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Marie Martin

Learning Conversations, marie.martin@learningconversations.com.au

Beth P. Hands

University of Notre Dame Australia, bhands@nd.edu.au

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This article was originally published as:

Martin, M., & Hands, B. P. (2003). Implementing a fundamental movement skill program in an early childhood setting: The teachers' perspectives. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 28 (4), 40-46.

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Implementing a Fundamental Movement Skill program in an early childhood setting: The teachers' perspectives

Marie Martin^a and Beth Hands^b

Connecting Learning^a

University of Notre Dame^b

Send correspondence to:

Dr Beth Hands

School of Health and Physical Education

College of Health

University of Notre Dame

PO Box 1225

FREMANTLE WA 6959

Ph: (618) 9433 0792

Fax: (618) 9433 0790

Email: bhands@nd.edu.au

Word Count: 3486

Abstract

The place of explicit movement skill development programs in early childhood settings is contentious. However given the growing understanding that movement competence is important for maintaining an active and healthy lifestyle (Hands, Parker, & Larkin, 2001), well planned and effective programs specifically designed for young children are important.

In this paper, the influence of a new teaching resource designed to support teachers in implementing a fundamental movement skill program is presented using a case study approach. The case studies were constructed with teachers working in a range of early childhood settings. The impact of the program on teachers' level of confidence, knowledge of fundamental movement skills and personal physical activity level is presented. The information was gathered using a structured self-reflection process including a journal, group meetings, individual face-to-face interviews and a final written evaluation. The findings indicate an increase in teacher confidence and knowledge but no impact on personal physical activity level.

Introduction

Fundamental movement skills are basic movement patterns that form the basis of many more complex skills used in games, sports and other recreational activities. They include running, throwing, skipping and balancing. Children who are proficient in these skills are more likely to have higher self-esteem and self-confidence (Henderson, May, & Umney, 1989), and therefore be more willing to seek activity opportunities rather than avoid them. Strategies to maximize movement proficiency, therefore, form an important part of early childhood teaching and learning programs. A number of teacher resources are now available to assist teachers in their planning.

In 2000 and 2001, the Fundamental Movement Skill Teacher Resource (Education Department of WA, 1997) was rewritten to bring it into line with the Curriculum Framework for Western Australian Schools (Curriculum Council, 1998). The earlier resource had been favorably received, with many teachers reporting that the materials had helped them to understand how particular movement skills were performed and given them information on one teaching strategy to implement. The package, however, did not support teachers in providing a range of experiences, integrated into the learning program. Nor did it help teachers in gathering information about skills that was comprehensive, fair, valid, explicit and educative. The emergence of portfolio reporting had also led to the exclusion of physical activity in these reports or, conversely, the inclusion of 'work sheets' that reflected children's written skills more than their physical skills. The new package aimed to address many of the early concerns by providing teachers with a selection of strategies to plan, deliver and evaluate quality teaching and learning programs to maximize children's learning of fundamental movement skills (FMS).

Practising teachers supported the rewriting of the package at all stages of the process. A reference group oversaw the production of the materials, a teacher reference group read and provided feedback on each draft of the materials, and a case study group implemented the materials and reflected on their experiences with them.

The writers of the package, as well as the reference group and teacher reference group, wanted to evaluate the implementation of the package as it was developed. There were three main focuses: documenting the use of the package in order to refine the content and presentation of the information, researching the impact of a fundamental movement skill learning program on children's skill and activity levels, and researching the impact of the FMS teacher resource on teacher's practice.

This paper presents the latter research component, examining the teacher's perspective on the implementation of the FMS Teacher Resource (Education Department of WA, 2001).

Method

Seven teachers from different school sectors, settings and year groups were involved in the redevelopment of the FMS Resource. Two teachers, one a generalist classroom teacher and the other a physical education specialist, worked together for one of the case stories. The characteristics of the six different settings are shown in Table 1.

The case study method chosen involved a structured self-reflection process. After a half-day orientation to the FMS Teacher Resource, teachers completed an initial feedback form and were given a reflective journal. The journal asked them to record their plans for the implementation of the resource, and provided a lesson plan format including a large space for reflection. Two face-to-face interviews were conducted with each teacher approximately three and six weeks into their implementation period. Teachers presented a short report of their experience with the resource during a second half-day workshop and completed a final evaluation.

From the journal, interviews and final report, case stories were constructed. Each story was written by the FMS Teacher Resource project writer and reviewed by each teacher three times – after each interview and on completion of the final story. At each point, changes were made to the stories to more accurately reflect their experience. These stories describe key components of the teacher's implementation of the Resource and

were included in the final Resource as examples for other teachers. The initial self-reflections, journals and case stories were analysed to identify emerging themes. These were loosely grouped into two areas: teacher knowledge and confidence.

Six weeks after the trial, teachers were asked to reflect on the impact of the FMS Teacher Resource on their confidence in teaching FMS and their knowledge of fundamental movement skills. This paper reports the teachers' journeys.

Results

In order to compare the experiences of the teachers, two sets of matrices were developed (Tables 2 and 3). The first described each case and included the initial understandings and expectations of the teachers, their journal entries, their learning as reflected in the co-constructed case stories and their final reflections. The second focused on the emerging themes.

Case Study Summaries

Each teacher reflected on their experiences and learning and reported the significant impacts on their practice, thinking and confidence that they identified. Not all teachers provided extensive written notes. For some, the interview process supported their reflections and enabled them to limit their writing. These 'verbal' teachers also gave limited information in their final reflections.

Emerging Themes

Learning seemed to fall into the focuses the authors had chosen for the Resource itself. This is not surprising since the materials were developed and reviewed within the following structure:

- Identifying children's interests, strengths and needs
- Choosing a focus skill

- Assessing children's skill levels
- Planning and implementing learning experiences
- Gathering information about developing skill levels, and
- Sharing information about learning.

The interwoven nature of the learning and teaching process, however, often meant that a comment made in connection to one aspect also reflected learning in others. In particular, comments made about 'confidence' often referred to many parts of the process, and of the teachers' own journey of learning about and teaching of FMS.

Final Reflection

Participants were asked to rate their knowledge, and confidence prior to and after completion of the trial period. These ratings are shown in Figures 1 and 2 . With the exception of one highly skilled and knowledgeable teacher, all other participants reported increased knowledge and confidence.

Discussion

From the beginning, the plan was to develop a Resource that could 'stand on its own'. Consequently, extensive information about FMS, observation strategies, information gathering techniques, appropriate learning experiences, assessment methods and ways to share information were developed in the form of texts, examples, proformas and the case stories. The aim was to provide a number of ways for teachers to access the Resource, catering for teachers' different learning styles and intelligences. The teachers were encouraged to take from the Resource those parts they felt were useful and to use it in a way that best met their particular requirements.

The self-reflective method chosen to document and evaluate the development of the resource was designed to support teacher's reflections, encourage deeper thinking and inform the writers on their progress. Three of the teachers kept a detailed journal, supporting their observations of the children's skill development with anecdotal records,

observation records and photographs and discussing these with colleagues and the project writers. Two other teachers used the journal to a limited extent, but used discussion with their colleagues and with the project writers to articulate their emerging understandings. The two remaining teachers wrote little in their journals but were happy to discuss their experiences with the writers. The combination of information gathering techniques, designed to deepen and enrich the data gathered proved to be useful in ensuring *some* information was gathered from each of the participating teachers as it catered for their differences in learning styles and intelligences.

Analysis of the information gathered, in Figures 1 and 2, shows that the teachers increased their knowledge about, and ways to teach, FMS. There is some evidence, albeit less directly linked to each level of the teaching and learning cycle, that teachers' confidence increased (Figure 2). There are other factors, however, that are not clearly evidenced by the anecdotal and tabular data.

Suggestions made by the writers for additional ways to develop skills were included in the case stories as they developed. Some of the challenges faced by teachers enabled the writers to develop additional materials for the final Resource. Some of the solutions found by the teachers were similarly added to the Resource. The Resource, as well as the case stories, were thus co-constructed with the case study participants and the writers.

As the project continued and information and reflections were undertaken, it became clear that some teachers had not read much of the materials. One teacher referred to it as 'the guff'. There was an expectation that the teachers would use the information in the Resource to gain knowledge about FMS and the teaching of FMS. Some teachers did not choose to read the 'guff', preferring instead to intuit the prerequisite knowledge and to use the 'tools' and proformas without the theoretical background. The role of the writers in providing professional development became important in the process of implementing the Resource. Implicit in the documentation of the case stories is the relationship that developed between the writers and the case study participants.

Three examples of the challenges of these implicit assumptions are described here. A skill was chosen that was already achievable by every child in the group, but because the teacher felt confident to teach it, the writers were faced with a difficult decision. Did they intervene and guide the teacher to a more difficult skill for the children but a more challenging skill to teach and, perhaps, result in the teacher leaving the project altogether? Did the writers leave this story out? Did they change the story and report it differently?

A second challenge came through a teacher providing limited and uninspiring learning experiences for the children that did not extend their skills or challenge them, and resulted in off-task behaviour. The teacher's immediate solution was to further limit the learning experiences, centering the lessons on whole group, teacher-directed activities.

A third challenge occurred when observing a teacher implementing experiences in a way that was confusing and overwhelming for the children. The need for the teacher to keep her own energy level up meant that the children were being rushed from one activity to another.

In all of these cases, to report them 'as they really were' required documenting, and potentially modeling, poor teaching practice. The writers' decision was to encourage the teachers within their comfort zones, suggest experiences that would build on the children's interests and competencies, but extend both the repertoire of teaching experiences of the teacher as well as the learning opportunities for the children. In each case, the teachers responded positively to our suggestions and were able to add to them. In effect, we modeled a teaching and learning process we hoped the teachers would enact with their children.

Each of the cases posed a question about the relative importance of knowledge and confidence. The teachers reported that the Resource gave them the *confidence* to teach FMS, but (it seemed to the writers) that their *knowledge* about FMS remained low. Having the information accessible increased the teachers' confidence in teaching the

skills but, without professional development, their knowledge of FMS and teaching FMS was limited. In the long term, poor experiences can result in reduced participation from the children, more off task behaviour and more difficult lessons for the teacher. Would the teacher then turn to the Resource for additional information to guide their teaching? Or, would they drop the Resource altogether? While the writers' intervention prevented it, the experience of the uptake of a Resource suggests that the latter was more likely. In other words, teachers having confidence in their ability to teach FMS might initially trial new experiences. Without the knowledge to support that confidence the learning experiences would not be appropriate, the children's off-task behaviour would increase and the teacher's confidence in their ability to teach FMS would be undermined.

Another teacher reported that her focus on the skill criteria resulted in her 'screaming skill criteria across the playground', for example "lift your knees up!". Her philosophy of the importance of play was, for a time, overwhelmed by her new knowledge of the skills she was teaching. Her knowledge and confidence increased for a time. As the children were not incorporating the skills into their play, she realised that teaching the criteria was not enough. Her confidence reduced. Through discussions with colleagues and with the writers, she was able to integrate her new knowledge of FMS with her philosophy of learning.

The teachers indicated an increased level of participation by the children in the learning experiences provided (Hands and Martin, in this issue). In order to maximize the children's learning, support individual development of skill criteria and gather information about individual levels of achievement, teachers potentially had to be 'in more places at once'. The framework for physical activity sessions involved a high level of small group and individualised instruction. There was generally less whole class demonstration which involved a teacher demonstrating a skill once to the whole group. Teachers reported demonstrating the skills repeatedly to individuals and small groups.

Conclusion

Teachers' knowledge of fundamental movement skills

It is clear that the FMS Teacher Resource supported teachers' understanding of FMS, the importance of FMS and different ways of developing a teaching and learning program to incorporate FMS. Part of this knowledge, for some of the teachers, came not from the Resource itself but from the professional development provided by the project writers. Written materials alone are insufficient to support all learners.

Teachers' levels of confidence

The FMS Teacher Resource provided the information and security that teachers felt they needed to teach FMS. There is no doubt that their perceived levels of confidence increased. This confidence came, in part, from the teachers' increased knowledge of FMS. However, for many of the teachers this knowledge came, not from the Resource itself, but from the interchange and relationship with the project writers. Without the professional development support it is possible that the long-term experience may have actually undermined the teachers' confidence in teaching FMS. As children were more off task from experiences that were inappropriate, unchallenging or boring, teachers may have abandoned the FMS program altogether. Extrapolating from this experience, it is clear that there is an important role for professional development in the introduction of the FMS Teacher Resource and the implementation of FMS in the classroom.

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Table 1: Context for Case Study Participants

| Setting | School Type | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------|-------------|
| | Government | Catholic | Independent |
| Classroom | Pre-primary | | Year One |
| Physical education specialist | | Year Two | Year Two |
| Children with additional needs | Education Support Centre | | |
| Aboriginal children | Year 3 and 4 | | |

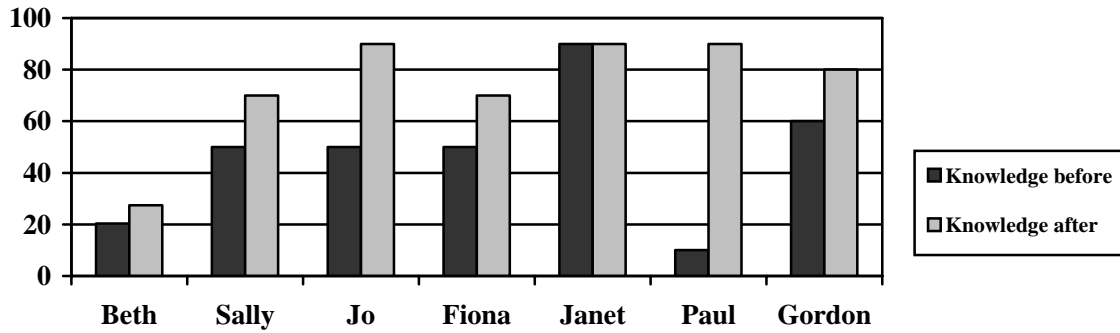


Figure 1. Changes in teacher knowledge about FMS after implementing the Resource.

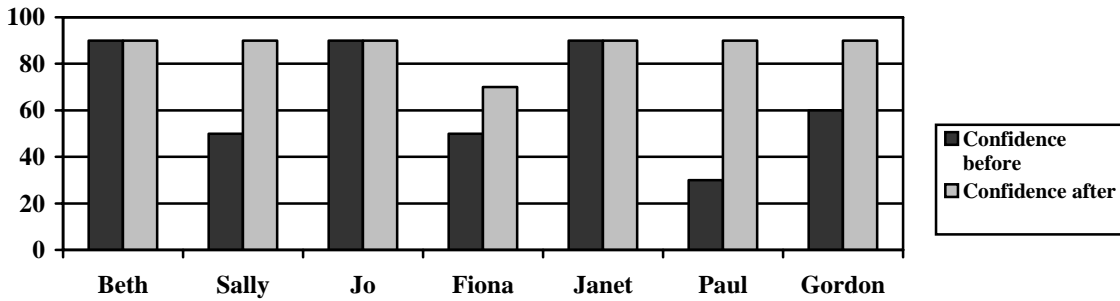


Figure 2. Changes in teacher confidence about teaching FMS after implementing the Resource.

Table 2: Summary of the teacher's experience of implementing the FMS Teacher Resource

| | Beth | Sally | Fiona and Jo | Janet | Paul | Gordon |
|--------------------|---|--|---|---|--|--|
| Initial reflection | Children need to focus on body management. | I believe in the value of learning through play. | Experienced classroom teacher. Inexperienced physical activity specialist. | Experienced, dedicated professional. | Previously used a play stations model. | It is important emphasise self-confidence and self-esteem. |
| Journal | Need to individualise assessment methods and develop ways of assessing attitudes | Explored a range of learning experiences. Problem solving helped children think about their skills. | Focused on specific components of the skills. Peer teaching worked well. Different experiences for different levels reflects the reality of classrooms. | Focusing on a few skills gave us an opportunity to really teach and develop skills in detail. | Used the skill criteria as teaching points. | I made links to the Curriculum Framework, . Many of the kids need extension. |
| Case story | I focused on 'How do they do the skill?' Collaboration with the classroom teacher is valuable. | It is important that children use the skill in a meaningful context and learn it for meaningful purposes. It's easy to teach the skills when you know about them. | There are many ways to integrate the FMS into the daily teaching and learning program. FMS can be child-centred. | Resource provided new ideas for learning experiences. | Reducing instruction time enabled increased time for children's activity. Modified the experiences by changing the size of the ball, distance to the target. I have the confidence to say 'Yes, I can teach these children.' | I needed to make the experiences more challenging. Observation Criteria identified what criteria to focus on. |
| Final reflection | | Three things I found critical to implementation were Daily activity Being experimental Involving the children in the implementation | I have a better understanding of the techniques/desired movements of particular skills and how to best develop them. | | | |

Table 3: Identification of case story themes

| | Knowledge | Confidence |
|--|--|---|
| Linking to children's previous experience | It is important that children use a skill in a meaningful context and learn it for meaningful purposes. | |
| Outcomes based education | The Resource provided the proper terminology to put into my program and to describe the movements. I made links to the Curriculum Framework. | |
| Skill descriptions | I have focused on 'Can they do the skill?' rather than 'How do they do the skill?' It's easy to teach the skills when you know about them. It was helpful to tell the children exactly what they were doing well. Focused on 'How can I learn to do it better?' The Resource made us slow down and focus on individual children and learning points. Observation Records provided information about the skill criteria and improved observations, enabled me to pinpoint any difficulties and give immediate feedback. Useful to know the criteria for a skill, common errors and teaching strategies. Used skill criteria with children in all years of schooling. | It isn't as scary now. I have the confidence to say 'Yes, I can teach these children.' Observation Criteria identified what criteria to focus on. Improved ability to make observations. |
| Using the Observation Records | We found ways of gathering information using the Observation Records that made sense to us. I was surprised at how little I knew about the children's movement skills. Using the Observation Records while looking at a video of the children's activity helped me to identify the wide range of skills in the group. | |
| Importance of participation | I need to focus on having the children actively participate so they can practise a skill. Ten in a group meant there was too much waiting around. Reducing instruction time enabled increased time for children's activity. Many of the kids need more challenges. | |
| Varied experiences | There are many ways to integrate the FMS into the daily teaching and learning program. FMS can be child-centred. Problem solving helped children think about their skills. Peer teaching worked well. The Resource has made me refocus the way that I teach FMS. It has made me slow down and focus more on individual students and learning points. Using the package improved my teaching strategies and knowledge. | The FMS Teacher Resource gives me the confidence to design a program to improve the children's skills. |
| Assessment | I made links to the Curriculum Framework, particularly in concepts for a healthy lifestyle, skills for physical activity and self-management skills. Developed other ways of gathering information about children's skills. Needed to individualise assessment methods as well as learning experiences. Need to develop ways of assessing attitudes as well as skills since attitudes impact on skill performance to a great extent. | |
| Reporting strategies | Supplemented the reporting format to families with information from the Resource. | |
| Need for collaboration with other teachers | Collaboration with the classroom teacher is valuable | |

