

Section III **Is This Worth Doing?**

What's Worth Doing: Reflections on an After-School Program in a Denver Elementary School

Nicholas J. Cutforth

How can concerned physical educators in higher education show more of a commitment to addressing the growing crisis among children and youth? A physical activity-based after-school program in a Denver elementary school provides the context for an account of how I, as a third-year tenure track assistant professor, have answered the question, "What's worth doing?" Ongoing program evaluation and dissemination of demonstrable results ensures that my work is not merely a service activity but also applied, scholarly research. In this essay, I trace the three-year history of the program, describe my struggles and successes, and conclude with my reflections on the personal benefits and strains which accompany my commitment to undertaking community work.

In 1994, a report by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development warned that societal change has left nearly 50% of American young people with large amounts of unsupervised discretionary time, while subjecting them to growing pressures to experiment with drugs, engage in sex, and turn to violence to resolve conflicts (Carnegie Council, 1994). These warnings come at a time when the general public is expecting universities to shed their cloth of traditional insularity, to become engaged with solving social problems, and to be jointly responsible for reform of society in partnership with local schools, civic leaders, and parents (Plater, 1995). There is an urgent need for professors, particularly those working in institutions located in large metropolitan areas, to respond both to the Carnegie Council's distressing warning and to

Nicholas J. Cutforth is with the College of Education at the University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208. He is the chairperson of the DU/Northwestside Schools Partnership: United for Educational Excellence, a collaborative venture between the University of Denver and three Denver public schools.

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the public's demand that they pursue activities that are focused on the world literally outside the university's door. However, in the past, with a few notable exceptions, universities have focused their collective intelligence on other matters. Attempts to be responsive to the neighboring community's needs have often been conceived as marginal by the professorate.

During graduate school, I was part of a group of faculty and doctoral students who developed and implemented alternative physical education programs for underserved children and youth in Chicago. These community programs used sports and physical activity instruction as vehicles to teach personal and social responsibility primarily through a variety of reflection and empowerment strategies (Hellison, 1995). The organizers believed that it was possible to serve through teaching in neighboring schools while simultaneously conducting research into the impact of the programs. Research and service were no longer fragmented and separate goals, but instead were reconceptualized as service-based scholarship and thus became essential and integrated functions of both doctoral students' and university professors' work.

What follows is one tenure track assistant professor's answer (so far) to the question, "What's worth doing?" Although one answer could be found in the culture of doctoral programs and in tenure and promotion committee guidelines, that answer has come under increasing attack, particularly from those who advocate a return to our collective social conscience, our activism, our passion for connection with and improvement of practice (Hellison, 1992; Lawson & Hooper-Briar, 1994). In this article, I discuss the development of an after-school program from its inception through its three-year history. Next, I elaborate on the program's struggles and successes and offer evidence of benefits to the students. Finally, I reflect on the personal benefits and strains which I experience while undertaking community work.

Program Background

For the past two years, I have been teacher/director of an after-school program that meets twice weekly in the gym of an elementary school located in an economically depressed neighborhood in northwest Denver. The program serves 4th and 5th grade Mexican American boys and girls, and the purpose is to use physical activity—more specifically sport and exercise—to help them take more responsibility for their own welfare (e.g., performing effectively in and out of school) and for becoming more sensitive and responsive to the welfare of others (e.g., caring for and including others). Five affective goals (Hellison, 1995) provide guidelines for becoming more responsible by identifying specific characteristics. Two of these goals—effort and self-direction—address the students' responsibility for personal development; another two—respect for the rights and feelings of others and caring for and helping others—address the students' social and moral responsibility for their relationships with others and as a member of groups. The fifth goal focuses on transfer of responsibility from the program to the rest of school, the playground, "the street," and the home.

The after-school program is my attempt to blend service and research in ways that do not oversimplify research. Students' self-reports, my reflective

journal, and end-of-year interview data comprise the ongoing scholarship component of the program. Information is obtained concerning what is experienced and learned in the program; whether and how students perform more effectively in and out of school by showing greater effort and self-direction in their academic and social life; whether students become more sensitive, respectful, and responsive to the welfare of others; and whether the lessons learned in the program transfer to other environments. This information advances the knowledge base concerning the potential of physical education to produce students who possess essential social skills and who are able to make responsible decisions in their daily lives (see, for example, Cutforth & Parker, 1996) and has been shared through publications and presentations to teachers, teacher educators, and other researchers (see, for example, Hellison & Cutforth, in press; Hellison, Martinek, & Cutforth, 1996). Thus, my work is not merely a service activity but also applied, scholarly research. Furthermore, the deliberate attempt to apply knowledge of and expertise in physical activity programs to the alleviation of social problems, together with immediate dissemination of demonstrable results, conforms to Ernest Boyer's notion of the "scholarship of application" (Boyer, 1991).

Program Implementation

Getting My Foot in the Door

Immediately after taking up my new position at the University of Denver, I began to search for a site to undertake community-based work. I contacted the principal of the northwest Denver elementary school and explained the philosophy behind my proposed after-school program. A week later, I presented my ideas to the faculty, informing them that I was interested in teaching an after-school program in their school and explaining the purposes of the program. At this meeting I also addressed two questions that professors who are interested in working in schools often have to answer. In reply to the question, "How often are you going to come here?" I stated that I planned on teaching the students once a week for at least a year and probably longer, and that this was not just another example of a university person making a brief foray into their school. (The principal later told me that several teachers were surprised that I wanted to run such a program, saying in effect, "Why doesn't he just stay in his office at the university and write articles—that's what most professors do!") To the question, "Is this just a research project?" I said that my motivation for getting involved in their school was primarily to try out some ideas that are intended to make a positive contribution to children's lives and not just to collect data for a research venture. However, I did say that I would be writing articles about the program eventually using the students' journals, my reflections, and possibly some interview data, and that I would be sharing some of the results with students at the university, as well as in academic and professional journals. I ended by asking the teachers to give their principal the names of students who they thought might benefit from the program.

It has been my experience that teachers are often skeptical about both my motivation to work with their students and my ability to control them. Consequently, these teachers are unwilling to recommend students for a program

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organized by a stranger from the university who has no track record at their school. After this meeting, however, the 4th and 5th grade teachers felt that many of their students would benefit from the program and soon provided a list of 20 students who would comprise the after-school program.

The First Year

The students were referred to the program by their teachers for a variety of reasons. These reasons are perhaps best summarized by the principal as, "All kids are needy here, but the kids in your program are extra needy because of their behavior, attitude toward school, and lack of social skills." Many have troubles and fears that emanate from their often-violent urban neighborhood and, in some cases, from disconnected, chaotic family lives. A few examples illustrate the challenges that these students present: Mercedes has experienced sexual abuse at home and harbors a considerable amount of anger and is always threatening "to quit" the program; Victor has a veneer of toughness which induces him to goad others with unkind words or actions; John is a shy fellow but is prone to lash out at others at the slightest provocation; Edwin's mood swings mean that he is likely to be friendly and cooperative one moment but to disintegrate into tears the next, the perceived victim of others' injustice.

During the program's first year, I taught the students once each week for one hour after school. Lessons typically began with stretching and fitness exercises, then included tag games and cooperative games, skill practices in volleyball, soccer, or basketball, and modified small-sided games. Throughout the year, two data sources provided information about the effects of the program as it unfolded: the students wrote self-reports in the form of end-of-class journals which provided me with a record of their feelings about the program and its impact on them, and I kept a journal of reflections of each session that recorded the affective strategies employed, how often, and to what extent the children were engaged in these activities. The students' journals were replete with comments such as "I am working on being better," "I like playing basketball," "I learned to pass the ball to other people," and "I didn't like today." My reflections contained both positive and negative reactions to the students' responses to the activities.

As the year progressed, it became clear that the large class size coupled with the challenging behavior of several students was creating a conflict between my personal and social responsibility goals and my classroom management strategies. When teaching for personal and social development, I am inclined to resist authoritarian inclinations and practices in favor of providing individual attention that students who have not been successful in school need. However, throughout the first year of the program, my journal contained evidence that management issues were causing me to abandon my preferred flexible and informal teaching style, hindering the overall effectiveness of the program. For example, "I couldn't focus on both soccer games because I was too concerned about management issues," "The kids knew I was getting angry and that only made things worse," "Several students told me that it wasn't good today," "Ricardo had been in trouble in school and never really settled down in class today. How can I deal with all his problems when I have 19

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other kids to teach?" and "I am frustrated about not being able to reach some of the kids." While on most occasions I was able to deal successfully with the challenges presented by individual students, there were several instances of failure. For example, according to my journal entries, I did not always view troublesome students in a positive light. Also, my inability to deal effectively with some of the more difficult students meant that, on occasion, they verbally abused other students. Therefore, some program members did not always experience a psychologically safe environment and thus were not regular attendees.

My end-of-year evaluation provided further evidence of the varying degree of success of the program (Hellison & Cutforth, in press). During interviews, some of the students' comments showed that they learned the explicit values expressed in the levels of responsibility, that they experienced them and reflected upon their relevance. For example, "The program taught me to control my temper and now I don't lose it so fast," "I learned to have faith in myself," "When I achieved my goal I felt great," and "In the program, people learned to like everybody." However, comments from other students indicated minimal interaction with the personal and social goals of the program. They tended to couch their experience and development in relation to the physical activities provided in the program—"I learned how to play basketball," "I got stronger and fitter," "I'm better at volleyball," "The program was a lot of fun."

During interviews with teachers it became clear that my program, while popular among most of the participants, had not generated any noticeable behavior and attitude changes in many of their students. The conclusions from my evaluation were clear: I had achieved only a limited degree of success in conveying the personal and social goals of the program to the participants. On further reflection, I concluded that this limitation had its origins in the relatively large number of students who were being served by the program, the resulting management problems which often occurred, and the tendency of these management problems to divert my teaching focus away from the personal and social responsibility goals of the program.

The Second Year

As I planned for the second year of the program, I explored ways to make changes that would reduce the management challenges and increase the potential for achieving the personal and social development goals of the program. Fortunately, I was awarded a small grant from a local foundation which enabled me to obtain some release time from university teaching duties and devote more of my time to the program. My desire to increase the potential impact of the program on the students was reflected in my decision to double the number of class meetings to two a week. My concern about the management challenges of the previous year led me to consider ways to involve additional teaching help.

My trepidation at expanding the program was alleviated considerably by two instances of good fortune. First, after a social event for incoming graduate students at which I briefly outlined the program, two female students responded to my request for volunteer assistance and soon became integral parts of the program. Second, I remembered that during the end-of-year interviews,

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