Pens and Swords: A Sport and Literacy Program

Randall Griffiths, University of the Incarnate Word
Stephanie Grote-Garcia, University of the Incarnate Word

Entry into sport is based on the participant finding an opportunity that provides valued benefits (Green, 2005; Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008). Achieving a level of attractiveness that maximizes recruitment and retention may necessitate modification of the sport. Youth sport is provided in many locations focused on the enjoyable elements for the child participant and developmental desires for his or her parents. These programs conduct the sport in alternative ways that modify or sacrifice rules, social norms or competitive outcomes in the name of participant development and retention. For example modifications in youth sport can include coaches on the field during play, participation trophies for all participants, and even the removal of competition completely (Green, 1997). These common examples are an incomplete list of the possible ways that sport can be modified to increase the realization of experiential and developmental outcomes.

This presentation will describe a youth sport program called Pens and Swords. The Pens and Swords program is formed upon the research supporting content area literacy. Content area literacy is described as “the ability to use reading and writing to learn subject matter in a given discipline” (Vacca & Vacca, 2002, p. 8). The Pens and Swords program has children participate in fencing lessons and then examine duels within fictional stories. Children also write their own fictional stories featuring characters in battles. In doing so, the literacy activities provide opportunities for children to critically think about the sport of fencing and to use the associated vocabulary within context. The integration of literacy activities is supported by Vacca and Vacca (2002) who report that such activities provided time to “play with ideas, explore concepts, clarify meaning and elaborate on what they have learned” (p. 282). McKenna and Robinson (1990) further support the integration of literacy skills into content areas and mention that “the more knowledge students have about the content they are assigned to read..., the more that knowledge facilitates their reading and writing—a situation that in turn sets up a cyclical...” (p. 13). This cyclical pattern is the foundation of the Pens and Swords program, and this presentation will describe the program and its use of this cyclical pattern.

Not only are content knowledge and literacy skills increased in programs that combine content with literacy activities as found in the Pens and Swords program, but vocabulary knowledge is also increased. A long history of reading research (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Perfetti, 1983; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985) has identified that rich vocabulary instruction incorporates multiple encounters with vocabulary terms and involves a variety of activities that require students to use words in meaningful ways. The Pens and Swords program incorporates both of these best practices by teaching and practicing the use of content-specific words for fencing (e.g., foil, forte, and glide) during the fencing lesson and the literacy activities. The idea of using reading and writing to support content learning and vocabulary is not new; in fact, it dates back to the mid-1970s (Close, Hull, & Langer 2005). However, what is new about the Pens and Swords is that the literacy activities are used to learn the sport of fencing — not the typical content subjects of math, history, and science.

This presentation will describe the design and delivery of two instances of the Pens and Swords program. Each was conducted with fifth grade students recruited from Title I (high poverty) elementary schools in a medium sized South Texas town. Each meeting session of the Pens and Swords program lasted one hour and 15 minutes. During this time, students participated in a fencing lesson and a literacy activity related to the sport. The researchers wrote observations in a field note journal and collected artifacts during this time. This is work is in-process with analysis proceeding with the closing of session two.