
Changes in the Japanese games curriculum and the shift toward student-centered learning

NAOKI SUZUKI ¹

¹ *Tokyo Gakugei University, Japan*

ABSTRACT

The current primary and secondary physical education curriculum in Japan aims to guide students toward achieving the ideal of lifelong participation in sport and leading an active lifestyle. In games teaching it is thus important to make learning enjoyable and meaningful. The influence of tactical approaches such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), Game Sense and Play Practice on the games curriculum in Japan has made a significant contribution toward achieving this aim by moving away from the outdated skill drill approach and bringing games learning to life for Japanese students. The teaching strategies for games teaching in Japan are moving toward learner-centered and game-based approaches that ask students to think, to interact and to intellectualise learning in games. Students learning experience in this approach can make games fun and educationally valuable. The games curriculum in Japan is now at a turning point in the move from military drilling of de-contextualized technique (or just rolling out the ball and not teaching). The new curriculum and its focus on inquiry and student-centred learning can produce learning that is fun and promote a fascination with games for young people by giving the game(s) back to children (Light 2004) and allowing them to enjoy and learn through structured play, reflection and social interaction.

Keywords: Games Curriculum, Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), Game Sense, Student-centered learning, Constructivism, Battle plan centered approach.

INTRODUCTION

Bunker and Thorpe (1982) have had a big impact on teaching ball games leading to ongoing innovation in games teaching across the world. However, for many decades there has been little change in either the games curriculum or games pedagogy in Japan but it is now undergoing what can be seen as radical change driven by a push for lifelong engagement in sport over recent years.

The content in PE had a strong relationship with competitive sports before the 1977 course of study (Suzuki, 2004). However, PE has had a strong relationship with lifelong sports since 1977, and it has been desired that students could experience the enjoyment and attractiveness of movement (Suzuki, 2004). In the 1998 course of study, “by considering physical and mental aspects in an integrated manner” was added to the PE overall objectives. That is, the PE perspective was changed to monism from dualism. In the 2008 course of study, the contents of game were described with the game category (Almond, 1986). The game shaping principle was constructed not based on the official competition sport but based on the learning contents (Suzuki, 2008).

This paper provides some detail on the changes that have taken place in the Japanese physical education curriculum with a focus on games teaching as a distinct component of the curriculum.

TRADITIONAL GAME TEACHING IN JAPAN

Traditional game teaching in Japan has followed one of two approaches. One was the “roll out the ball” approach (Graham, 2008) in which students are given a ball and the rules of the game and then asked to play the game. The other was the military drill approach that emphasized endless respective drills aimed at perfecting technique out of context but with little actual game play.

Traditional teaching for games is a “skill centred approach” that Bunker and Thorpe (1982) were critical of. This is based on behaviorist theories of learning (Light, 2008) and influenced by structuralism and essentialism. It followed the pattern of drill-drill-drill-main game, based on the assumption that technique had to be mastered before being able to play the game. In each lesson the vast majority of learning time was devoted to drills with sometimes only a few minutes left to play a game at the end of the lesson. PE teachers intended to teach

students how to play the official, full game and did not consider changing the game to make it easier to learn or scaffolding on previous learning by moving from simple games to more complex games as is practised in Game Sense (Light, 2013). This learning was much like the production line in a factory in which the separate components of techniques and knowledge are assembled into the finished product at the end of the line. Some students were satisfied with it, and others were not, but few felt the pleasure of playing a good game.

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN JAPAN

In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) issues a course of study that is a guideline across the country and all teachers must follow it and this includes physical education. It is revised approximately every ten years with the current curriculum set up in March 2008. Overall objectives of the new course of study are described below (MEXT, 2008a & 2008b).

Objectives in the 2010 course of study

<Elementary School_1st-6th Grade>

To help pupils — through proper exercise experience and understanding of health and safety, and by considering physical and mental aspects in an integrated manner — develop basic qualities and the abilities to participate in enjoyable physical activity throughout their lives, maintain and improve their health and fitness and ***cultivate an appropriate attitude towards leading a pleasant and happy life.***

<Junior High School_7th-9th Grade>

To enable students, through understanding of physical activity, health and safety, engaging in physical activity sensibly, and by considering physical and mental aspects in an integrated manner, to develop qualities and abilities to enjoy physical exercise throughout their lives and to help them cultivate practical abilities for the maintenance and improvement of health and improvement of physical fitness, and ***cultivate an appropriate attitude towards leading a happy and fulfilling life.***

There has been significant international interest in tactical approaches to games teaching in Japan. This is because of a major change in view on the place of physical education in schools and its aims. These changes involve a major shift from teacher-centered to student-

centered learning and an emphasis on the intellectual and social aspects of learning in and through games. As such, there is a need to better understand the nature of tactical learning and relevant outcomes. A prominent focus of student learning within tactical models of instruction is the ability to make appropriate decisions in game play situations. Over recent years the traditional technical approach in Japan is being replaced by teaching students to play games joyfully regardless of skill level, with the new national course of study ¹ based on this idea.

Table 1
The Change of Game Teaching

	Traditional PE	Current PE
	Dualism	Monism
Perspective	Behaviourism	Constructivism
Main Activity	Drill	Game
Approach	Teacher-Centered	Student-Centered
Teaching Style	Command Style	Divergent Discovery Style
Outcome	Technique & Knowledge	Tactics
Contents	Champion Sport	Leisure Sport

In Japan, compulsory education is undertaken for nine years and includes six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school. High school (last three years of secondary school) is optional but 97% of students continue into high school. Public schools open five days a week but some private schools have six school days in a week. A teacher's license is required in order to engage in school teacher's job in present-day Japan. That is given by completing all the courses necessary for it at university. There is a teacher's licence respectively different in a kindergarten, an elementary school, a junior high school, a high school, and a special needs school. In elementary schools, classroom teachers teach all

¹ *The Course of Study includes the objectives and contents of each subject. Each school should formulate a proper curriculum in compliance with the Course of Study, in order to accomplish the well-balanced development of individual students as human beings, with full consideration toward the circumstances of the school and its local community, and toward students' stages of mental and physical development and their individual characteristics (MEXT, 2008a).*

subjects but, recently, some elementary schools have specialist teachers for Physical Education (2012 academic year:3.14%, 2013 academic year:3.38%). On the other hand, in junior high school and high school, teachers specialise for each subject and PE is taught by specialist PE teachers.

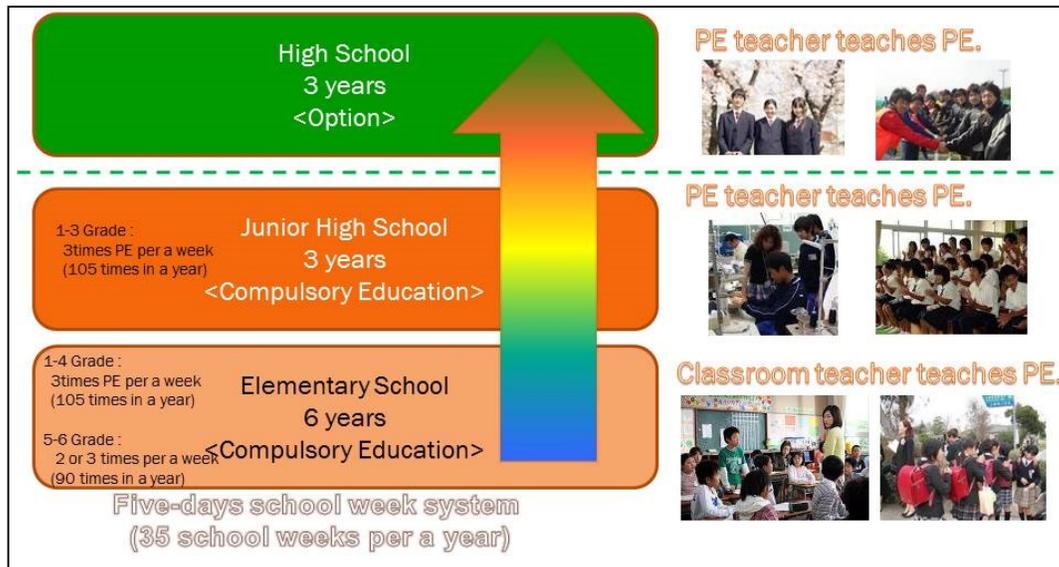


Figure 1
Education System in Japan

The physical education curriculum content is influenced by the play theory of Huizinga (1938) and Callois (1958) and the exercise/sport classification ideas of Loy (1969) and McIntosh (1963). The exercise domains of physical education in Japanese elementary and junior high school are shown on the Table 2. and Table 3. There are seven contents in elementary (primary) school. There are nine components in junior high school.

Table 2: Physical Education Content in Elementary School

	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th
Contents	Physical Fitness					
		Play with apparatus and equipment			Apparatus Gymnastics	
		Play with Running and Jumping		Running and Jumping		Track and Field
		Playing in water		Floating and Swimming		Swimming
			Games			Ball Games
		Expression and Rhythm Play			Expressive Activity	
Health						

Table 3: Physical Education Content in Junior High School

		7 th	8 th	9 th
A	Physical Fitness	Requirement		Requirement
B	Apparatus Gymnastics	Requirement		2 items are selected from B, C, D, G.
C	Track and Field	Requirement		
D	Swimming	Requirement		1 item is selected from E, F.
E	Ball Games	Requirement		
F	Budo (Martial Arts)	Requirement		2 items are selected from B, C, D, G.
G	Dance	Requirement		
	Theory of Sport and Physical Education	Requirement		Requirement
	Health	Requirement		Requirement

Table 4
History for Games Content in Course of Study

Year	Grade 1 & Grade 2	Grade 3 & Grade 4	Grade 5 & Grade 6	Grade 7, 8 & 9
2008	Ball games with throwing Ball games with shooting	Invasion games Net/wall type games Striking/fielding type games	Invasion games Net/wall type games Striking/fielding type games	Invasion games Net/wall type games Striking/fielding type games Basketball or Handball
1998	Ball games with throwing Ball games with shooting	Basketball type games Soccer type games Baseball type games	Basketball Soccer Softball or Soft Volleyball	Soccer Volleyball Tennis, Table Tennis or Badminton Softball Basketball or Handball Soccer
1988	Dodge ball Ball games with shooting	Port ball Line Soccer Hand Baseball	Basketball Soccer	Volleyball Tennis, Table Tennis or Badminton Softball
1977	Ball games with throwing Ball games with shooting	Dodgeball(Grade3) Port Ball(Grade4) Line Soccer	Basketball Soccer	Basketball Volleyball Soccer
1968 (Grade1-6)	Grade 1 Delivering a ball by hand Dodge ball with rolling a ball Ball-toss game, in which balls are thrown into a basket on a high pole Kicking a ball in parallel	Grade3 Square dodge ball Hand Baseball Foot Baseball Line Soccer	Grade5 Port Ball Hand Baseball Simple Soccer	Basketball Handball Volleyball Soccer (Boys)
1969 (Grade 7-9)	Grade2 Delivering a ball by pass Circular Dodge ball Throwing Kicking a ball in parallel	Grade4 Port Ball Hand Baseball Foot Baseball Line Soccer	Grade6 Port Ball Softball Simple Soccer	
1958	Grade1 Delivering a ball by hand Dodge ball with rolling a ball Ball-toss game, in which balls are thrown into a basket on a high pole Kicking a ball in parallel Grade2 Delivering a ball by pass Circular Dodge ball Throwing Kicking a ball in parallel	Grade3 Square dodge ball Hand Baseball Foot Baseball Line Soccer Grade4 Port Ball Hand Baseball Foot Baseball Line Soccer	Grade5 Port Ball Hand Baseball Simple Soccer Grade6 Port Ball Softball Simple Soccer	Volleyball Basketball Soccer(Boys) Softball

In previous versions of the course of study, the name of the full official sport was used to indicate learning content in the area of ball games and, in particular, with the three big sports of soccer, basketball and volleyball. However, the broader term, of specific ball game “type”, came to be used for the notation of the contents from the revision in 1998 to broaden possibilities for modified, small-sided games. In the course of study in 2008 this tendency was increasingly emphasised with a move to using the game categories used in TGfU. As a result, all learning contents were described as a type and a full sport name is only shown to provide guidelines. Thus, it seems that the game curriculum has been increasingly shaped by the tactical approach as is evident in the transition of the content.

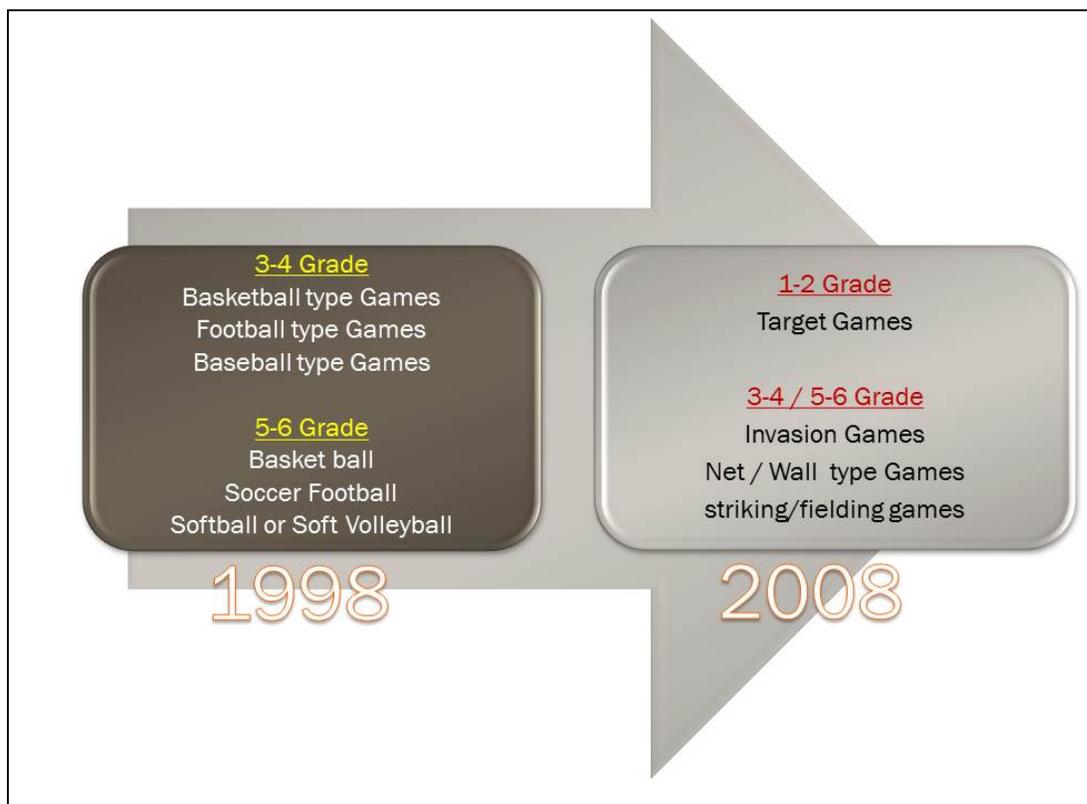


Figure 2

Contents Reform

Extracts from the “Course of Study in Elementary School”**1st & 2nd**

1. *To enable pupils to acquire the relevant motor skills by enjoying the following activities:*
 - a. Ball games, including games involving hitting a target and offensive/defensive transition with simple on the ball skills and off the ball movements.
 - b. Tag game, including escaping, chasing, and gaining/protecting territory within a fixed area.
2. *To enable pupils to actively engage in activities while observing rules in a friendly manner, to accept victory and loss and to pay attention to the safe use of place.*
3. *To enable pupils to devise simple rules and decide on offensive formation.*

3rd & 4th

1. *To enable pupils to acquire the relevant motor skills by enjoying the following activities:*
 - a. Invasion games, including easy modified transition with basic on the ball skills and off the ball movements.
 - b. Net/wall type games, including easy modified transition with basic involving continuing rallies and passing balls
 - c. Striking/fielding type games, including easy modified transition with basic involving such movements as kicking, hitting, catching and throwing.
2. *To enable pupils to actively engage in activities while observing rules in a friendly manner, to accept victory and loss and to pay attention to the safe use of place and equipment.*
3. *To enable pupils to devise rules, and to make simple operations in accordance with the type of me.*

5th & 6th

1. *To feel the fun and pleasure of the following activities and to enable pupils to acquire the relevant motor skills:*
 - a. In invasion games, including offensive and defensive plays in modified transition with on the ball skills and off the ball movements.
 - b. In net/wall type games, including offensive and defensive plays in modified transition through coordinated team attack and defense.
 - c. In striking/fielding games, including offensive and defensive plays in modified transition through attacks of hitting the ball and defense formation.
2. *To enable pupils to actively engage in activities while observing rules and helping each other and to pay attention to the safe use of place and equipment.*
3. *To enable pupils to devise rules and make operations in accordance with the characteristics of the team.*

Extracts from the “Course of Study in Junior High School”
7th & 8th

1. *With regard to the following activities, to enable students to experience the fun and pleasure of competing over wins and losses, and to enable the students to engage in games by using basic motor skills and coordinated movements with their teammates.*
 - a. *For goal-type games, to enable students to engage in offense and defense in front of the goal via on-the-ball skills and off-the-ball movements such as running into open spaces.*
 - b. *For net-type games, to enable students to engage in offense and defense surrounding open areas via on-the-ball skills and off-the-ball movements such as returning to a base position.*
 - c. *For baseball-type games, to enable students to engage in offense and defense such as by going on the offensive via basic bat manipulation and base running, and defending via on-the-ball- skills and positioning at a base position.*
2. *To enable students to actively engage in ball games. To enable students to strive to observe fair play, fulfill one’s own responsibilities, and take part in discussions on game plan, as well as to enable the students to mind health and safety.*
3. *To enable students to understand the characteristics and origin of ball games, the names of techniques and how to perform them and the physical fitness components expected to be improved in conjunction with this, while also enabling the students to devise ways of solving problems according to their own tasks.*

9th

1. *With regard to the following activities, to enable students to experience the fun and pleasure of competing over wins and losses, and to enable the students to engage in games by coordinating with their teammates through skills according to a strategy.*
 - a. *For goal-type games, to enable students to engage in offense and defense such as by penetrating to in front of the goal via steady on-the-ball-skills and off-the-ball-movements such as creating open spaces.*
 - b. *For net-type games, to enable students to engage in offense and defense surrounding open areas by steady on-the-ball-skills according to one’s role, and coordinated movements with others.*
 - c. *For baseball-type games, to enable students to engage in offense and defense such as by going on the offense via steady bat manipulation and base running, and manipulation of the ball and a coordinated defense with others.*
2. *To enable students to independently engage in ball games. To strive to hold fair play in high esteem, fulfill one’s own responsibilities and contribute to discussions on game plane, as well as to enable the students to maintain health and safety.*
3. *To enable students to understand the names of techniques and how to perform them, how to enhance physical fitness and methods for observing exercise, while also enabling the students to devise ways of solving problems according to their own tasks.*

BATTLE PLAN CENTERED APPROACH

Drilling technique out of context does not produce good games players or typically generate much pleasure for learners (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) but just letting students play the full game without any structure or aim on the part of the teacher will not necessarily produce good games players either. Under the current course of study, Japanese teachers want students to acquire both knowledge and skills through playing modified games. So, they ask their students to implement “battle plans” (Suzuki, 2011) for each modified game as an agreed strategy for the team. A battle plan is a tactical plan developed by the teams in the game.

The battle plan centered approach is used to dissolve the differences between players in skill and confidence by allowing all players to contribute to the battle plan and share in the team effort. It focuses on the social interaction involved in the collective design of battle plans as an intellectual activity and collective discussion and the formulation of a battle plan that is then tested in the game. This is followed by group reflection and evaluation of the plan leading to modification and further testing in the game. This is very similar to the framework for Game Sense outlined by Light (2013), which describes the need to provide opportunities for learners to collectively formulate strategies, test them in the game, reflect upon and evaluate them, and test again in the same process of inquiry asked for in the battle plan approach.

This approach has had some problems. Most of the time the battle plans are not effective in the real game, suggesting a separation between theory and practice. However, this gap can be reduced through the reflection on and evaluation of plans put into action in Light’s (2013) 3rd feature of Game Sense: providing opportunities for the collective formulation of strategies that are tested and evaluated by learners. This should occur as tactical knowledge develops.

Table 5
Comparison among approaches

Skill Centered Approach	Battle Plan Centered Approach	Game Centered Approach
Drill	Skill Practice	Game
↓	↓	↓
Drill	Meeting for making a battle plan	Game Appreciation
↓	↓	↓
Drill	Game	Tactical Awareness
↓	↓	↓
Drill	Meeting for reflection and Practice	Game
↓	↓	↓
Game	Game	Tactical Understandings
	↓	↓
	Meeting for reflection	Skill Practice
		↓
		Game



CONCLUSION

The new physical education curriculum in Japan aims to guide students toward achieving the ideal of lifelong participation in sport and leading an active lifestyle. In games teaching it is thus important to make learning enjoyable and meaningful as Light (2014) suggests in the positive pedagogy approach. The influence of tactical approaches such as TGfU, Game Sense and Play Practice on the games curriculum in Japan has made a significant contribution toward achieving this aim by moving away from the outdated skill-drill approach and bringing games learning to life for Japanese students. The teaching strategies for games teaching in Japan are becoming more learner-centered and employ game-based approaches that ask students to think, to interact and to intellectualise learning in games. Students' learning experiences in this approach can make games fun and move away from the military

drilling of de-contextualized technique. The new course of study and its focus on inquiry and student-centered learning can produce learning that is fun and promote a fascination with games for young people by giving the games back to children and allowing them to enjoy and learn through structured play, reflection and social interaction. However, this presents a huge challenge for Japanese teachers to move from a teacher-centered, technical approach to a student-centered, inquiry-based approach that will require ongoing commitment from the ministry to ensure that this significant curriculum change is realised in practice.

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