

Critical Reflection on a Tactical Approach to Invasion Games: Winning the Ball

The winning the ball session developed my understanding of how a Tactical Games Approach can prioritise decision-making over isolated technical skills. Designed for children aged 7–9, the session focused on regaining possession through positioning, pressure and interception. Bunker and Thorpe (1982) argue that game understanding and tactical awareness should underpin games teaching. This informed my decision to introduce the problem through a small-sided game before practising defensive techniques. However, I recognise that a well-designed session does not automatically produce learning; its effectiveness depends on pupils' engagement, the quality of questioning and their ability to transfer learning into gameplay.

The game–practice–game structure was a particular strength because it connected tactical understanding with practical application. In 'keep the ball', defenders were challenged to prevent three consecutive passes, encouraging them to consider whether to pressure the player in possession or anticipate a pass. The Intercept and Win activity then simplified this problem through a two-attacker, one-defender format before pupils returned to 'win it back'. This reflects the tactical approach described by Mitchell, Oslin and Griffin (2013), in which modified games create opportunities to develop game understanding. Nevertheless, the practice activity risked oversimplifying invasion-game situations: defending against two attackers may not fully reproduce the movement, communication and uncertainty of a larger game. I would therefore retain the progression while ensuring the final activity provides sufficient opportunities to apply the learning.

Questioning was another important feature of the session. Questions such as "Is it better to chase the ball or intercept a pass?" were intended to encourage pupils to analyse defensive decisions rather than simply follow instructions. Light (2004) identifies the potential of game sense to support player-centred learning through active participation and reflection. For children aged 7–9, however, questions must be concise and appropriate to their developmental level. Lengthy discussions could reduce active playing time in a session lasting only 10–15 minutes. I would use brief questions between rounds, followed by immediate opportunities to test pupils' answers in the game.

The session also highlighted the importance of inclusion and differentiation. Using small teams, frequent role rotations, soft balls and adjusted playing areas was intended to maximise participation and support different confidence levels. Griffin, Mitchell and Oslin (1997) emphasise the value of developing tactical understanding alongside skill execution. However, reducing the playing area to increase pressure may disadvantage less confident pupils, while more experienced players may dominate possession. I would adapt space and touch restrictions according to individual needs and observe whether every child has meaningful opportunities to defend, intercept and regain possession. Safe defending, including avoiding pushing and

grabbing, was equally important because tactical success should not be prioritised over pupils' wellbeing.

Finally, the assessment criteria focused on positioning, decision-making, teamwork and application in the final game. Harvey and Jarrett (2014) highlight the significance of game-centred approaches while recognising that their implementation varies between contexts. This encouraged me to consider assessment beyond whether a team won possession: pupils should demonstrate why and when they chose to pressure or intercept. Overall, the session strengthened my understanding of tactical teaching as an inclusive and reflective approach, but also revealed the need to balance tactical questioning, technical development and active participation. In future practice, I would use targeted observation and pupil explanations to establish whether learning transfers from the practice activity into the final game.

Word count: 548

References

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