

## Preschool/Developmental

# Tasks, Refinements, and Applications

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Lulla (1996) recommends placing preschool gymnastics students in similar ability groupings in order to avoid threats to children's self-esteem. He suggests that, in a class with a wide range of abilities, peer comparisons may lead to a sense of inadequacy or failure. He further stipulates that it is much easier for teachers to work with homogenous groupings. There is research to suggest that children below third grade level rely on feelings of general competence (Harter and Pike, 1984) that are relatively unaffected by any specific sense of movement competence (Gallahue, 1989). I would, however, agree that it certainly is easier for an instructor to work with homogenous ability groups.

There are several drawbacks to homogeneous grouping. Many gymnastics programs lack the population base or facility time to offer the multiple classes necessary to facilitate such grouping. Parents may not want or be able to accommodate restrictive scheduling. And, as public education is realizing, children often exhibit greater persistence if allowed to progress with their peers, regardless of their innate ability.

Therefore, while homogeneous grouping may lead to greater efficiency, it is not necessarily developmentally appropriate, and may be difficult for smaller programs to implement. Therefore, there has to be some alternative which will lead to effective instruction, maintain children's interest, and encourage continued participation.

Modern physical education is faced with similar concerns related to homogeneous grouping of students. The phenomenon of the 'competent bystander' (Tousignant and Siedentop, 1983) serves as one example. Students lacking in skill, self-competence, or self-esteem are faced with an undesirable situation. They don't wish to demonstrate their lack of skill through public, mistake-ridden practice. But neither are they allowed to withdraw from the situation due to mandated attendance requirements. Therefore, they develop a capacity for appearing to be active participants. They keep their place in line, but are able to avoid taking their turn. They run up and down the field in team sport activities, but rarely contact the ball or influence play.

The developmentally appropriate response to this pattern of nonparticipation is to recognize individual differences between students and develop activities that can be adapted to the individual needs of the students. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education has published guidelines that describe what this would look like in an elementary physical education program (COPEC, 1992). Recognizing that the goals of gymnastics programs are different from those of physical education programs, how do we go about addressing the needs of individual students in programs that cannot provide homogeneous groupings?

## Definitions

Graham, Holt/Hale, and Parker (1993) describe a teaching framework based on Tasks, Extensions, Refinements, and Applications. *Tasks* are planned activities or skills to be taught. A task is the basic unit of instruction. *Extensions* are variations of the basic task. Extensions are usually progressive in nature, from easier to more difficult. An extension may be as simple as asking students to perform a skill with a different body shape, at a different speed, or maybe with a partner.

*Refinements* are cues used by the teacher to focus students' attention on a particular aspect of the task. These might be technical cues (i.e., "use the back of your head," "tuck tightly") or aesthetic cues (i.e., "point your toes," "stretch through your fingertips") They are called refinements because they should be presented selectively and progressively as students learn the skill. Beginning teachers tend to present a lot of cues all at once while, at best, children can attend to only two or three cues while actually performing a task. Graham, et al (1993) recommend presenting children with only one cue at a time. This does not mean simply limiting the teacher to one cue after each practice attempt. It means choosing a cue and sticking with it for the entire period of time a skill is practiced, or until the cue is mastered.

Selectively choosing cues requires the teacher to prioritize. What are the most important cues and in what order should they be presented? Typically, the choice should be to progress from gross motor to fine motor movements, and from technical to aesthetic refinements.

*Applications* are challenges related to a task. An application is typically associated with a number or time-"Can you do five... in a row?" "How many... can you do in the next 30 seconds?" The idea is to pique a child's interest in performing a task at a higher level of difficulty. Successful completion of the challenge should be recognized, but should not be turned into a competition.

## **Teaching Heterogeneous Classes**

How do tasks, refinements, and applications solve the problem of heterogeneous classes? First, intra-task variation allows children to choose a level of participation at which they are comfortable. Mosston and Ashworth (1986) suggest in their 'slanty rope' theory that, given options, children will choose that which is maximally challenging but at which they can also be successful. In gymnastics classes this can mean offering students a choice of rolling in different body shapes (tuck, pike, straddle), or from different heights (squat, handstand, dive) As long as the teacher acknowledges each child's choices and execution quality, there should be little concern about peer comparisons.

Second, the teacher reinforces the same cue with all task variations. (i.e., All forward roll variations use the back of the head). Focusing on one cue for all students and for a particular task portion of the workout (1) simplifies the teaching process, (2) provides better carry-over effect for that cue during subsequent classes, and (3) allows children to feel successful about that cue. In subsequent lessons, there is a short review of a previous cue, and then a new, more difficult cue is presented. If cues are appropriately prioritized and sequenced, the resulting small steps allow children to experience success during every class.

Young children do not have an adult understanding of competition. Applications, or challenges, must recognize that children gain immense satisfaction from accomplishing

tasks on their own. If the instructor presents reasonable challenges and then acknowledges the varying efforts of children equally, then all children can pursue skills at their highest level of ability without a sense of inadequacy.

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