

Learning to Throw in Physical Education Class

What I Learned From Fourth and Fifth Graders

by Mark Manross

To answer the question, "How do children learn?" I did something schools never do: I asked the children. Because they know.

—Robert Fulghum

Have you ever wondered what your students think about your physical education class? In particular, have you ever wondered what they are learning? And not learning? Several years ago, I became interested in discovering answers to questions such as these. As part of my master's thesis, I found these answers by doing exactly what Mr. Fulghum advises—I asked the children! And, by golly, they had lots and lots of answers!

In this and the next two issues of *TEPE*, I will share some of the insights I gained through my conversations with fourth and fifth graders about their physical education classes and, in particular, what they were learning about the skill of . . . *throwing*. Yes, I know it sounds a little crazy, but I had in-depth conversations about overhand throwing with fourth and fifth graders. We talked about the mechanics of how to throw, how important it is to learn to throw, where they learned to throw, ways they liked to practice throwing, and what they did in their physical education classes in regard to throwing. I even listened to their advice about how their physical education classes could be improved so that students like themselves could become even better throwers. It was terrific!

To get started, I would like to explain how I conducted my thesis project. The remainder of this article will deal with

background information, a description of the physical education programs, a description of the interview process, and a list of some of the questions I asked.

Background and Justification

There are several reasons why I chose the particular skill of throwing as the topic of conversation. First, I thought throwing would be a skill most children would have already been exposed to (e.g., in physical education class, at recess time, playing throwing games with friends or family at home, playing throwing games in formal

1 The first in a three-part series examining the way children learn a basic motor skill.

leagues like Little League), and therefore, any youngster I chose to speak with would have something to share about his or her throwing experiences. Second, there is an abundance of research on the skill of throwing (Halverson & Robertson, 1979; Stroot & Oslin, 1993; Wickstrom, 1983), which further illustrates its importance in physical education. Last, the NASPE National Standards clearly states that second-grade students should be able to "identify four characteristics of a mature throw" (NASPE, 1995, p. 20). Therefore, I was curious to know whether children in fourth and fifth grades could identify and discuss a mature pattern of throwing.

As for my decision to conduct interviews and some short written assessments with the children, these seemed the best ways to learn more

about what I was interested in: gaining deeper insights into what children think, feel, and know about the skill of overhand throwing. Many other physical education studies have embraced this methodology too, as evidenced by the *Students' Voices* monograph in the *Journal of Teaching Physical Education* (Graham, 1995).

Description of PE Programs and Settings

I thought the best (and most convenient) place to talk to children about throwing would be at their schools during physical education class. In order to get a range of opinions, I chose two physical education settings that were different in their approach to and philosophy of physical education. To this end, I found one program that used the Skill Theme approach to physical education and another that relied on a more traditional curriculum. (Note: To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all schools, teachers, and children.)

Pendelton Elementary (Skill Themes Approach)

Pendelton Elementary is a K–5 school, and the teacher had been an elementary physical education specialist for 19 years. Children had physical education class for 30-minute periods, twice a week, with class sizes averaging about 22 children. Pendelton had a Skill Theme–based curriculum (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 1998), which means the teacher spends a great deal of time teaching basic skills such as throwing, kicking, and balancing. The main part of each lesson typically consisted of children practicing skill tasks alone or with a partner using individual pieces of equipment. For example, in one lesson

dealing with striking with paddles, each child had a paddle and a foam ball. Some children were striking to the wall, while other children worked in pairs to design their own games. During the lesson, the teacher provided feedback to all children but limited his comments to one or two biomechanical cues (i.e., “stepping with the opposite foot,” “turning sideways to the target”). At the end of the class, the teacher gathered the children together for a brief review of the “cues for the day.”

Eckland Elementary (Traditional Approach)

Eckland Elementary is a Grade 1–7 school; the teacher had been an elementary physical education specialist for 13 years. Children at Eckland had physical education class *daily*, with two classes of the same grade attending a single physical education class. Class size averaged approximately 50 children. A full-time aide was employed to assist the physical educator. Eckland maintains a program most would consider traditional. Children participate in low-organized sports and games, the content of which is organized around instructional units consisting of traditional sports such as basketball, football, baseball, and soccer. Units last 1–4 weeks for each topic. Based on the teacher’s description of a typical fourth- or fifth-grade unit, the first week is spent teaching the children the basic skills of the activity. The second week is devoted to playing lead-up games (e.g., 2-on-2 basketball). The remaining portion of the unit is reserved for full-regulation game play (e.g., 5-on-5 basketball).

Clearly, these two programs were quite a contrast. I wondered if the children’s opinions would be as different as their physical education programs. Do children in dissimilar physical education programs think and speak differently about the skills they learn?

The Students and the Interview Process

Interviews were conducted during physical education class in a room away from the gym. As a result of this schedule, none of the interviews lasted longer than 30 minutes. The interviews were videotaped and audio-taped for later analysis. Children were

interviewed in pairs in the hopes that they would feel more comfortable. In addition, all of the children knew me fairly well, as I had spent several days at each school participating with them in their physical education classes.

The interviewees’ throwing ability ranged from high to low according to estimates made by their teachers. The selection process thereafter was based on the number of returned parent permission slips. (To read a detailed description of this process, see the original document at <<http://www.chre.vt.edu/dfour>>.) In the end, 14 higher-skilled and 12 lower-skilled throwers were interviewed at Pendelton, while 14 higher-skilled and 14 lower-skilled throwers were interviewed at Eckland. Twenty-eight of the participants were girls, and 26 were boys. Higher-ability throwers and lower-ability throwers were interviewed together.

The Interview Questions

Highlighted here is a list of the questions that I asked in the interviews. As with any conversation, not all interviews and questions were exactly the same, but I asked most of these questions in a majority of the interviews. After the children stated their answers, I often asked them to explain what they meant. To obtain an even clearer understanding, I sometimes asked children to demonstrate their answers.

Were children able to articulate the correct biomechanical cues for throwing? From whom did they say

they learned the skill of throwing? Did their physical educator make the top 10 list? Did they think it was important to learn to throw? Did the children in one program respond differently to these questions than the children in the other program? How would the children in your classes respond to these questions?

Stay tuned for the next two articles in this series, as answers to these and other questions will be revealed!

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Interview Questions

1. I am getting ready to teach some first graders how to throw a ball. What is one thing about the skill of throwing that you would have me tell them so they can become really good throwers?
2. You sound like you know some things about throwing. My first graders will appreciate your help. Where did you learn all of this?
3. Is throwing an important skill for you or your friends to learn?
4. If you wanted to improve your own throwing skills how would you go about it?
5. If I were to stop by your gym class on a day you were doing things that involved throwing skills, what would I see? Where would you be and what would you be doing?
6. How do you feel about how you are learning how to throw in your physical education class? What changes would you make if you could?
7. Do you know anybody that is a poor thrower? How do you think they feel? Why do you think they are poor? What advice would you give them to get better? How could we get them interested in becoming a better thrower?
8. What is your favorite game that involves the skill of throwing? Why do you like this game? Where did you learn it?
9. Do you think you will use the skill of throwing when you are older?