

Values and Goal-Setting with Underserved Youth

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Becoming an adult is a difficult process under the best of circumstances. For inner-city children who are underserved, the transition is fraught with obstacles. The stories of children and youth at risk in the United States are often highlighted by school dropout, criminality, drug abuse, prostitution, and hopelessness. At the heart of such despair, for many underserved youngsters, is their belief that they have been abandoned by society. Such children grow up struggling to survive dysfunctional educational and health systems, as well as economic and social isolation created by poverty.

The 1990s have seen increased numbers of underserved youngsters, particularly in the inner cities, become at-risk for school failure. New intervention programs have focused on enhancing resilience among these children. Many of these programs are established in schools in which teachers shoulder the responsibility of getting at-risk children to fit into the mainstream of schooling (Wang & Gordon, 1994).

A major aspect of these resiliency programs is *goal-setting*. Goal-setting assumes that, by creating and achieving goals, an individual gains greater autonomy and control in dealing with day-to-day challenges and setbacks. Several alternative physical activity programs for underserved youth have used goal-setting to help children overcome poor decision-making, increase social competence, and become optimistic (Miller, Bredemeier, & Shields, 1997; Danish & Nellen, 1997; Cutforth,

1997; Hellison, 1995; Martinek & Griffith, 1993; Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Steihl, 1993). In most of these programs, goal-setting is implemented by a mentor—a significant adult who works one-on-one with a child. Group goal-setting is also practiced; here the emphasis is on promoting group values and membership.

Does goal-setting work? Our own experience with underserved youngsters indicates that the answer is “sometimes.” We have found, for example, that goal-setting can be helpful for youngsters who see achievement as a possibility or who believe there will be a “payback” for reaching a goal. They see a connection between getting good grades or improving behavior and being successful in school and their community. They also believe that goals are of value and that strategies used to reach them will work.

For underserved youngsters who live with crime, drugs, dysfunctional family life, and violence, setting traditional goals often becomes a remote and obscure process (Ogbu, 1997). This is not to say that goal-setting cannot work with these youngsters. Rather, the problem lies in social and psychological “barriers” between at-risk youth and those who work with them. In many cases, these barriers are products of a culture bounded by poverty and racism. Awareness and understanding of these barriers have important implications in the planning and execution of goal-setting programs.

This article aims to put teachers, youth workers, counselors, coaches,

and volunteers in a better position to successfully implement goal-setting programs for underserved youngsters. This will be accomplished in two ways. First, an overview will illustrate why underserved youngsters respond poorly to traditional goal-setting efforts. Specific “barriers” related to the environments and belief systems of inner-city youths will be described. Second, guidelines for setting goals will be suggested.

Barriers to Effective Goal-Setting

For more than 25 years, author Hellison has attempted to integrate goal-setting into programs specifically designed to help underserved youngsters become responsible decision-makers. His most recent programs are organized as clubs (i.e., clubs for coaching, sports, and martial arts). The “club” concept helps young people feel that they “belong” to something and thereby provides a sense of identity. Guided by a model that focuses on personal and social responsibility, club members work on such goals as self control, respect for the rights of others, self-direction, and leadership, and on outside-the-gym applications (Hellison, 1995).

During the last four years, author Martinek has extended the after-school program to include in-school mentoring (Hellison, Martinek, & Cutforth, 1996). The mentoring program is called *Project Effort* and presently operates in several elementary and middle schools in Greensboro,

North Carolina and Chicago, Illinois. The objective of the mentoring program is for club members to transfer the values and goals of the club to the classroom setting. Each mentor (undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty) is assigned a student in an after-school club. A mentor spends one to two hours each week with the student, working on specific goals that apply to the classroom. Some of the goals also pertain to the student's home and neighborhood.

We have found that certain barriers must be negotiated before any kind of goal-setting can take place. These barriers are: (1) the school culture, (2) combative values, (3) dysfunctional home life, and (4) fear of making choices.

The School Culture

Many of our club members have a particularly difficult time in school. They have decided that the "school culture" is not for them. There are many reasons for this. They include overcrowded, self-contained classrooms; purposeless course work; low teacher expectations; and lack of parental involvement. The result is a discouraging culture for youngsters who are searching for self-identity and purpose.

We also believe that children struggle because of the "top down" approach in teaching and administration. That is, teachers and administrators place a high premium on good behavior, and rules of conduct are continually monitored. Furthermore, students are expected to score well on standardized tests. Often, these tests are the sole measure of a student's merit. Students must follow a list of rules or face various forms of reprimand, such as office referral, suspension, or expulsion. This does not mean that rules are necessarily bad for students. Rather, rules are integral to the school culture—a culture created by a belief that order and conformity are necessary for teaching and learning to take place (Boyd & Shouse, 1997).

For many youngsters, doing well on standardized tests, following rules, and respecting authority are helpful

for success. Our hunch, however, is that the students who do well in this type of setting are those who have a pretty good sense of control over their own lives. For youngsters who do not fit in, a "top down" approach does not seem to work either in the short or the long term. Getting good grades, staying out of trouble, conforming to school policy, and doing homework are unimportant in their lives. Instead, they have found that gang affiliation, playing basketball, surviving stressful family circumstances, knowing how to deal with teachers and the principal, and not being bullied by others are much more important.

University of California anthropologist John Ogbu says that resistance to the school culture is especially true for adolescent African Americans living in the inner city (Ogbu, 1997). Their perceptions of how much social mobility they have directly affects their acceptance of white middle-class values and attitudes in the area of education. School learning is viewed as unimportant; they see few benefits for adopting the values and behaviors endorsed by the school culture.

Consequently, setting goals that focus on academic and social performance is almost impossible. For example, one of the middle-school students we worked with in the Coaching Club in Chicago felt that he was quite in control of things. Skipping classes, being disruptive, ignoring homework, and not paying attention in class were daily occurrences for him. He believed that simply getting to the club sessions (8:00 in the morning!), playing basketball, "connecting" with girls, and just "doing his thing" were critical autonomous behaviors that legitimized his status in school and in the neighborhood. In his mind, he had mastered the appropriate strategies of his culture. Peer pressure and gang values prevailed in his life. Consequently, getting him to set goals for better behavior and academic work was impossible. We found that it was important to teach him ways to accommodate without disconnecting him from his own culture and belief system. For ex-

ample, we would connect a goal (not falling asleep in class) to a school activity that had value for him: basketball! The school's principal often would not let him play on the team if he was not participating in class. Since he was one of the better players, his absence significantly affected the team's overall performance. During goal-setting sessions he was reminded that responsibility to his basketball team included being alert in class. This appeared to work for a while—until basketball season ended!

Combative Values

Many of the goals that we try to set concern respecting the rights of others and staying out of fights. These are the hardest goals to set because fighting has become a way of life for many inner-city youngsters. The value placed on being confrontational is steadfast, and dismantling it takes careful thought and patience (Demos, 1989). But how is this value fostered? One way is through parents or family members who encourage children *not to back down when challenged*. Caring parents teach this as a survival skill. The insistence on being "strong and tough" prevails so that vulnerability to physical harm can decrease (Willis, 1992). Violence is a common social problem for inner-city families. Crime rates are three to four times higher in the inner city than in suburban areas; the possibility of injury or death is always present for these families. This is especially true in areas where gang culture dominates. A recent study by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 1992) showed that criminal violence is the most common cause of death in inner-city neighborhoods. The majority of youngsters that we work with in Chicago and Greensboro have experienced the loss of one or more family members or friends by murder. Consequently, vigilance and reactivity to violence are important strategies taught to the children.

The value of "toughness" is illustrated in our work with Latesha, a fifth-grade club member from Greensboro. She lived in a small public-housing

apartment in one of the toughest areas of the city. Raised only by her mother, she was taught that it was wrong to back down from any fight. Her way of establishing status in school was to intimidate and fight. School suspension was a common event for her, yet she was quite bright and saw the importance of schooling. During one of our goal-setting sessions, we talked about making decisions in life and about the problems she was having in school. We emphasized that when someone starts a fight there are two choices: you can fight, or you can walk away. Latesha's immediate response was, "I have no choice. Where I live you need to fight or they will think you are a chump. Besides, my mama said nobody should push me around." Latesha's mother, too, had learned during her own childhood in "the Projects" that survival depended on being tough and not backing down.

A Word About Gangs. Fighting and intimidation are by-products of the gang culture. Gangs have become an integral part of many of the club members' neighborhoods. For youngsters who come from dysfunctional families, the gang becomes the "new family." It insures stability and security for them. Leon Bing's provocative profile (1991) of gang life in South Central Los Angeles portrays fighting and intimidation as a way of life among gang members. Power and murder are the sources of self-worth. Drive-by shootings, gang rape, torture, and indifference toward killing become the status quo.

Several of the youngsters that we work with are budding gang-bangers. Getting them to regain interest and membership in the outside world is a constant struggle. Quincy Howe, who teaches in an alternative school for court-referred youths, argues that the power of the street may be too much for any intervention program to override (Howe, 1991). In a sense, gang membership provides a buffer against helplessness and loss of identity. Gang membership confers mastery of the streets. Trying to con-

vince young gang members that schooling and conformity are a better way to go simply "doesn't wash" with them. These options are not as attractive as having power over neighborhood turf and access to quick money through drug trafficking and other forms of criminality.

Dysfunctional Home Life

A third barrier to goal-setting is dysfunctional family life. In general, inner-city families adapt quite well and show close nurturing, support, flexibility, and caring among their members (Demos, 1989). Unfortunately there are also families that become dysfunctional due to the hardship of poverty. Children raised in dysfunctional households frequently experience isolation, physical abuse, and parental conflict and alcoholism. Describing children raised in this type of setting, Joyce Ladner of Howard University says, "They are like canoes floating in an ocean without a compass." This simile implies that these youngsters receive little guidance in decision-making.

Often children respond to the stresses of the home situation by emotionally disengaging (Berlin & Davis, 1989). This can lead them to spending long periods of time "hanging out" with friends or, in some cases, running away from home. Positive interactions with adult figures are dissolved, and value is placed on being independent and self-serving. Clinician and researcher Judith Wallerstein found that such youngsters put little value on maintaining peer and adult relationships and shun directives from authority figures. In many cases, gang affiliation gains a strong foothold in the youngster's life (Wallerstein, 1983).

Within the school setting, these children are often confrontational and impulsive with both peers and teachers (Dugan, 1989). Trying to get them to become caring and responsive to others is a difficult task for their mentors. We found this to be true with one of our club members, Iisha.

Iisha was a Coaching Club member

from a school on the south side of Chicago. Her father left the family when she was just starting school. Until that time both parents were heavy drinkers and drug users. After the father left, the mother had several boyfriends who took up quarters in their apartment. Drug use and conflict prevailed. When the fighting became intense, Iisha would move out. She frequently stayed at a friend's house; sometimes she slept in cars and basements in the neighborhood, or in a shelter. Her grandmother took her in and offered to keep her in on a long-term basis, but after several incidents of stealing, Iisha was thrown out. She eventually returned home to her mother, who was living with a boyfriend. During a heated argument one evening, the mother shot and killed the boyfriend. She was incarcerated, and Iisha became a ward of the state. She was returned to her grandmother, but spent much of her time with local gang members.

Amazingly, Iisha usually managed to get to school. However, relationships between Iisha and her teachers and principal were always strained. Iisha ridiculed her classmates and was frequently in fights. One teacher commented that Iisha was capable of doing good academic work. Unfortunately, her reluctance to respond to adults in positive ways interfered. Therefore, the mentor found that getting Iisha to feel comfortable with goal-setting sessions was a formidable task. It required staying with her week after week throughout the school year. She had to be assured that the mentor was going to be with her for the long haul.

Fear of Making Choices

A final barrier that grips some of our club members is the fear to make choices. A central component of goal-setting and club activity, making choices includes picking the right goal and strategy, deciding whether or not to use a strategy (e.g., should I fight or walk away), and even whether or not to set goals. Making choices is personal; it requires evaluation and commitment. Malcolm, a third grader from

the Horner Homes of west Chicago, suffered from the fear of making choices. Malcolm's "big goals" were to get through school and not to become part of a gang. He was not a behavior problem in the after-school club or classroom. His academic performance in the classroom, however, was poor. Several possible academic goals were discussed. Most focused on reading, because this was his weakest area. Although Malcom believed that the suggested goals were desirable for him, he did not choose any of them.

Steihl (1993) believes that youngsters like Malcolm are unwilling or afraid to make certain choices because they see little need, or they perceive themselves as incapable of making appropriate choices. Too often we hear club members saying, "I don't know how to do this; I have tried before and just didn't get it"; "I am afraid to try it—I know I will fail"; or "Who cares what I do, it's not going to matter in the long run." Such responses reflect feelings of *helplessness* (Seligman, 1990). Once this mindset is firmly in place, a youngster will look for or produce evidence to confirm it (e.g., getting into trouble, making poor grades, etc.). This mindset is a result of repeated failure in school, low expectations, and, in many cases, lack of opportunities to make responsible choices (Martinek, 1996). By contrast, Bonnie Benard's (1993) work on resiliency in underserved youngsters shows that resilient youths seldom adopt an "I can't" attitude.

Getting at-risk youths to make choices through goal-setting takes careful thought and intent. Choices have to be few, and doable. Mentors must provide consistent encouragement and monitoring. Children are also great "crap detectors." Helping a youngster with free will to make good choices, therefore, will depend on showing that the goals are important and valued by the mentor.

Barrier Busters

How can these barriers be broken down during goal-setting? We have had some success in breaking these barriers

down during our goal-setting activities in physical activity programs for underserved youth (e.g., Hellison, Martinek, & Cutforth, 1996). By choosing to work in neighborhoods characterized by violence, uneven parental support, and less-than-fully functional schools and other agencies, we continually face an uphill battle. We suggest that working with underserved youngsters effectively will require that certain principles be considered during the goal-setting process. Here are a few guidelines based on our experiences and those of our colleagues in the Urban Youth Leader Project Partnership (Nick Cutforth, Univ. of Denver; James Kallusky and Missy Parker, both of California State Univ., Los Angeles; and Jim Stiehl, Univ. of Northern Colorado).

Commitment. You have to value this work, to have a passion for it. Without sufficient internal drive, we would have given up long ago. When we do workshops for teachers and youth workers, we always make the point: "You have to outlast them!" We refer not only to the children, who reflect the influences in the community, but also to all attempts to derail your efforts. We often say that our most important goal is to hang in there (white-knuckled) through thick and thin—all the rest "is details."

Redefining. One sure way to burn out is to expect big turnarounds in your students' attitudes and behaviors. Instead, you have to see yourself in the role of "planting seeds," not knowing which, if any, will take root in the long run. We have seen youngsters who respond very well to the setting and carry out goals but who eventually succumb to the influences around them. And we have seen youngsters who do not react well to goal-setting, drop out, fail to respond to our efforts to contact them, and then show up two years later, back in school and back in contact. It seems that the only way to survive this work is to savor the "small victories" and to celebrate those few children who manage to overcome the barriers.

Create an Alternative Culture. Some

goal-setting is done in the gym as well as in the classroom. In either case, it is important to create a culture in which youngsters feel comfortable and confident doing some type of goal-setting. Whatever success we have had is in large part the result of the climate we created in the gym and other places where goal-setting is done. Creating the environment is another uphill battle, because such a climate often conflicts with the cultures of the school, community, and home. We have found that a positive atmosphere, augmented by opportunities for making choices (thereby giving youngsters "ownership" in the goals being set), makes goal-setting a viable activity.

To create this alternative culture, two approaches work best. One is to respect the children—their culture, their struggles, their individuality, their voices (they "know things" we don't but should), and their capacity for decision-making. The latter two are prerequisites for the kind of goal-setting that empowers students. We have found that if you genuinely respect the children in these ways, they will respond and contribute significantly to the creation of an alternative culture. Respect for others, another requirement, is addressed below.

The second approach is to have a *personal-social development* framework for the physical activity content of your program (Hellison & Templin, 1991). We use a five-levels framework and associated strategies (Hellison, 1995). Participants are taught that respect for the rights and feelings of others is their first responsibility and a prerequisite to participation. This requirement addresses the need to treat peers the same way mentors treat them. Two more-advanced responsibilities directly involve goal-setting: self-motivation and self-direction. Strategies for putting these responsibilities into practice include individual decision-making and follow-through, as well as specific goal-setting activities. The fourth responsibility, group welfare and caring about others, emphasizes both group goals and service to others; this introduces leadership goal-

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