

Physical Activity Programs for Underserved Youth

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Underserved youth face enormous barriers in their emotional, social, and intellectual development. One such barrier is the scarcity of developmentally oriented extended day programs. Recent research and professional opinion have stimulated a reconceptualization of the field of youth development as well as the identification of specific guidelines for extended day programs in underserved communities. The Urban Youth Leader Project (UYLP) in Chicago, which has now spread to several other universities, is a specific example of these developments in practice. UYLP sponsors 1) a number of youth programs in Chicago's most underserved communities, 2) service learning and professional preparation programs linked to the community youth programs for interested university students, and 3) applied research. The personal and social responsibility model provides the template for youth programs and for university interns and is the focus of the applied research. Several alternative structures have been created to provide more compatible settings for this work. Although such activities hold promise for incremental change, they do not address the more deeply rooted systemic causes of being underserved.

Introduction

Children and youth living in low income socially stigmatized (e.g., minority) communities face a number of issues such as poverty and racism, the stress of living in "war zones", and the influence of gangs and drug trafficking. An issue of particular concern to child development experts, law enforcement professionals, and others is the unsupervised time in the daily lives of these young people. Studies of American children and youth show that sexual activity, substance abuse, and negative peer pressure escalate during this discretionary time (e.g., Dwyer et al., 1990). Yet extended day youth programs in underserved communities, unlike more affluent communities, are scarce, often underfunded, and in many times in need of reform. For example, programs that do exist tend to "blame the victim" by attempting to "keep them off the street" or remedy their perceived deficiencies, rather than placing the blame where it belongs, on unresponsive educational, social and political institutions (McLaughlin & Heath, 1993). By the ages of 11 or 12 (at least in the United States) youth start to drop out, not only of school, but of extended day programs as well (McLaughlin et al., 1994).

In the United States, the unsupervised time issue has drawn the attention of the media and politicians. Both private and federal funding for extended day programs in underserved communities has increased markedly. Moreover, this

issue has contributed to the professionalization of youth work and an emerging field of youth development which has shifted its focus from safe, structured, enjoyable activities to youth development in health/physical, personal/social, cognitive/creative, vocational, civic, and other areas (Hudson, 1997).

Typical physical activity extended day programs in underserved communities have not fared any better than youth programs in general, despite the recent influx of programs such as Soccer in the Streets, Midnight Basketball, and Reviving Baseball in the Inner City. For example, so-called "gym and swim" programs which focus on free play experience the same dropout pattern as non-sport extended day programs (McLaughlin et al., 1994). In addition, traditional school sport programs in underserved communities, with their emphasis on winning and other aspects of professional sport, do not support the new youth development perspective nearly as well as non-sport extended day programs (Kahne et al., in press; Spady, 1970).

However, the recent influx of physical activity extended day programs designed for underserved communities noted above have shown some reduction in crime and gang involvement (Farrellet al., 1995) as well as academic improvement (American Sports Institute, no date). However, the data are often weak (Derezotes, 1995) and the research methods questionable (Kahne & McLaughlin, 1998).

None of these findings provide guidelines for the development of effective physical activity programs for underserved youth. However, 11 state-of-the-art criteria for inner city extended day programs (Hellison and Cutforth, 1997), drawn from best practices and scholarly opinion and supported by the alternative school (Raywid, 1994) and resiliency (Wang et al., 1994) do provide such guidelines, although they are not specific to physical activity. These criteria include: a whole person focus, empowerment, a strong explicit set of values, small program numbers along with belonging and membership, and significant contact with a caring adult.

The Urban Youth Leader Project (UYLP) at the University of Illinois at Chicago meets the guidelines provided by the new youth development perspective and the 11 state-of-the-art criteria. More specifically, it builds on my field work teaching inner city youth since 1970 (Hellison et al., in press) and on the recent interest in the United States in universities that are actively engaged in university-community collaboration, service learning, and applied research (Lawson, 1997; Siedentop, 1999).

UYLP attempts to integrate the traditional tripartite mission of the university by providing: 1) service in the form of physical activity-based youth programs in its most underserved neighborhoods; 2) service learning, professional preparation programs, and field experiences for interested undergraduates and graduate students; and 3) opportunities for applied studies of the processes and outcomes of UYLP youth programs by faculty and students. Six faculty from different universities in the United States are now engaged in this work (Hellison et al., in press).

The primary program model for UYLP and the partnership is the personal and social responsibility model (RM), which has been a work in progress for nearly thirty years, and continues to be modified in our ongoing practice and research (e.g., Hellison, 1978, Hellison et al., in press). The essence of the model is embodied in three premises. Within this structure, numerous modifications and adaptations are possible.

RM is relational

Beyond being caring and non-judgmental, not embarrassing kids, and so on, RM emphasizes genuinely respecting each student's strengths, individuality, voice (e.g., opinions, values, judgments, insights), and capacity for decision-making.

RM integrates life skills and values into physical activity with transfer outside the activity setting

A few key life skills and values, integrated into the physical activity content, provide the daily themes for the curriculum in this model. Four levels of responsibility are suggested as the key life skills and values — respect for the rights and feelings of others, self-motivation, self-direction, and caring and leadership, although they can be modified as needed. As the program progresses, more attention is paid to their possible application outside the gym in school, in after-school time, on the street, and/or at home. The daily format provides a framework for integrating life skills and values into the physical activity program:

- 1) an awareness talk that focuses on student responsibilities;
- 2) the physical activity lesson with responsibilities integrated;
- 3) a group meeting so that students can express their views about the lesson; and
- 4) reflection time so that students can evaluate the extent to which they put their responsibilities into practice in and outside the gym.

RM gradually shifts power and decision-making from the instructor to the students

In RM, students gradually become more responsible for respecting other students' rights and feelings, the effort they put into the lesson, their independence and goal-setting, and helping to make the lesson a positive experience for everyone. Even students resistant to accepting responsibility need to be given a voice.

An alternative program model can operate in a traditional context, as many physical education teachers have proven by successfully adopting and adapting RM for their classes. However, extensive field testing has led to the conclusion that such traditional structures often inhibit full development of RM. Therefore, the following alternative structures (as well as others not listed) have been created for implementation of RM (Hellison et al., in press): extended day clubs, mentor programs (Martinek et al, 1999), apprentice teacher programs, and outdoor education programs which combine RM with the outdoor adventure experience.

Because the fieldwork from 1970 to the present has involved developing and teaching the responsibility model with inner city youth, the work is highly relational, labor-intensive, complex, and to some extent context-specific. As a result, our research has for the most part been a mixture of qualitative methodologies (Martinek & Hellison, 1997). These studies, beginning in 1978 and continuing to the present, include published work (for example, Cutforth & Puckett, 1999; DeBusk & Hellison, 1989) as well as theses, dissertations, and unpublished papers (for example, Lifka, 1989; Kallusky, 1997). More recently, studies have utilized mixed methodology (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) to evaluate quantitative indices of program effectiveness supported by qualitative inquiry (for example, Cummings, 1998; Martinek et al., 1999). This growing body of literature has yielded a number of cross-context outcomes including specific behavioral changes such as improved self-control and reduced dropout rates compared to

controls as well as evidence of positive affective changes in evaluations by participants and adult authorities in contact with program participants.

Underserved youth face immense, deeply rooted problems in their efforts to develop as productive human beings. Such programs as those discussed here provide incremental change in the battle against these forces. However, systemic factors must be addressed to truly provide widespread opportunities for underserved youth.

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