Project Coach: Youth Development and Academic Achievement Through Sport

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This after-school program fosters youth development in more ways than sport involvement alone.

Fifteen-year-old Kenny walks into an energetic and bustling group of elementary school-age boys and girls, puts his whistle to his mouth, and gives one short, decisive tweet. "Okay, Nikey-Nikes, gather around for a meeting." Twelve boys and girls promptly scamper over and sit in a circle. Kenny and another teenager, both wearing a blue tennis shirt emblazoned with "Coach," join the group. "Coach Pedro and I are happy to see you today. Before we begin playing, I have a question for you. What does it mean to be a good sportsperson?" Coach Kenny and Coach Pedro listen intently as each of the players shares an idea. They ask follow-up questions like "How do you think it feels if your opponent celebrates too much after scoring a goal?" After each of the students contributes, Coach Pedro claps his hands, points to a 30-foot square demarcated by orange cones, and says, "Everybody grab a soccer ball. There is the ocean. You are fishes—Coach Kenny and I are sharks. You know the game—let's go!" In an instant the students are tearing around the field chased by their teenage coaches.

Coach Kenny and Coach Pedro belong to Project Coach, an after-school program designed to teach economically disadvantaged minority youths, living in the distressed communities of Holyoke and Springfield, Massachusetts, to be sport coaches and to organize a youth sports program for elementary-age neighborhood children. Now in its third year, Project Coach has evolved dramatically since we, two college professors, set out to develop a sports-themed after-school program. While most program case studies focus on describing the current status of programming, the compelling story of Project Coach involves the iterative development of both the conceptual roots of the program and its structure. The following sections trace the story of Project Coach and illuminate key tensions and possibilities involving the role or sport in youth development.

The Challenge
In the summer of 2003, we were presented with an intriguing question by a philanthropic funder engaged in underwriting various educational programs in urban areas. The funder wanted to know the answer to a riddle that has long vexed those involved in youth sports and education: is it possible to effectively harness the power and intrinsic appeal of sports in ways that aid the academic and social development of children? How can participation in sport promote community growth and development—particularly in struggling, high-need communities? The underlying intent of the original question was whether there was a way to leverage sports participation to help children do better in school.

The idea of connecting sports and academics is not a new one. Over the years many individuals have claimed that sports can contribute to personal development by enhancing such things as fitness, health, and well-being; social competence; physical competence and self-esteem; moral development; aggression and violence abatement; and academic achievement (Ewing, Gano-Overway, Branta, & Seefeldt, 2002). This claim has been conveyed in multitudinous versions, from the Duke of Wellington's assertion that "The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton," to
sociologist David Riesman’s contention that “The road to the board room leads through the locker room” (“Comes the Revolution,” 1978, p. 59), to Coach Mike Krzyzewski’s primer on success in business and life, in which he argues that what a person learns from sport can help overcome generic life challenges, such as “Getting Organized” and “Refresh and Renew” (Krzyzewski & Spatola, 2006).

The literature on this topic has a great deal of anecdotal data from individuals who say they achieved various types of success in life thanks to experiences they had in a variety of forms, such as sports. Unfortunately, most self-reflections say too little about how the processes contained within those experiences were connected to the development of the personal qualities that led to their current success. Furthermore, even if such attributes were acquired through sports, the mechanisms for transferring them from one context to another are typically unclear (Danish, Nellen, & Owens, 1996).

It is also true that for each success story, there are others that tell a less favorable tale. Given data on drop-out rates in sports (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004), one cannot help but wonder about how many youths are negatively affected by the experiences they have. As conveyed by Orlick (1974) and Fullinwider (2006), participation is a two-edged sword that can produce either positive or negative psychological and social outcomes depending on the sorts of experiences in which children engage. These depend on an array of factors, including the program’s philosophy, the relative emphasis on winning versus player development, the coach’s capacity to provide effective leadership in teaching and reinforcing desirable behaviors, and whether the overall experience is fun.

Clearly, if sports are to fulfill the potential so many have claimed for them, then program directors and coaches will need to move beyond what might be labeled the “osmotic model,” which implies that mere involvement results in all sorts of positive outcomes. Instead, hypothesized outcomes need to be connected to specific experiences within sport (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005) or related processes (Jones & Jones, 2002). In order to achieve outcomes that are of interest and value to extra-sport activities, explicit connections need to be formulated and operationalized. As noted by Lauer (2002):

Because a metaphor by definition is not obligated to explain precisely how, for example, the captany of a basketball team translates to leadership in the boardroom, the links between sports participation and the various attributes, qualities and skills that represent the desired outcomes of youth development (i.e., respect, discipline, compassion, perseverance, decision-making, problem-solving, etc.) remain vague abstractions. (p. 5)

Indeed, if sport involvement alone had such a potent power to nurture and develop the types of attributes alluded to by the Duke of Wellington, David Riesman, and Mike Krzyzewski, then the thousands of underserved youths in the United States who spend countless hours honing their basketball and football skills would be academic and business success stories rather than kids who dream of athletic stardom and have little else to show for their efforts.

**Refining and Reframing the Question**

Given the complexity of this issue, we began to rethink and reframe our questions. It became important to first figure out what types of programs and interventions have proven successful in improving the academic and social development of children in high-need communities. This question redirected our inquiry toward the extensive and complex research literature that investigates the causes and consequences of the academic achievement gap that exists between higher and lower socioeconomic students and between white and black or Hispanic students.

While a range of interventions have been developed over the past 30 years, the present focus has been on the federally mandated legislation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The NCLB movement is driven by an effort to increase the accountability structures in public education through the design of objective standards that are used to assess student achievement. Not surprisingly, the pressure to meet these standards has resulted in schools allocating more of the school day to targeted literacy and math skills. An unintended outcome of this policy has been the narrowing of the curriculum, resulting in the reduction or even elimination of many activities (Dillon, 2006).

After-school programs, historically the province of highly engaging activities such as dance, art, music, and sports, are also being transformed into extended tutoring sessions in an effort to raise test scores (Afterschool Alliance, 2006; Perry, Teague, & Frey, 2002). Although this effort has produced successes (e.g., Chenoweth, 2007), data shows that the achievement gap has been fairly resistant to such interventions despite the amount of time, energy, and money allocated to this effort (U. S. Department of Education, 2007). According to the National Assessment of Academic Progress scores (the “gold standard” for tests of academic achievement), African American and Latino 17-year-olds’ math and reading skills are at about the same level as white 13-year-olds’ skills (The
Educational Trust, 2001). Consideration of this gap was important to our project because the communities of Holyoke and Springfield represent a microcosm of the larger American struggle toward academic attainment.

The Basis for Academic Achievement
The gap in standardized test scores is significant and worthy of attention, but the preoccupation with test scores seems to have the unintended consequence of overshadowing other crucial and perhaps more important disparities between lower- and middle-class students and between black and white students. This viewpoint was both affirmed and deeply influenced by Rothstein (2004), who contended that standardized tests only provide imperfect and misleading information about the true performance of students in the academic areas that tests are supposed to measure. For example, he described how the curriculum in schools is designed to teach children how to identify the main idea of a reading passage; however, most questions on tests simply require identification of details (p. 90). While these and other biases and distortions render the data unreliable, the more fundamental issue is that the preoccupation with test scores that measure cognitive achievement (albeit poorly) means that we discount many skills that we want young people to acquire from education. "If, for example, we want schools to develop habits of good citizenship, standardized tests of academic knowledge tell little about whether students have learned these habits, and what the gap in these habits might be between students of different classes" (p. 85).

Rothstein's important claim is that as schools expand their efforts to teach to the test and focus on explicit academic goals, they ignore or shortchange educational programming focused on developing crucial life skills such as initiative taking, self-control, goal-setting, and communication. Ironically, these skills—often referred to as "soft skills" or habits of the mind—are considered by many to be the core skills to thrive in college and in the 21st-century workplace.

These analyses swim against the current stream of educational programming and compelled us to think about the critical value that after-school programs focused on activities such as sports, arts, and theater can play in developing capacities like leadership, communication, and responsibility (Hellison, 2003)—attributes that econometric studies and employee surveys have shown to consistently predict adult economic success and general well-being more effectively than test scores (Goleman, 2006; Rothstein, 2004).

For those of us who are trying to find the connection between sports involvement, the development of achievement values and skills, and success in extra-sport endeavors, this focus on soft skills appears to reflect, in greater detail, the kinds of attributes implied by the Duke of Wellington, David Riesman, and Mike Krzyzewski. These attributes include attitudes, skills, and behaviors such as (1) the ability to work with a team, (2) time management and punctuality, (3) the capacity to avoid or manage conflict, (4) resilience, (5) tolerance, (6) self-discipline, (7) self-direction, (8) industriousness, (9) communication, (10) problem recognition and resolution, (11) integrity, and (12) competitiveness. As we considered these critical attributes, several thoughts came to mind.

First, the notion of calling them "noncognitive" or "soft skills" seems diminishing and, in many ways, dismissive. For example, is communication an activity that can take place without cognition? Communication is an incredibly complex activity that is affective, cognitive, and physical. Therefore, characterizing the array of skills denoted by Rothstein and others as noncognitive or soft is a flawed premise that contributes to these skills being marginalized in the educational system. In an effort to recognize the complexity of these skills, we describe them as "supercognitives," in that they describe activities that are more than merely cognitive and that include the employment of multiple forms of intelligence and judgment.

Second, these supercognitives have a generic quality that transcends domains, and they are fundamental for success in any significant endeavor. Whether a person is involved in theater, the arts, academics, sports, or a profession, supercognitives are critical for developing the specific technical skills required within a domain.

Third, these are very similar to, if not identical to, the array of benefits typically listed by sports' advocates.

Fourth, whereas proponents of sport are often elusive about how participants acquire these attributes within the physical activity programs they direct (as noted by Lauer), Rothstein contends that they are implicitly and explicitly learned, or not learned, from the formal and informal experiences youths have with their family, peers, community, and school. The challenge is for those interested in educating youths, and specifically underserved students, to develop and implement strategies for teaching the supercognitives.

Interestingly, it appears that many of the activities being cut in schools, or that can be found in after-school and summer programs, may be the most appropriate settings for the teaching and learning of supercognitives. Indeed, this contention is supported by studies that show that the achievement gap grows during summer vacations (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000; Entwisle, Alex-
ander, & Olson, 2003), when middle-class children are more likely to be differentially exposed to enrichment activities such as going to camp, traveling, visiting zoos and museums, or engaging in sports, dance, and music (Entwisle et al., 2000; Rothstein, 2004).

These insights into the importance of the supercognitives as a foundation for academic achievement provided us with a new way to think about the virtues of sports as a developmental medium. Specifically, it provided an inferential, hypothetical, deductive framework for testing the elusive connection between engaging in sports, acquiring important assets, and being successful as an athlete and as a student. Essentially, such a model portends that if a sports program can integrate the teaching of sport-specific knowledge and skills with the explicit teaching of supercognitives, then over time it should be empirically demonstrated that sport can be a viable medium for reducing the achievement gap and changing the life trajectories of underserved children. While such a model provided a way forward, the challenges of developing a program were significant.

Asset Cultivation and Development
Concordant with our evolving sense of direction around the supercognitives, we were also engaged in a different set of readings and conversations focused on conceptual orientations toward urban youth development. A quick scan of the research literature and the popular media suggests that for decades youth programming has followed a deficit model focused on the prevention of problem behaviors and the reduction of risk factors such as alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of school (e.g., Pitter, 2004). The prevention-orientation approach—sometimes called the field of development psychopathology (Larson, 2000)—has been unable to document any long-term effects (Scales, 1996; Scales, Leffert, & Lerner, 1999).

In response to the meager success of preventive programs, an alternative approach has evolved among youth- and community-development researchers and practitioners. With roots in the emerging field of positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Seligman, 1991), the asset-based approach to youth development contends that high-impact youth programs do not focus on risk prevention and problem intervention but rather on creating pathways through which youths can become motivated, directed, socially competent, compassionate, and psychologically vigorous adults. As Larson (2000) describes it, “a central question of youth development is how to get adolescents’ fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives” (p. 170). The challenge was to create a program that developed supercognitives by mobilizing positive relationships, providing connections to resources, and developing what the Search Institute (2003) calls the “developmental assets” of youth.

The asset framework was influential both on the level of conceptualizing how to develop a curriculum for youths, and how to come up with interventions for the communities of Springfield and Holyoke. Asset-based community development is a framework that emerges from the work of McKnight (1995). It begins with the assumption that successful community building involves rediscovering and mobilizing resources already present in the community. It is “asset-based, internally-focused, and relationship driven. Although some resources from outside the community are often needed, the key to lasting solutions comes from within” (Rans, 2005, p. 2). McKnight’s analysis inducts external entities that come into communities with solutions or programs and, in doing so, fail to mobilize the skills, capacities, and talents of local residents.

In the effort of creating a sports-themed after-school program that would use college students as tutors, we were left with a couple of potent design questions:
- How could a sports-themed program cultivate youth development and promote the growth and transfer of supercognitive capacities?
- How can college professors work with the two local communities of Springfield and Holyoke in ways that honor McKnight’s premise of asset-based community development?

Operationalizing Ideas
We began a series of conversations with individuals that McKnight’s Asset-Based Community Development Institute calls “connectors.” Drawn from Malcolm Gladwell’s (2002) book The Tipping Point, connectors are individuals in a community who know lots of people and who yearn to create a strong vibrant community.

School principals described their struggle to raise academic performance and meet the achievement levels of No Child Left Behind. Teachers expressed their struggle to keep students motivated on their academic tasks. Community physicians spoke of near-epidemic rates of teenage pregnancy, high asthma levels, and a general downward trend in youth fitness. Leaders of institutions like Boys and Girls Clubs had difficulty recruiting, keeping, and training staff. Youths said that there were few meaningful organized activities for them outside of school and that they felt little connection to school. All groups agreed that there was a great need for local colleges to get involved in youth development, but they suspected our intentions since many of the stakeholders had been disappointed by past college-initiated activities that had begun with fanfare and disappeared soon thereafter.

One of the principals we spoke with, a long-time resident of the Springfield community, suggested that we talk to Jimmy, the neighborhood parks and recreation director. Jimmy, he said, is a “legend in the community and nothing has happened in youth sports in this neighborhood without Jimmy’s contribution.” He was McKnight’s quintessential connector.

We met Jimmy in an office covered with pictures of youths playing sports, and he took us on a tour of the North End complex, which includes an elementary school, a middle school, a library, and a health center. When we walked over to the middle school, he said, “Let me show our pride and
joy.” He took us out back and showed us three well-greened soccer fields, saying,

We are so proud of these fields. Five years ago these fields were abandoned and overgrown. They had all kinds of junk on them and car wrecks and it was a favorite hangout for all sorts of dangerous characters including drug dealers. This was no place parents wanted their kids around, but we received a federal grant and transformed them.

We responded by saying, “You must be so thrilled to see your youths playing on those fields now.”

He paused and then replied, “Actually—these fields get used more often by the elite soccer teams from the suburbs. The kids from the neighborhood don’t usually use them.” Surprised, we asked, “Why not?”

“I have interest from the kids,” he said. “But I can’t find coaches. I just can’t find a core of parent volunteers to serve as coaches. If I could find enough coaches, I could use the fields.”

Jimmy’s response triggered a set of ideas, connections, and conversation from which our program developed. “Jimmy,” we asked, “do you think you could find high school students who would want to get paid to be coaches.”

“Absolutely. I know tons of kids who would love to,” he replied. So we suggested, “We can train the teenage coaches, and they can run a program on these fields.”

Convergence of Ideas with a Program

From the conversation with Jimmy, all the conceptual work we had done converged, and we proposed a model that has iteratively evolved to become Project Coach. We view sports as the catalyst that provides the “fuel” for engaging youths. As Larson (2000) notes, the key to youth programming is to “get adolescents’ fires lit” (p. 170). However, mere motivation and energy towards even a good cause does not necessarily translate into effective youth development. The key to the Project Coach curriculum involves the intentional design of experiences in which youths practice and perform behaviors related to supercognitive development. Our model proposes that the supercognitives are foundational to success in a range of settings from coaching, to school, to the community, to the work environment. The program’s theory of change is that if teachers focus on building supercognitive capacities, such as communication, youths will find that they have the tools, skills, knowledge, and behaviors that allow them to thrive in a variety of settings. Transference will not happen automatically. Adolescent coaches are explicitly taught that what they learn in coaching classes and as youth coaches applies to their school and community life. As an aggregate, coaching education and its associated experiences have the potential to build the sorts of knowledge, skill, and aspirations that can truly affect future opportunities in sport and nonsport domains.

Evaluation

As with all educational and social programs, we aspire to accomplish a lot. We propose that Project Coach can improve the academic and social development of participants along with building capacity in underserved communities. Although these aspirations may be commendable, we must find ways to demonstrate Project Coach’s effectiveness. In an effort to document our work, we have learned much about the possibilities and limitations of program evaluation. Here are four tools and approaches to evaluation that we have used and what we have learned from them.

1. Because we knew we were hoping to achieve a broad range of outcomes related to growth and development, we identified an instrument that would allow us to take a pre-participation snapshot of individuals and of the group. The Developmental Asset Profile (DAP), designed by the Search Institute (2005), yields quantitative scores for personal, social, family, school, and community assets. We have administered the DAP both pre- and post-participation and have found modest gains on the scales. Despite the portrait of success we invariably felt and observed on a daily basis, the scale was only of moderate value in providing a portrait of individual development.

2. We aspired to use formative evaluation methods to help us understand whether our program was actually doing what it was meant to do. In other words, was our on-the-ground practice commensurate with our stated objectives? The hallmark of formative evaluation is that it occurs during the operation of a program, and its purpose is to provide those responsible for the program with ongoing information about whether operations are proceeding as planned (Guskey, 1998). We used a variety of methods to do this, but none was more useful than regular staff meetings, at which we challenged ourselves with a series of reflective questions such as “What is happening out on the fields? What do we need to focus on? What is working and not working?”

3. We also aspired to hear from the youths as to whether or not they thought the program was valuable and useful. To collect data on their perceptions, we used a range of instruments, including focus groups, interviews, and the Youth Experience Survey (YES 2.0) designed by Hanson and Larson (2005). This instrument was administered at the conclusion of each season of programming. The YES contains 70 ques-
tions that explore an array of program experiences, including identity development, initiative taking, effort expended, goal-setting, self-regulation, leadership, group dynamics, and social capital building. Preliminary data from over 50 adolescent coaches shows that they perceived their positive experiences to be more favorable across domains than the norms presented by Hansen and Larson (2005) and that their negative experiences are less so than the norms.

4. We videotape all of our Coaching Academy sessions and our sport sessions. We watch the videotape with the youth coaches and use it to structure discussions on performance. The use of videotape also provides us with data on performance across time. The downside of this data is that it is costly to collect, time-intensive to organize, and not easily translated into a format that is accessible to funders or journal readers. With that said, we have a library of data portraying substantial behavior change.

We have learned that evaluation is difficult and resource intensive. We feel pressure to show “quick and easy” indicators of success: higher grades, higher school retention, and better attendance, but also feel as though these indicators conceal what really happens in Project Coach. We also believe that the in-house approaches to reflection help us learn and become better at what we do. We often say to those who want to learn about our program and understand it: come see and experience for yourself what we are trying to do.

Conclusions
This long journey had led us to a new way of understanding the question we had originally set out to answer. Seemingly, a powerful connection between sports involvement, academic achievement, and psychosocial development could exist, but it is not a result of “mere exposure” or nonpurposeful involvement alluded to by many over the years. While we are just at the beginning of examining how sports can foster the development of superrcognitives and how these, in turn, can promote aspirations that promote academic achievement, we have derived the following core concepts that will inform Project Coach in the future:

Core Concept 1. Given the elusive nature of the relationship between “playing sport” and academic achievement, developing a program based on coaching provides an opportunity to explicitly and intentionally focus on the superrcognitive capacities identified by Rothstein and others as crucial to academic success. Thus, the intent is to develop leadership skills and promote generalizable assets in our youth coaches that can be translated into success in school, employment, relationships, and other community endeavors.

Coaching, by nature, provides a unique and authentic opportunity to focus on developing a range of superrcognitive skills. Successful coaches must be goal setters, communicators, and planners. They need to be able to take charge and build a sense of teamwork and camaraderie. Effective coaches must learn to develop the capacity to think strategically and plan deliberatively. They must learn to execute plans across time and simultaneously perform in a context that demands quick judgments, initiative-taking, and improvisational thinking. Coaches must motivate themselves, inspire others, and create conditions for their players to learn about themselves. Coaches practice and deploy many of the skills indispensable for success in the classroom and the world of work. A coaching curriculum that teaches this indispensable skill set and attempts to help youths internalize achievement behaviors and values can hypothetically promote success in a variety of venues, including school.

Core Concept 2. High-impact youth programs are characterized by an approach that views youths as resources to be developed rather than as problems to be managed. The focus of programming is on cultivating the internal assets of youths and increasing their exposure to external assets, opportunities, and supports (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999). By using neighborhood teenagers in the high-status role of sport coach, youths are viewed by elementary children, parents, teachers, and community members as valuable contributors to their neighborhoods. Project Coach embodies what McLaughlin et al. described as the first principle of urban youth development: “Seeing Potential, Not Pathology” (p. 96).

Core Concept 3. Effective community development begins with finding and connecting the hidden treasures of a community itself (Rans, 2005). From “taking back the fields” for local youths, to recruiting and training neighborhood teenagers, Project Coach seeks to build the capacity of the local community. This is particularly important in Springfield and Holyoke—two cities that have suffered from a chronic shortage and relentless turnover of qualified coaches and youth workers. Our coaches work in organizations that they themselves attended, such as elementary schools and Boys and Girls clubs. Our model seeks to recruit local neighborhood youths to serve as leaders and mentors and, in doing so, Project Coach delivers a message to the participants and the community that adolescents—often depicted as troubled and dangerous—can be competent citizens who create positive changes in the community.

Core Concept 4. Colleges and universities can form alliances with communities and their institutions that leverage each constituent’s resources to provide benefits that are unavailable to each entity alone. Through Project Coach, elementary school children now have opportunities to engage in after-school sports. Adolescents develop knowledge, skills, and values that allow them to be human resources to their communities. Equally important, the newly acquired capabilities and capacities provide the foundation for personal achievement in school. Community organizations with physical capital now have human capital that makes programming possible. Finally, colleges and universities are able to fulfill their social missions to use their resources to help local communities develop their indigenous resources. Faculty and students also have unique access and opportunities to do service-learning and field research about important social issues, which is particularly crucial at our college, where we...
aspire to prepare teachers and coaches who have experience working with high-need, diverse populations.

References


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