

Special Blog: 'Playing Fair' (2016)

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Introduction

As part of the 40th anniversary of the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model, there were monthly 'spotlights' on key models/approaches within the field of Games-Based Approaches (GBAs). I am continuing this initiative to focus on additional models and approaches. This month I would like to discuss the Inventing Games approach.

In devising a PE curriculum, the PE teacher asks themselves a number of questions:

What is PE for? What do I want my pupils to learn?

How should I teach these things? How can I measure pupil learning?

These are perennial questions for PE educators, with teachers each having their own opinions on appropriate answers for their context. For decades institutionalised team games have formed a significant part of the UK PE curriculum (Lockwood, 2000), based on the mastery of clearly defined skills taught using out-of-game drills (Thorpe, Bunker and Almond, 1986). However, it has long since been recognised that the majority of children will never be able to play institutionalised games, and game-based approaches (GBAs) such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) have offered ways to modify games so they can be played by all pupils (e.g., Bunker and Thorpe, 1982, Gambles and Griffin, 2023).

This raises further questions of what is a game, and what makes a *good* game?

It could be said that good team games have rules that create problem-posing situations which are fun to solve by working together to overcome your opponents. As a PE educator, Joy Butler, was inspired by learning about the idea of inventing games (IG); where pupils develop original games of their own making in ways that are challenging and fun to play. In her book 'Playing Fair' (Butler, 2016), Joy credits Terry Williams and Len Almond (Almond, 1983) with introducing her to the idea of inventing games, an approach that she developed to help address the issues of anti-social behaviours in schools.

The growing societal problems of bullying, intolerance or violence towards individuals from particular groups such as immigrants, females, LGBTQ+ and people of colour, are reflected in patterns of

behaviour in our schools. As a microcosm of power and privilege schools can serve to enable and reinforce social inequalities, or alternatively teachers can use active learning to challenge attitudes and beliefs within their classrooms.

Joy uses IG as a vehicle for pupils to experientially learn about and put into practice the principles of social justice and democracy within the context of game play. The IG process creates opportunities for pupils to build skills in becoming more articulate communicators and active listeners.

Through the game development process, pupils learn how to work together, come to decisions and effectively resolve conflicts with team mates by applying the democratic concepts of negotiation and debate where everyone has a right to be heard and treated fairly.

Chapters 1 to 5 introduce the theoretical background for inventing games, teaching social justice, curriculum design and pedagogical principles. At its foundations, the IG process uses the TGfU framework of the games classification system (Almond, 1986a; Bunker and Thorpe, 1982), with an adapted version of the cyclical learner-centred TGfU Curriculum Model to shape a games curriculum. It is emphasised that the 10-stage process (listed below) can be modified to be appropriate for the developmental level and experiences of the learners. Deconstructing the intent/primary rules (Almond, 1986b) of the game into strategy, tactics, skills, and the different roles/positions that players take on in the game (bowler, goalkeeper etc.), make transparent those aspects that are common, and promotes teacher-directed transferability of learning to sports within the game category. The democracy in action principles of group process (GP), free inquiry (FI), social justice (SJ) and personal and social responsibility (PSR) are part of this cyclical process.

Stage 1: (A) Set learning conditions (B) Games category and its constructs

In this stage the group make decisions about group rules

Stage 2: Invent the game (democratically)

(PSR) Individuals have responsibilities to the group

Stage 3: Game appreciation (Play game)

(PSR) The group has responsibilities to the individual

Stage 4: Refine the game (Play game)

(SJ) Performed in a climate of social justice that promotes inclusion and empathy

Stage 5: Adaptation (scoring for everyone)

(GP) Conflicts are resolved through debate with respect and patience for everyone

Stage 6: Refine the game (Identify a coach and referee)

(GP) Conflicts are resolved through debate with respect and patience for everyone

(FI) Leadership styles are explored

Stage 7: Show case games

(FI) Constructive feedback

Stage 8: Identifying and refining Offense (strategies, tactics, skills, defense to offense transitions)

(FI) active listening, (GP) building of a consensus, (PSR) trust

Stage 9: Identifying and refining Defense (strategies, tactics, skills, offense to defense transitions)

(FI) active listening, (GP) building of a consensus, (PSR) trust

Stage 10: Transition (transfer of learning from invented games to national sports within category)

(SJ) Modifications and adaptations for equal access

Critically, the IG model establishes the learning environment around democratic principles and social justice where group processes enact decision-making, responsibilities to the group and individual, giving

and taking of constructive feedback, consensus building, and inclusivity with mutual respect that foster the development of trust and empathetic relationships.

Four pedagogical principles for the IG model are presented and discussed; (i) teaching as facilitating, (ii) understanding tactical complexity, (iii) game modification through representation, exaggeration and adaptation, and (iv) assessment of learning outcomes.

- (i) Teaching as facilitating:
The focus for teaching is pupil-centred where the teacher facilitates active learning within an emotionally safe environment.
- (ii) Understanding tactical complexity:
Games are categorised based on their shared characteristics (e.g. the intent of all invasion games is to simultaneously invade your opponents' defences and propel the object of play into their goal whilst defending your own goal from attack by your opponents). Pupils learn that this creates similar problematic circumstances which may be resolved in similar ways for games across the same category.
- (iii) Game modification through representation, exaggeration and adaptation:
The modified game being played retains critical elements that are representative of the full game. Aspects of the game are modified in an exaggerated fashion (e.g. relative dimension of playing area) to encourage a particular response or tactical requirement
- (iv) Assessment of learning outcomes:
Pupils undergo a process of ongoing reciprocal assessment of learning outcomes

A lack of understanding is an oft-cited barrier for implementing GBAs, with practitioners needing detailed information about how to implement models in their lessons (e.g. Harvey, Cushion and Sammon, 2015). To overcome this barrier, in the latter half of the book renowned experts present practical examples of applying the IG approach to an institutionalised game from each of the TGfU game categories. Similarly, each chapter includes vignettes that effectively describes a recognisable classroom scenario with anti-social behaviour or a potential dilemma for the teacher to deal with where the author provides their thoughts for approaching the situation in a way that incorporate equity and ethical standards.

Abridged Vignette (taken from Butler, 2016 p16 to 19)

A scene is described where a group of children are questioned by the teacher on the game they are playing as he has seen they are throwing the ball at each other. The teacher's first instinct is to halt the game as dodgeball is not allowed in many North American schools, but he chooses not to mention it yet. A taller and more vocal pupil, (Sophie), describes the modified dodgeball game but it transpires she had been taught the game at a summer camp. The teacher asks if they had all agreed on this game but feels there is a sense of compliance with Sophie than of a consensus being reached. The pupils are asked what the name of the module is (inventing games), the types of game (invasion game), and the primary rule (to send the ball into the opponents' goal at the other end of the pitch). The discussion continues below

Mr. Uppal: Right! So where are the goals in this game?

Sophie: Mmm. We don't have any....

Mr. Uppal: Well, you kind of do..... (There is a little pause.)

Sophie: Oh right. We use each other as the goals!

Mr. Uppal chooses not to address this, but notes it for later discussion

Mr. Uppal: OK. So can you quickly regroup and redesign your game to include goals, one at each end?

About 15 minutes later, the group is fully engaged in the newly adapted game complete with two goals (mini soccer nets). Throwing at human targets is still part of the game, and most of the students are flushed and beaming with joy.

Mr. Uppal: I see you've included the goals at each end. So how have you included these in your game?

Sophie: We used-

Mr. Uppal: Thanks Sophie, but let's have someone else explain this time.

Tamson: I can explain! If we manage to get the ball past all the opponents and it lands in the goal we score 5 points. If we hit one of the opponents we get 1 point. They still have to sit down and they can still be rescued.

Mr. Uppal: That sounds pretty good! Thank you, Tamson. The next step now is for you all to ask yourselves 6 questions. These are all listed in your games sheet. I'm going to invite the whole class to do the same task.

...the issue of human targets has not been addressed. Rather than tackling this head on Mr. Uppal poses 6 questions to help all the students in his class (not just the most vocal) engage in dialogue about the educational value of the games they have designed.

Is this game fair? Is it safe? Is everyone involved? Is it challenging? Does it flow? Is it fun?

The pupils continue to play the game and make decisions on rules.

John: I think Mr Uppal wants us to take out the human targets rule

Sophie: But that would change the whole game

Tamson: Yeah I like it

Amy: I don't I always get hit.

Sophie: Well move out of the way.

Amy: You think I don't try! You think I'm useless.

Mr. Uppal: What have you decided? Any rule changes?

Sophie: We can't agree.

Mr. Uppal: Who can summarise the discussion so far?

Sophie: Well some of us still want to keep the human target rule in and some want it out. They say you don't like it.

Mr. Uppal: Well it's true, I don't. But if all 6 of you decide to keep it then it's your decision. No one forced you to play this.

Tamson: Why don't you like it?

Mr. Uppal: Well it's complicated but there is no game I know of where players deliberately aim to hit a player. I think the reason for that it encourages people to throw balls at someone else and it can hurt them not necessarily physically either. I've seen kids use this game as an excuse to bully others and that's pretty unpleasant.

Mr. Uppal leaves the pupils to continue the decision and decide the rules. Mr. Uppal refrains from telling the pupils what is morally right earlier in the process, preferring the pupils to work it out for themselves and take ownership, reinforcing democratic decision-making.

An initial chapter with an IG approach for each game category precedes a chapter on the sport from the same category.

i.e. Chapter 6: Inventing Unopposed Target Games
Chapter 7: Innovative Approaches to Opposed Target Games
Chapter 8: Inventing Striking Games: Danish Longball
Chapter 9: Striking Games: Cricket
Chapter 10: Inventing Net and Wall Games
Chapter 11: net and Wall Games: Pickleball
Chapter 12: Inventing Invasion Games
Chapter 13: Invasion Games: Soccer
Chapter 14: Invasion Games Touch Football

For each game category, the progressive stages for IG are given alongside a democracy-in-action focus and in each chapter the strategic concepts and tactical decisions of the game category are described along with the required skills.

Key takeaways

With a high proportion of practical illustrations, this book presents IG in a way that teachers will find accessible.

Using IG in the PE curriculum has the potential to give all pupils the chance to be heard and reduce inequalities of privilege and power.

Game construction is experientially learned during the process of decision-making for their invented game.

The skills that pupils develop in building relationships, problem-solving and critical thinking whilst using the IG model are transferable across all parts of their lives.

This book demonstrates that rather than jumping to fix situations, dilemmas are opportunities for teachable moments for their pupils.

The need for social justice and democracy is never more so critical than in today's society. In this work, the author advocates strongly for educating our pupils to develop their social and cognitive skills to become responsible world citizens.

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A word about the book's author

Joy Butler was a powerhouse who was well-liked and highly respected by friends and academic colleagues. She was passionate about overcoming social injustices and using her beloved physical education to address key issues and support all children especially marginalised groups.

She set up the TGfU International Taskforce and championed it through affiliation to AIESEP to become a Special Interest Group which she chaired for 8 years. She instigated the SIG International Advisory Board (IAB) to democratically distribute governance for the aims and activities of the SIG. Joy has left an enduring legacy in her wake and this book is a testament to the principles that she lived her life by.