

# Can observation improve PE teaching?

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## AIM

*To see whether an increased awareness of observational strategies enhances effective teaching of physical education at Key Stage 2.*

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- \* There were no differences in the observational strategies implemented practically or in the classroom – “scanning”, “group focus” and “individual focus” were all used.
- \* Experienced teachers use a variety of observational strategies but are not always aware that they are using them.
- \* A number of factors influence the selection of observational strategy. Safety was identified as a key factor, which resulted in a predominance of scanning.
- \* It is possible to structure the learning environment to allow for effective observation. Through the use of lesson material the teachers became aware of ways of structuring the learning environment to provide the opportunity for increased observation of pupils’ performance.
- \* Planned observation allows teachers to gain greater information about pupils’ performance and gives more valuable feedback to encourage maximum learning. It is not an increase in the quantity but the quality of feedback that is important.
- \* The structure of the lesson has a significant influence on pupil motivation.
- \* As a result of being involved in the project, the teachers did not feel more confident teaching PE, but they were certainly more comfortable.
- \* The subjects raised the question, “Are structured observations enough, without an effective way of recording pupil progress?”
- \* There are implications for teachers in training to develop an awareness of observational strategies and an understanding of the ways in which to structure a task before entering the profession rather than developing them through years of experience.
- \* The subjects expressed a positive response to the project and felt the knowledge gained could be disseminated, possibly through an INSET day, which should include practical experience of observational strategies.

*A research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency  
as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/97*

## Explanation of main findings

In discussions it became clear that the teachers had little or no initial understanding of the terms “scanning”, “group focus” or “individual focus” but were, in fact, using all three methods of observing a group of pupils. The questionnaire highlighted that the teachers used all three methods of observation in both classroom and practical lessons.

The initial questionnaire and discussion, based on three lessons, helped raise the teachers’ knowledge and awareness of when and why they were using each observational strategy. Analysis of the questionnaires confirmed that the teachers were using all three observational strategies, but the purpose of each strategy selected did vary slightly. With scanning, discipline, the task in question and safety were the priorities. With group focus they were the group dynamics, differentiation and assessment; and with individual focus they were differentiation and assessment.

There appeared to be a gradual increase in specificity as we move down the strategies which highlighted that, if pupils’ learning (and, hence, performance) is to improve, then opportunities must

be provided to enable the teacher to focus on individual pupils.

The initial questionnaire identified several factors that could influence the observational strategy selected – class size, nature of the lesson (practical or theory), pupils’ response to a task, past experience of teaching the

task, knowledge of pupils’ behaviour, knowledge of pupils’ ability, assessment, lesson objectives and safety. But the main issue expressed by the teachers was for pupils’ safety, and this resulted in the predominant use of scanning. The main question from these results was how much individual learning or improvement in performance took place.

The two main stages of the project that helped the teachers to identify ways to structure the learning environment to allow them to focus on individual pupils were the observation and analysis of a pre-recorded video (gymnastics and netball) and the prepared lesson materials (gymnastics). The teachers were able to identify ways to adapt a task to suit the observational strategy they wished to use. They felt that an awareness of the observational strategies was essential for good lesson preparation. Possible ways of structuring the lesson, or adapting the task, included the time spent on an activity, the organisation of the pupils and teaching style. Reciprocal teaching was included in the prepared lesson material, which all teachers found to be an effective way of allowing them to focus on individuals or pairs without the overriding concern for safety.

During the individual interviews at the final stage of the project, the teachers indicated that, although they were not necessarily able to give more feedback to the pupils, it was more informed. They felt they had clear expectations of what they needed to achieve. As a result they felt that the pupils progressed well and produced good work.

The teachers responded positively to the lesson material and all said how motivated the pupils were. They were not sure of the main reason for this but suggested it may have been due to the originality of the material, the amount of feedback given, the challenging nature of the tasks, or the fact that the pupils felt they were learning and improving.

*“An increased awareness of the possible observational strategies available and the ways in which to structure the lesson to facilitate teacher observation could be beneficial to the inexperienced teacher or student.”*

*“An awareness of the observational strategies was essential for good lesson preparation.”*



Owing to the limited timescale and sample size, there was no substantial evidence to suggest that increased subject knowledge has an influence on teacher confidence. Most of the teachers were already reasonably confident and experienced, and so they did not feel their confidence had increased. But they did indicate they felt more comfortable teaching gymnastics, especially as their concern for safety was lessened.

During the individual interviews, several teachers expressed the need for an effective and manageable method of recording their observations to fulfil National Curriculum requirements. One teacher devised a recording sheet for the lessons and was able to make judgements on the whole class in the two lessons.

The subjects used for this project were relatively, if not very, experienced teachers. Even though they felt that the project had raised their awareness of observational strategies, they could see a greater application of the knowledge for students in teacher training. Whether teachers learn the skill of observation through experience or natural ability is debatable, but an increased awareness of the possible observational strategies available and the ways in which to structure the lesson to facilitate teacher observation could be beneficial to the inexperienced teacher or student.

The possibility of organising INSET was considered appropriate for disseminating the findings of the project, as long as the teachers were involved in practical experience of observational strategies and provided with strategies to structure a lesson to enhance their opportunities for observation. This highlighted the need for further investigation into the possible application of the various teaching styles.

## Methods

The subjects were taken from two primary feeder schools, each providing four Year 5 and Year 6 teachers. Each stage of the project was devised to provide material to focus the next stage of the project. There were eight stages to the project:

- \* *an initial meeting with all the primary teachers involved;*
- \* *the devising of a questionnaire based on three classroom lessons to gain more systematic material;*
- \* *teachers' observations and analysis, a pre-recorded video and the questionnaire;*
- \* *a group discussion of their observations on the video;*
- \* *qualitative analysis of the questionnaire material and a group discussion to provide material for the next stage of the project;*
- \* *the use by primary teachers of material provided by the researchers in two gymnastics lessons and the completion of a questionnaire;*
- \* *qualitative analysis of the questionnaire, which identified key observational strategies for the teachers to implement in their teaching of PE;*
- \* *individual interviews with each primary teacher.*

***“Teachers used all three methods of observation in both classroom and practical lessons.”***

*I would like to thank Ann-Marie Latham of Brighton University.*

### **Further reading**

Barrett, K., "Observation of Movement for Teachers. A Synthesis and Implications", in *Motor Skills: Theory into Practice*, volume 3, number 2, 1979.

Mawer, M., *The Effective Teaching of Physical Education*, Longman, 1995.

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