

# Teaching an Inner-City After-School Program

*An after-school basketball program has helped at-risk youngsters to take charge of their lives.*

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Children living in the housing projects of Chicago confront the danger of drug trafficking and violence daily. The following is an apt description of outsiders' perspectives on life in the projects:

Picture no-man's land with broken windows, dark abandoned buildings, no law and order. There are carefully demarcated areas controlled by rival bands of militia fighting over the rubble. Nearly every night there is sniper fire. It sounds like Beirut, but in fact it's America (Kroft, 1989).

This bleak scenario was the introduction for a television documentary about Cabrini Green, a low income housing project located in downtown Chicago. The term "at-risk" definitely applies to children living in this area. Besides having to face problems within the community, students must also struggle with their education. Research indicates that children's living environment can influence their learning disposition. In fact, the lowest achieving schools are those primarily comprised of students from low income families (Menacker, 1990).

Children from the inner city soon become aware of their place in the social strata, which can have a detrimental effect on their educational progress (Ekert, 1968; Rist, 1970). How teachers treat students is one part of the hidden curriculum in which children learn what is expected from them. Research shows that through the hidden curriculum, students from a low socioeconomic background are labeled as successful if they follow basic rules. Consequently, they are reluctant to make any decisions for themselves (Anyon, 1980). A teacher's implicit and explicit expectations can perpetuate children's perception of their inadequacy.

This article describes an effort to implement a model that encourages responsible decision making among children participating in an after-school basketball program in Cabrini Green. The model is based on the assumptions that these young people are faced with choices, can take an independent step forward in their own lives, and can help others along the way despite their hostile and oppressive situation. Both the teacher's and students' struggles

and successes while working with the model are discussed.

**Self- and Social Responsibility**  
Harrison's model (1978, 1985, 1990) teaches self- and social responsibility through a process of building awareness and providing experiences for decision making and self-reflection. Over the past 20 years the model has been used in various physical education programs (DeBusk & Harrison, 1988; Georgiadis, 1990; Lifka, 1990).

Self-responsibility is conceptualized as providing at-risk youths with the opportunity to take charge of their lives, learn to control their emotions, and promote self-development in an environment where the odds seem to be against them (deCharms, 1976). Social responsibility means developing a sensitivity to the rights of others—to promote the ethic of caring (Gilligan, 1973; Noddings, 1984). Based on these underlying premises, four goals are used to assist in planning, teaching, and evaluating. The four goals, or levels, provide a structure to build discussion, reflection, and problem solving to demonstrate values exhibited in the membership of the gymnasium:

Level 1—Sufficient self-respect to respect the rights of others  
Level 2—Participate in program activities  
Level 3—Self-direction on independence  
Level 4—Caring about others  
Various strategies help become aware of and the levels:

"Teacher talk" is used and discuss the levels. Students are encouraged within one of the Student decision-making problem-solving embedded into the curriculum. Students are faced with Reflection time is end of every class. Think about the level intentions, motivations in relation to ally through group individual journal

**Implementing the Model**  
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Operation of the program plan was:

- Level 1—Sufficient self-control to respect the rights and feelings of others
- Level 2—Participation and effort in program activities.
- Level 3—Self-direction with emphasis on independence and goal setting
- Level 4—Caring about and helping others

Various strategies help students to become aware of and experience the levels:

- "Teacher talk" is used to explain and discuss the levels, and students are encouraged to work within one of the levels.
- Student decision-making and problem-solving experiences are built into the curriculum so that students are faced with choices.
- Reflection time is spent at the end of every class when students think about the lesson and their intentions, motives, and behaviors in relation to the levels, usually through group discussion or individual journal entries.

#### Implementing the Model

*Students and setting.* The tutors of an organization for disadvantaged youth asked Nikos Georgiadis to teach a basketball program. Although the program was called "basketball," it was through this activity that Georgiadis wanted to implement the model and encourage students to make choices and decisions. All the students were African-American and included three fifth-grade students (all boys) and eight ninth-grade students (seven boys and two girls). The program was conducted in the basement of an old ball in Cabrini Green after school on Friday afternoons and on Saturday mornings. The students met for eight weeks, with each session lasting two hours. The "gym" had a very low ceiling, making it difficult to shoot into the only basketball hoop. The hoop was mounted on the wall just for this program because in the past, a hoop attracted many people to the basement which had become a center for the activities of a dominant gang.

#### Operation of the Program

The program plan was to introduce

students to the levels and to establish an activity routine. The students' routine included performing stretching exercises, working at skills and fitness stations, setting goals for themselves and recording results in journals, playing small-sided scrimmages, and reflecting on the day's lesson.

Georgiadis encouraged the students to make decisions about the class structure and the extent to which they wanted to participate. At first, the students were surprised and frustrated when asked to take the responsibility. One student said that they should be made to run laps instead of making decisions. Choice and action, however, were left up to each individual.

When it was time to play a game, the concepts of playing for fun and playing to win were often at odds. This produced tension and conflict between the desired outcomes of the model and the perceived purposes of the game. A description of the first day highlights these problems:

*Playing for fun.* John and Gerry were the first two students the authors met. They led the way to the "gym," and both shouted with excitement when they saw the basketball hoop. They raced over to four tables on the far side of the gym, took off their coats, ran back, and jumped up to try and touch the net. Both laughed as they pretended to dunk the ball. They found a woolen hat, rolled it up to make a ball, and made various moves to pass and shoot the "ball." Georgiadis joined them while waiting to receive a key to get the basketballs. The two 14-year-old boys were excited about the prospect of playing basketball; there seemed an overwhelming sense of innocence as they laughed and moved around the gym.

*Playing to win.* The innocent play soon turned into bitterness and aggression when the basketballs were distributed. A group of students began to play a warm-up game where they shoved and pushed each other as they attempted to get the ball. Accusations of fouling and cheating and swearing echoed around the

gym. One particular activity which enhanced this negative behavior was a process called "checking the ball," when the defending team was to pass the ball gently to the offensive team after a basket was scored. This provided an opportunity to slam the ball either at the face or fingers of an opposing player.

#### Focusing on Level 1

After witnessing the students' aggression in the warm-up game, Georgiadis decided to focus almost exclusively on Level 1 behavior. He stopped the scrimmage and explained about being supportive toward both teammates and the opposition, saying, "Instead of name calling, let's hear 'nice job,' 'good hustle.'" At first, this did not have much effect. Although severe name calling was more contained after the teacher talk session, students still complained about their teammates' performance and questioned fouls. On the first day, Georgiadis reinforced the importance of being supportive and also emphasized that he wanted the students to call their own fouls instead of relying on him to decide.

The problems of the first day were compounded by the constant interruption of people walking in wanting to play "ball." Besides trying to identify who was in the program, Georgiadis also faced verbal abuse from outsiders he turned away.

The following week, various incidents occurred that made Georgiadis question the project's merit. First, on both days in the second week, the program had to be moved to an outside court. This made the teacher apprehensive because there were many people using the court, and he had to ask if they would mind leaving for a while. Although these others let Georgiadis and his students on the court, they stood around laughing and making comments. To add to the teacher's apprehension, there were recent reports of sniper fire in the area. Additionally, the students arrived at various times, and name calling was rampant.

It was frustrating for the teacher to hear the students eloquently define respect for others and then not practice it. Persistent lack of respect and self-control forced the teacher to reevaluate his approach when dealing with these problems.

In the third week, Georgiadis started transferring responsibility to the students for the decision-making process. He met with the students before and after practice to establish basic rules that were essential for the physical and emotional safety of the team. The students and teacher discussed issues such as arriving on time for practice; including everyone in the team, particularly during a scrimmage; and, most important, developing a team atmosphere that was free from physical and verbal abuse.

The students decided that being prompt allowed more time to work on their skills and play. They also agreed to include everyone in the team. The older, more skilled players were not satisfied with this decision because in a game situation they wanted every opportunity to shoot. Respecting each other and controlling emotions were necessary because constant fighting and name calling created a hostile, unpleasant environment for both teaching and learning.

The students openly provided input on the various issues, but problems remained when transferring thought into practice. The teacher had to remind them of the rules that they had created for themselves. At first, the students were uncomfortable because they realized they were responsible for instituting and abiding by the rules. The teacher made sure that any violation of their own rules was handled immediately by stopping the drill or scrimmage and discussing the problem that occurred. Students were also encouraged to stop to observe a violation that the teacher had not noticed. With these rules and strategies, problems at Level 1 diminished, but were not extinguished.

By the fourth week the students arrived no later than ten minutes,

an improvement on their 40- or 50-minute late arrivals. Making sure everyone was included was difficult to achieve. At one point, frustrated by the failure of teacher talk, problem solving, and self-reflection to help students deal with inclusion, Georgiadis played with a team, did not pass the ball, and scored all the baskets. The students then expressed their feelings as players on the winning and losing teams and agreed that it was not much fun to play with someone who "hogged" the ball.

Georgiadis questioned the students on respect for each other and had them practice playing without name calling. When the students started fighting or name calling, the teacher stopped the game and discussed the problem. He never raised his voice, gave positive feedback verbally and physically (e.g., "high and low fives" and patting students on the back) to reinforce valued behaviors and attitudes, and encouraged students to express their opinions. He tried to get the students to focus on being "winners" in ways other than scoring: attending the program, getting rebounds, and giving high fives and verbal encouragement to their teammates. After the students had discussed, reflected on, and practiced playing without name calling, they described their feelings:

*Gene:* I liked when I make the shot and when my team cheers me on. I don't like when we are playing and sometimes people [call] each other names.

*Geoff:* I feel today was good because there wasn't any name calling. Most important...we all showed respect for each [other]. [We had] teamwork, like if a person [missed a] shot we wouldn't get mad.

### **Beyond Level 1**

The improvement made at Level 1 was remarkable. By the end of the eight-week project, verbal and physical abuse were almost nonexistent. In addition, some of their interaction extended beyond Level 1. Stu-

dents laughed and joked with each other, passed the ball around the team before shooting a basket, and high fives to their teammates, and praised an opponent when an impressive shot was made. The following journal entries describe the fourth week and what the students enjoyed:

*Patricia:* I liked today because I made more shots and it made me feel good.

*Curtis:* I like to play ball. We passed the ball. I feel good. I hate to [lose], but sometimes your team [has] to lose like today.

*Derek:* The thing I liked about today is playing [with] Patricia and Lamont.

*John:* I like basketball because it is fun to play. I did 11 jump shots and three lay ups. Next Friday I am going to do better.

There was a time, however, when the students' progress regressed. This flashback to week-one behavior occurred for two reasons: a student who had been in jail for two weeks returned to the program, and another student who had attended sporadically showed up after a three-week absence. The ensuing atmosphere emphasized how well the other students had improved their behavior during that time.

Jim, the student who had been in jail, seemed to take out his frustrations on everyone, shouting at others' mistakes and hogging the ball. Georgiadis stopped the game many times to remind the students of what we hoped to achieve in the program. When there was time, he talked with Jim about his jail experience. He described what he had been through and said he felt wrongly accused for the crime. In the next session, Georgiadis told everyone how pleased he was to have Jim back with the group, and on that day Jim seemed to relax and return to playing for fun.

The other student was more than a rest of the students, and his domination in the scrimmage caused anger and frustration. After

ted, the student left. She asked the other program how to deal with the problem. They decided the problem maker should not return to the program. He did not come. One effective aspect of the program was that of making students responsible for their own behavior. For example, after Georgiadis demonstrated how to perform stretches, students to bring the group through the exercises. They also worked independently at the difficult exercises which included fitness and passing tasks. They learned how to set goals and record their progress. One week to the next. They also had time to do what they wanted, if they ever did.

Halfway through the program, the teacher introduced a "crazy station." The students were allowed to do any activity they desired. In addition, all sorts of activities were allowed, from working on moves to skipping rope. The student stations contradicted the idea that children from low-income groups cannot learn.

Toward the end of the program, the students called their own names. The caring aspect was that they gave each other compliments and positive feedback. The positive impact was also apparent when students were asked to be sportscaasters. They interviewed each other. The students asked questions. The tape made of the interviews called it "Come Fly With Me." On the video they interviewed each other and gave compliments on various playing techniques. Laughing, infrequent tears, occurred often during the program.

