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Games Within Games:

A Pedagogical Approach to Build Self-Esteem and Promote Social–Emotional Skills in Physical Education

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Children and adolescents' participation in sports and games has long been seen to provide them with positive personal and social development outcomes. These outcomes include enhanced confidence, perceived skill competence, interactive engagement with others, and desirable values such as discipline, diligence, and fairness (Collins et al., 2009; Cote & Gilbert, 2009; Holt et al., 2009; Horn, 2008; Horton, 2015). Studies have consistently shown that participants in organized youth sport, compared with nonparticipants, report having higher self-esteem (Wagnsson et al., 2014). Research in schools indicates that student involvement in sports and physical activities, including activities offered in physical education (PE) classes and extracurricular sports, can positively impact their physical, social, and emotional well-being, as well as their cognitive and academic achievement (Biddle et al., 2019; Cerda et al., 2021). However, whereas PE classes are seen to provide a prime environment for students to learn social and emotional skills such as interpersonal skills, self-awareness, emotional processing, self-management, and responsible decision-making (Jones & Doolittle, 2017), how effectively they are taught, reinforced, and practiced in such classes is in question (Dyson et al., 2021).

This article focuses on the explicit use by PE teachers of the principle of *exaggeration* as a pedagogical instrument to enhance a players' sense of competence, autonomy, and belonging when participating in games and sports while promoting physical self-worth, self-esteem, and social–emotional skills. *Exaggeration* is well known as a pedagogy of game-based approaches (GBAs) that helps with teaching for understanding through game form design (Pill et al., 2023). It involves changing key elements of gameplay (e.g., rules, equipment, or playing area) to allow participants to explore tactical problems or focus on a specific technical skill while playing. Extending the pedagogy of exaggeration from tactical–technical skill learning to the pursuit of affective learning outcomes such as physical self-worth, self-esteem, and supportiveness, this article will provide examples using a variety of sports and games in authentic school contexts to demonstrate practical implications for PE teachers.

Self-Esteem and Social–Emotional Skills

Self-esteem is how a person feels about themselves—good or bad—and is manifested in a variety of ways such as pride or shame, and especially in self-confidence. A person's self-esteem is based on the relationship between their achievements and their aspirations, according to psychologist William James, who introduced the concept (Mruk, 2013). The more a person considers themselves successful (according to their own standards) in attaining their aspirations, the greater the increase in their self-esteem. Self-esteem is multidimensional, consisting of specific sub-domains encompassing perceptions of one's academic, social, and physical attributes (Harter, 2012). Consistent with this understanding, physical self-worth, as a sub-domain of self-esteem, is shaped by a person's assessment of their own demonstrable physical attributes and abilities, including physical appearance, social acceptance, and athletic competence. This self-worth is a particularly significant contributor to self-esteem during adolescence, and sport and PE provide especially influential social environments in its development (Rose et al., 2023). This degree of influence may be because the physical tasks performed in these environments often can be challenging, public, and involve collaboration with others, thereby having underlying elements of social identity, social acceptance, and social competence (Taylor & Turek, 2010). Related to learning such skills, it is important to recognize that a learner's self-esteem is often strongly linked to their confidence and motivation to learn, participate in, experiment with, and persist with a task (Brown, 2014; Cigman, 2004; Ferkany, 2008).

In terms of students' willingness to pursue aspirations, self-determination theory posits three basic psychological needs which a learner must perceive as being satisfied to maintain their motivation to continue with learning: (1) *competence*, defined as the experience of efficacy and mastery of a skill; (2) *autonomy*, defined as engaging in an activity by choice; and *belonging*, defined as a sense of meaningful and valued connection with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). How these needs are satisfied or hindered depends on the need supportiveness of the social environment in which the learner is operating. In organized social contexts such as a PE class, the teacher purposely influences the social environment and consequently can support or diminish participants' satisfaction of these needs through the behaviors they promote, their instructions and communication, and the activities they provide.

The social–emotional attitudes and behaviors of peers are also significant contributors to the health of such environments. Social–emotional skills important to successful performance in sports and PE include sportsmanship, cooperation with others, empathy, supportiveness, emotional regulation, and resilience (Zach & Rosenblum, 2021). The development and demonstration of such skills, together with more individualized outcomes such as motivation, enjoyment, and self-esteem, are considered examples of affective learning (Bailey et al., 2009). Researchers have found that adolescents' perceived competence in sport and physical activities have positive connections to their feelings of social acceptance (Willow, 2022), mental health (Graupensperger et al., 2021), athletic and social self-perceptions (Stein et al., 2007), and future participation in physical activity (Timo et al., 2016).

Research has also shown that, whereas for some students the social environment created or perpetuated by PE practitioners has positive connections to self-worth and self-esteem, for others it can be a source of negative experiences and enduring stress during childhood and adolescence that diminish feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Cardinal et al., 2013; Pringle, 2008; Strean, 2009). For example, teachers who are overly controlling and critical, show favoritism toward more talented participants, lack tolerance for mistakes, explicitly compare a player against other players, and overemphasize winning, negatively affect young people's sense of self-worth and self-esteem, with consequent effects on their motivation to participate in sport and physical activity (Crane & Temple, 2015; Pringle, 2008; Witt & Dangi, 2018). Researchers have advocated GBAs as containing the underpinning beliefs and pedagogical practices to limit such effects (Light, 2013; Pill & Hyndman, 2018).

Game-Based Approaches

Game-based approach (GBA) has become an umbrella term covering several nuanced variations developed and adopted by practitioners in their teaching of games and sports as a way of encouraging players to develop their tactical understandings together with their technical skills (Gutierrez & Koekoek, 2023; Pill, 2020). Researchers have found the more traditional, teacher-centric, "skill by drill" –focused approach to teaching sport skills and techniques (Pill, 2016) to be less engaging for players and that it can restrict their personal

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and social development by limiting their decision-making and problem-solving opportunities (Bessa et al., 2021; Ennis, 2014). In contrast, GBA is considered a learner-centered pedagogy that seeks to promote players' learning and engagement through using modified, developmentally appropriate game forms, emphasizing a preference for dialogue with players through questioning, encouraging learner reflection, and sharing ownership of the learning process so as to be athlete- or player-centered (Forrest, 2015; Kirk, 2009; Light et al., 2014; Pill et al., 2023). In addition, GBAs have been aligned with a *constructivist* learning perspective (Stolz & Pill, 2016) which maintains that learning occurs when individuals encounter new experiences that disturb their learning equilibrium, which allows the learner to then construct or reconstruct unique ideas from their personal experience and prior knowledge (Applefield et al., 2000). Unlike the traditional teacher-centered approach that focuses on skill drills, GBAs position the student as an active learner. This approach allows students to learn essential skills and tactics as interconnected parts of the game within a contextually authentic environment. Rather than starting with isolated techniques defined as individual movements to be learned through repetitive practice, GBAs emphasize understanding the game as a whole (Light, 2013).

The pedagogy of exaggeration, defined in the introduction of this article, is one of the four highlighted pedagogies of a GBA (Thorpe & Bunker, 1989). The other three are:

- *Sampling*: Teaching a variety of games/sports from each sport category—invasion, net/wall, striking/fielding, target
- *Tactical complexity*: Gradual and progressive teaching of games/sports in accordance with their complexity
- *Representation*: Use of game forms with the same essential structure and skills as the competition sport, but modified by altering the size of equipment and spaces, the shape of equipment and spaces, the properties or qualities of equipment, or the quantities (e.g., number of players) and roles (e.g., position of players)

GBA and Games within Games

According to Light (2017), the learner-centered features previously identified as integral to GBAs such as teacher-as-facilitator, self-reflections and group reflections on experiences, social interactions, and player decision-making autonomy, reflect a more holistic view of players—one that recognizes the individual learner's different capabilities and social and cultural contexts. These elements also lend themselves to developing the social and affective (fun and enjoyment) domains together with the physical and cognitive domains (Hewitt & Pill, 2021; Light & Harvey, 2017) because they encourage relationship-building, communication, and dialogue. The player-centeredness of GBAs is also seen as providing an environment in which the player "owns the direction, is accountable for that direction and thus takes responsibility for their actions and performance" (Penney & Kidman, 2014, 2). The actions a player chooses to perform, or not perform, are strongly influenced by their views of themselves and their abilities in the

game/sport environment (e.g., "I'm not good enough to attempt a shot, so I'll pass it"; "I don't want to mess up, so I'll stand where no one will pass me the ball"). As posited by self-determination theory, motivation to attempt or continue learning an unfamiliar skill relies on the learner's perception of their competence, their autonomy, and how their efforts will be appreciated (Nicholls, 2017). Students' perceptions of these needs being met by participating in sporting activities can be distorted by the overt valuing and rewarding by teachers, coaches, peers, and parents of only a few highly visible skill events (e.g., goals scored; catches taken), which generally only a few players can execute in the game. Less obvious skill efforts, which may have been integral to the more visible skill event's execution, may be unseen, ignored, or relegated as unimportant in players' eyes. For example, a player moving to a wider support position in soccer draws an opponent away from the middle of the field (or at least creates indecision), which can create time and space for a teammate to get into a goal-scoring position. Hellison (1973, 8) feared that such a limited view of a player's performance may be particularly demotivating:

> Many of us have the mistaken impression that we build our self-perceptions from fact rather than from beliefs derived from highly subjective interpretations of our own experiences. Nowhere is this clearer than in competitive sport, in which the scoreboard has been consecrated as the supreme 'factual' evaluator of all physical performance.

The *Games within Games* (GwG) approach seeks to alter players' paradigms of success and consequently how they view themselves and their abilities when engaging in games and sports.

Stating the Problem

The desire to discuss the concept of teaching *Games within Games* is in response to challenges the author faced as a physical educator and coach over a 30-year period. These challenges included the difficulty of noticing and recognizing the skills and efforts of individual students, especially in large class activities. Additionally, the curriculum tends to demand teachers' focus on game competency at the expense of important affective qualities, such as students demonstrating supportiveness, persistence, and resilience. Another significant challenge is the variability in students' readiness to learn. This variability often necessitates teaching fundamental game skills to less experienced students, while also keeping more experienced participants engaged. It is challenging to teach games with purpose (Pill, 2010) when only a few students are willing or active participants while the majority does not participate due to earlier experiences of feeling ignored or under appreciated.

With the context just provided, the three key questions inspiring the GwG approach are:

1. How might teachers engage those players who still want to play and contribute but who struggle with performing the game skills?
2. In line with self-determination theory, how can practitioners teach in and through game play to increase each player's sense of competence, sense of autonomy, and sense of belonging?
3. How might teachers precisely and purposely pursue affective learning outcomes that are encouraged but not explicitly rewarded in the game?

The Pedagogy of Exaggeration and GwG

The pedagogy of exaggeration (Thorpe & Bunker, 1989) is at the heart of the GwG approach. In teaching games and sports, it is utilized to amplify participants' focus on performing specific elements of the sporting activity. The pedagogy of exaggeration has predominantly been suggested for the purpose of heightening player awareness and understanding of an identified movement's tactical uses as well as improvements in their technical execution (Basketball Immersion, 2024; Pill, 2018; Serra-Olivares et al., 2015).

However, the primary purpose of the GwG approach is to develop players' perceptions of competence, autonomy, and belonging with an eye to building their physical self-worth by exaggerating their focus toward performing a particular individual skill or tactical movement, explicitly drawing attention to its execution (and its performer) and rewarding it on the scoreboard. Essentially, the teacher identifies desired micro-skills they wish to see performed by players within the larger game. Points will be attributed to players who perform the selected micro-skill, which will contribute to their team's overall score in the larger game. Players can still be encouraged to score in the traditional way for the purpose of authentically playing the core game/sport. However, the performance of the nominated micro-skill will provide all players a chance to contribute points to their team's overall tally—*and to be recognized as contributors to the goal*. These players might be those who are not in a position on the field that allows them to score in the traditional way (e.g., a defender), or those who are still learning the game or who do not have the physical skills or capacities to maneuver themselves into a scoring position.

Essentially, the teacher is asking these players to play a game (with the goal of performing the targeted micro-skill as many times as practical) *within* a game (the full or a modified version of a particular sport or game) and explicitly celebrating skill performances/attempts in both. If players feel that they are able to play competently in an autonomy-supportive environment, they will more likely become positively engaged in the game, leading to improved social self-perceptions (Stein et al., 2007). In the GwG approach, players can choose to focus on their performance of the micro-skill or the traditional scoring methods (allowing autonomy). The more attempts they make in performing their chosen skill effort, the higher the chance of them improving their perceptions of competence. Finally, the positive recognition accorded for their attempts by the teacher and peers for at least trying to contribute to the team's overall score can boost a sense of belonging. Examples of micro-skills teachers could target in various sports activities are listed in Table 1.

Importantly, and consistent with the practices of GBAs, the teacher must ensure participants are provided opportunities to learn, practice, and re-practice the fundamental skills of the game plus the identified micro-skills as the teacher (and the players) deems necessary. Similarly, it is essential that teachers facilitate learning by providing students opportunities to reflect on their skill performances and decisions within the game. For example, players can discuss the circumstances within the game when it might be detrimental or optimal for the targeted micro-skill to be performed. It should also be noted that the GwG approach does not look to subtract points for performance elements the teacher does not want to target. This approach does not mean that teams are not penalized within the general rules of the game (maintaining the principle of representation); rather, with the goal being to foster player self-esteem, the *rewarding* of the performance of the identified element is the focus, *not* the punishment of poor skill demonstrations or decisions.

Table 1.
Examples of Micro-Skills, Movements, and Understandings a Teacher or Coach Might Want to Reward During Gameplay

Soccer
• Demonstration of *Give–Go–Get* movement sequence: Player in possession passes to teammate (*Give*); player moves to an open position within range (*Go*); player receives return pass (*Get*). • Defensive player jockeys player in possession (i.e., does not lunge in to tackle, uses little steps to maintain balance and stay belly button facing belly button with attacker). • Players scan, then move to mark an opponent when they are in defense (one-to-one, not three defenders on one attacker). • Goalkeeper kicks/throws ball toward sidelines rather than up the center of the field.
Softball/T-Ball
• Outfielders move forward to the ball when it is hit toward them (meaning they initially positioned themselves correctly to be able to do this). • Fielders throw to the correct base where the runner was potentially going toward (e.g., it does not matter if the runner elected to stop on second base, the fielder still throws to third base). • Outfielder attempts to catch a flyball. • Fielder supports outfield teammate by sensible positioning for relay throw.
Badminton
• Player performs shot and immediately moves toward the "T". • Player chooses correct shot placement (e.g., opponent was at the back of the court, so a drop shot was the best option).

Practical Examples Using Touch Rugby

This section will suggest how the GwG approach can be used in school/team contexts using touch rugby as an example. The basic question underpinning each of these suggestions is: "What skills/movements/understandings do I as a teacher want to see students demonstrating in this specific sporting activity?"

A key principle of play in touch rugby is for the team in possession to go forward toward their opponents' tryline. Often novice players will, upon receiving the ball, step sideways or try to run around defenders rather than engaging them. This practice can stop forward progress because as the ballcarrier moves sideways, the defensive line is moving toward them. The sideways runner can often impinge on teammates' space (herding them toward the sideline) and make it more difficult for them to support the ballcarrier as they now move sideways in response. Travelling laterally makes it difficult for supporting players to move forward to receive the ball because it can only be passed backwards. Therefore, to discourage such outcomes, players would score points every time they received the ball and take their first step explicitly forward.

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Upon a ballcarrier being touched, they must place the ball on the ground at their feet and step over and past it (a process called *play-the-ball*). This practice allows a teammate to pick the ball up and either pass it or run with it. Simply, the quicker this play-the-ball process, the easier it is for the attacking team to keep going forward because the defensive team must retreat 5 meters before being allowed to come forward toward the attackers. An individual tactical skill a ballcarrier can use to speed up the play-the-ball is to initiate the touch by running directly toward the defender, reaching out with the hand not carrying the ball and tagging the defender rather than waiting to be tagged. Doing so lowers the ballcarrier's body height so it will be quicker to place the ball upon touching the defender and to step over it. Moreover, the defender, who has been moving forward to make the tag, has to decelerate, then reverse quickly with less chance of getting to the 5-meter retreat line before the ball has been played and another ballcarrier is running forward toward them. If the defender does not make the 5 meters before moving forward, they can be penalized for being offside. Therefore, ballcarriers can be given a point each time they initiate the touch on their defender. Other micro-skills that might be rewarded in beginner games of touch rugby include the following:

- Ballcarrier running at the space between two defenders to draw them toward the ballcarrier, thereby creating space for teammates to attack
- Ballcarrier holding the ball in two hands when outside of contact zone (defenders remain unsure if ballcarrier will pass and which way)
- Potential receiver calling for the pass from the ballcarrier/dummy half by name
- Defensive players nominating aloud who they are marking

Using GwG to Pursue Social–Emotional Learning Outcomes

Although often promoted as benefits arising from participation in sport and physical activity, affective learning outcomes such as sportsmanship, empathy, supportiveness and resilience have been considered "typically as a hoped-for by-product rather than a directly and intentionally pursued outcome" (Teraoka et al., 2021, p. 460). Using the pedagogy of exaggeration, GwG can explicitly focus on more affective micro-skills to promote the personal and

social skill competencies attached to being a "fair" player or "good" teammate.

For example, in addition to the traditional method of scoring, the author scored players' positive comments and actions toward others during a game of soccer, including constructive comments such as "Good try," "Great ball," and "Nice call." Supportive actions included giving high fives, helping a teammate/opponent off the ground, fetching the ball from the back of the net for the goalkeeper, and applauding a teammate/opponent. Initially, this affective micro-skill was only revealed after the game due to the author's concerns that the positivity would not be sincere. However, when announced as a targeted micro-skill with the same group another time, students appeared to enjoy the overt supportiveness of the game environment.

Teaching and Coaching Challenges

The major challenge for the practitioner using the GwG approach is keeping track of the points being awarded to students for performing the targeted micro-skill(s) during the game. These score tracking challenges may require the practitioner to target one micro-skill at a time. The author has successfully used the following methods in school/team contexts:

- The teacher calls out scores as they occur (including micro-skill scores and actual traditional scores such as goals) and updates the tally as points occur. For example, if the playing area contains a scoreboard of some kind, a running tally might be kept. The difficulty of this method is dependent on factors such as the number of participants, size of the playing area, and the frequency of micro-skill performances.
- The teacher informs students each time they have been individually awarded a point for performing the targeted micro-skill and participants keep track of their own personal micro-skill scores as notified by the teacher. Scores are totaled at the end of the game.
- Non-participant students maintain micro-skill scores by using a roll printout, allowing them to keep track of individual students' scores as they are announced by the teacher during the game.
- The game is filmed and the performances are reviewed at home for delayed feedback and game results.

In addition, it is important that practitioners using GwG are mindful of the problems that may arise in terms of players' focus, engagement, and gameplay. For example, players who are very capable at scoring in the traditional method in the game (e.g., kicking goals in soccer) or who have low self-esteem may see the points being given to players who do not score goals as tokenistic and inauthentic, and thus respond negatively. The author has found when using the GwG approach that the rationale must be explained clearly and its relevance to building skills that are valuable to the effective playing of both the modified and authentic game must be emphasized to players. A differentiated approach to the awarding of points depending on the perceived needs of players may also sometimes be used. For example, a tentative player requiring encouragement to participate may be awarded a point for attempting a particular skill, whereas a more experienced player might only get a point for successfully performing the same skill. Also, how the teacher introduces a targeted micro-skill is also context- and personnel-driven (e.g., the age of the players, the number of novice players, the personalities within the group). Some teachers might choose to reveal the micro-skill at the end of a game session, whereas others might introduce the skill element and use a *Play with Purpose* approach (Pill & SueSee, 2021) involving playing the game, reflecting on the micro-skill's use within that context, practicing it out of context, and then returning it into context by playing again.

Benefits of the GwG Approach

The examples provided in this article highlight the explicit connections of the GwG approach to achieving curriculum outcomes such as the Grade-Span Learning Indicators contained in the 2024 SHAPE America National Physical Education Standards (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2024). The use of a GwG approach would be particularly relevant to those focusing on motor skill development (Standard 1) and social–emotional learning (Standard 3) in Grades 6–8 and 9–12.

In the author's experience, the GWG approach has worked well within three contexts:

- When playing a close-to-authentic game to promote basic skills to players who may be new to the game while keeping the more experienced players engaged and challenged by still valuing and rewarding the traditional skills and methods of scoring
- When only a few players have attended training and the only meaningful activity option involves skills-focused, small-sided games in limited spaces
- When the educator wants to engage those players who struggle with performing the skills most noticed or rewarded in the game but who still want to participate and contribute.

Consistent with a GBA, GwG looks to use games and sports as the primary learning instrument for participants. By using the pedagogy of exaggeration and highlighting the value of certain generally "unseen" elements of a sport or game, it is possible to show students and players who are not overly experienced or skilled performers, aspects of the game in which they can be not just competent but outstanding contributors to their teams. It focuses on what such players can do, rather than on what they cannot do, while simultaneously recognizing and rewarding all players' performance of traditional skills and scoring options. One teacher described the GwG approach as "mana-enhancing"—essentially, an approach that builds a person's self-esteem. Whereas this approach can also play a role in developing participants' physical skills, its possible contribution to students and players feeling positive about themselves and their abilities may be the benefit most worth pursuing.

Conclusion

The GwG approach has been suggested as an easily implementable way to engage, recognize, and reward those students and players who wish to participate in sporting activities but whose motivation to play is affected by feeling that they are not skilled enough, appreciated enough, or allowed to make decisions about their engagement. All of these factors can impact their physical self-worth, which can be a significant contributor to adolescents' self-esteem. As a pedagogical approach, GwG

provides a vehicle for achieving multiple curriculum outcomes. The GwG approach enables the teacher to identify and target specific valuable skills and elements within a game or sport and then exaggerate the importance of these being performed by explicitly rewarding their execution (or even the attempt) on the scoreboard. By adding this approach to their "pedagogical toolkits" (Pill, 2011), teachers are using a strategy that publicly recognizes the contribution all players can make to a team performance, recognizes the importance of basic skill progressions in developing mastery, and allows participants to see what they are capable of and their value in an authentic sport and physical activity context. This approach can change how students and players view success—that success is not limited just to those who score goals, take catches, and hit home runs. Players can be successful at a skill that was initially not obviously important but is being given greater recognition through this approach. An experience the author had at the end of a GwG touch rugby session with a Grade 9 PE class went along these lines:

> So, everyone, Team A scored 80 points. Congrats to Matt and Lucy (strong, experienced players) from Team A for scoring three tries each at 3 points apiece, totaling 18 points—good job. But, also, big kudos to Stacey, Liam, Gavin, Margot, and Tia (not overly keen on sport and/or inexperienced players) from Team A who scored a total of 43 points just by stepping forward with their first movement upon catching the ball! Just doing that got your team going forward, preserved space outside for your support players, and put pressure on the defense who were still getting back the 5 meters. (Class applause)

The GwG approach demonstrates that while the scoreboard may still be important, *what* is being scored and explicitly highlighting what and who is involved in this approach to scoring is far more valuable and enduringly beneficial to students and players.

Disclosure Statement

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