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University of San Francisco

Teaching a Human Rights Education Through Youth Athletics

A Field Project Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Human Rights and Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Human Rights Education

by
Jake Beaman
April 2017

Teaching a Human Rights Education Through Youth Athletics

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTERS OF ARTS

in

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

by

Jake Beaman

April 2017

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

Dr. Monisha Bajaj

Date

Instructor/chairperson

April 26, 2017

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Abstract

Throughout my research and work in education I realized there is often a disconnect between schooling and students especially in low-income areas. It can be incredibly difficult to feel confident at school when the curriculum is not relatable to your experiences and life. In this paper I explore how an athletic program can be used to teach a Human Rights Education to fill in the gaps the traditional school day may not provide. I used a Human Rights Education framework with the teacher/coach as a facilitator and a Critical Race Theory lens examining intersectionality, counter-story telling, and interest convergence in the school day. I interviewed 14 students at two different urban elementary schools who take part in a “junior coach” leadership program to get an oral history perspective on their lives, experiences in school, and how sports impacted them.

Some of my findings demonstrate how powerful and empowering being part of a sports team can be for a student because of the community that is built within the team. Students also explained how they needed a balance of being taught by a coach but also the need to be given leadership opportunities and freedom to make their own decisions. It became clear to me that athletics can build on the community that is shared for the sport to talk about issues going on within the individual and communities. Based on my findings I provide recommendations on how best a coach, teacher, team, and community can support and empower students to solve community problems and inspire students to follow their dreams. In the Appendix there are some sample lesson/practice plans on how a coach can use a Human Rights Education at a sports practice.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In my own work as an educator I have witnessed how extremely difficult it can be for students to build confidence within themselves especially in urban school settings. Instead of school feeling liberating and necessary for students, it is often dreaded and confusing. When looking at the American education system critically it is founded and designed by the social and economic predominately white elites, which constructs an enormous disadvantage to minority students who are not raised with similar life experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Too often the community's desires and students' needs aren't being addressed during the school day because of a variety of factors that this paper further discusses.

My experience working in schools along with graduate research about American education has demonstrated that in many low-income communities, the ideal empowering education can be incredibly difficult for students because often the coursework and schooling focus on a Eurocentric model that does not relate to students of color. This is significant because many students are having their own life experiences being devalued and dismissed. Yosso (2002) explains, "Traditional curricular discourses distort, omit, and stereotype Chicano/a, Latino/a, African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and Native American experiences. These deficit discourses serve to rationalize discriminatory curricular processes that maintain structures of racial, gender and class inequality in schools" (p. 93). When students' viewpoints are rarely considered and are negatively stereotyped, school no longer becomes a place of growth but

instead can further marginalize. Students of color are too often being taught that their experiences aren't valuable and they are encouraged to learn about a history that isn't always familiar or relatable. I believe there are ways outside of the traditional school day to help students realize that their experiences matter. It is crucial to develop programs outside of the normal school system that include student voice and empowerment abilities that are so crucial to becoming not only a strong student but developing life skills such as confidence, problem solving, and working with a team.

Background and Need For Study

When analyzing methods to include student voice, experience, and empowerment, I realized it would only be right to begin with my own unique experience. I am an educator at elementary schools, a youth sports coach, and a graduate student studying Human Rights Education (HRE). Throughout my professional career, I have taught, tutored, mentored, and coached at low-income elementary and middle schools throughout the Northern California Bay Area. While working for education non-profits, I also attend the University of San Francisco pursuing a graduate degree in Human Rights Education. Sports, specifically basketball, have always been a huge part of my life growing up and I continue to train and coach youth athletes. After reading about and seeing first-hand the lack of empowerment that happens for students in schools who seemingly need it the most, I decided to research and create a program to help. Human rights, American K-12 education, and athletics often aren't considered in the same conversation but I believe there is a unique opportunity to help fill the gap the classroom might not be able to provide by creating a program that combines a human rights education and athletics.

When analyzing the history of human rights, it is fundamental to examine the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR is a milestone document that was drafted and created by representatives from different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world in 1948 as a response to atrocities of World War II (UN.org). The Preamble begins with

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom justice and peace in the world...” (UDHR, 1948). The document outlines key freedoms that everyone should have “without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.... (Article 2 UDHR, 1948)

193 countries have signed this document (UN.org), agreeing to strive for the freedom of all human beings. In the UDHR freedom to housing, education, legal representation, and security are all promised and haven't always been obtained in America. To date, the intersection between human rights and athletics in America has primarily been through professional sports.

Throughout United States history we have seen empowering opportunities created when athletes choose to take a stand for human right injustices. Muhammad Ali sacrificed the prime of his career to protest against the morality of the Viet Nam War (Block, 2016). Ali, who was both criticized by some and revered by others at the time, helped contribute to a nationwide conversation about American military fighting in Viet Nam. US Olympian sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos wore human rights badges and raised the black power fist salute on the podium of the 1968 Olympics. This sacrifice by the sprinters had them kicked out of the Olympic Village and their medals stripped, but it inspired many citizens to stand up around the world for civil rights (Rhoden, 2016). Five NFL players on the St. Louis Rams entered a game in

the 2014 season and raised their arms in a “hands up, don’t shoot” pose to represent the discrimination in the killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown and the Black Lives Matter Movement (Chow, 2014). Recently, San Antonio Spurs NBA Head Coach Gregg Popovich expressed fear on President elect Donald Trump’s morals and dishonesty saying, “You can’t believe anything that comes out of his mouth” (Spears, 2016). Popovich is known as one of the greatest leaders and coaches of all time and took some risk when speaking out against Trump considering he coaches in the highly Republican state of Texas and his own boss and team owner donated to the Trump campaign (Spears, 2016). Through these examples and many other protests, we have seen professional athletes use their position in sports to take a stand for human rights. Human rights actions by athletes can lead to a nationwide conversation and empowerment for the athlete and like-minded individuals. If people can be united by their love of a sport or familiarity of an athlete then they might be more likely to actually listen or take action against human right violations. My research investigates how to design a youth athletic program that creates the same conversation and empowerment within the youth athletes and urban communities.

When developing an athletic program, it is crucial to first address team leadership and the coaching. In my opinion the job of the coach is not always to win games but build teamwork and confidence within the team and individual players. I think that the same can be said for a teacher, the goal shouldn’t only be strong test scores but student empowerment and student voice are essential to giving students the tools to succeed. It is my belief that whether it’s a teacher, coach, or mentor using human rights as the start of a conversation with youth can lead to a conversation that focuses on the student experiences of their fundamental freedoms and needs. Students often are not always able to express themselves in the typical classroom but by bonding

empowerment skill building with a passion that youth enjoy like athletics I believe there is a unique opportunity for players to share their experiences and uncertainties that can lead to personal growth. HRE can create a conversation where teammates share their own narrative that seems much more tangible than learning from a textbook.

Coaches can act as mentors and teammates are the crucial supportive community that's often needed for growth. Research shows that there are three basic psychological needs in leadership programs to best foster youth development: autonomy, competence, and relatedness are all necessary for a robust youth personal development program (Bean, Harlow, Kendellen, 2017). Autonomy also known as self-directed behavior might not be found in a classroom because of the mandatory curriculum but might be more likely to be found through sports (i.e. they want to play the sport) and HRE requires student voice and opinion. Competence which means the ability to perform can be used as an athletic coach teaches the skills of the sport and relatedness means being able to connect to support systems like coaches and teammates. This research paper focuses on how to include these three important youth building characteristics and create an HRE youth athletic program. In my research I address the question: how can we best use coaches, teammates, and sports to teach Human Rights Education?

Purpose and Importance of the Study

It is important to examine our education system to find ways to better serve our students and the communities they live in. Traditional schooling is not the only way to educate, therefore, it is important to closely examine what essential skills the normal school day doesn't provide. Keeping these important but missing skills in mind and with interviewing students asking them what they need for their own growth, then we create a program that helps fill in the gaps that

traditional school might not provide. I am passionate about athletics because it taught me so many life skills and provided support that I never received during school. If teams can take the bond that is created with coaches and teammates and provide a clear way to teach empowerment than this will provide essential skills for students and a guide for coaches. After doing this research, I created a sample playbook for coaches that can be used as a practical way to teach HRE. It is my hope that this playbook will be a valuable resource to others. I would like to continually expand the playbook and create my own HRE and athletics program for youth in the Bay Area in the future.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions.

- 1) What successful ways is HRE already being used in the classroom and how can we translate these techniques/benefits to an athletic program?
- 2) What skills are students in urban communities wanting but not getting from school and how can we use an HRE athletic program to provide these?
- 3) What skills and knowledge are most needed in today's America and how can we provide these through an HRE athletic program?
- 4) What is the role of the coach, individual athlete, and teammates in creating a dynamic and empowering HRE athletic program?

Theoretical Framework

Human Rights Education

Human Rights Education is a framework and tool for youth empowerment. HRE is a great guide for both how a teacher can facilitate and create community. In the UDHR Article 26, part 2 states

...

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (UN, 1948).

Human rights as a context is so valuable because it clearly states that people of all types have the right to developing their greatest self as long as they're tolerant and understanding of groups around the world.

HRE is described by Flowers (2000) as, "Conveying the "common language of humanity is the whole purpose of human rights education. Concerned citizens.... need to understand and embrace the fundamental principles of human dignity and equality and accept the personal responsibility to defend the rights of all people" (p.v). In HRE it is imperative that students not only reflect on their own perspective, but also hear from their communities' real experiences as opposed to learning from a textbook.

In chapter two, I further investigate the role of the teacher/coach acting as an authentic facilitator. When teachers are aware of the community values and difficulties, it makes them a much more valuable teacher in the community because they can authentically be there for their students (Ladson-Billings and Donnor, 2005). Teachers should continually be working to develop a sense of the culture of the school community instead of the student always having to

conform to a pedagogy that does not relate to their lives (Ladson-Billings and Donnor, 2005). In this research, athletics will be the part of the culture that unifies the athlete and coach.

In order for students to feel safe to share their truths, it is imperative the teacher, mentor, or coach establish a safe community. Chapter two will further look at Paulo Freire's (2000) work in creating dialogue and community. Freire argued that a teacher should facilitate an education and that the classroom should be a community where everyone learns from their shared and individual experiences. He wrote that the current education system is relatable to a banking model where it was teachers who were required to deposit certain knowledge in empty vessels, the students. This style is oppressive and limiting because the students are missing ownership in what or how they learn (Freire, 2000). In order for communities to be defenders and learners of human rights then, as a society, we must accept to listen to the different viewpoints around the world using the UDHR as a guide to the human rights that should be ensured. Teachers or coaches can do this by establishing an environment where it is safe for students to share their experiences and ask questions to understand other perspectives. HRE is based on the idea of developing community agreements and allowing for the participants to determine what they want to learn based on their own needs.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

HRE will be used to facilitate student empowerment, student voice, and future action plans. CRT will be used to analyze the current situation of minority students and urban communities. In chapter two our research will further investigate the theory of interest convergence (Bell, 1980) and how the success of minorities often is "allowed" only if it benefits whites. This research also explores the questions: what does interest convergence mean for urban education and how we can empower students to combat this obstacle? This paper also

delves into the power of counter narratives (Brown and Jackson, 2013) in providing a voice for those who are often silenced. This investigation seeks to find the best ways to give athletes the tool of personal “story telling” in order to offer solutions or relief with difficult circumstances. The idea of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1995) also addresses how people of color have been oppressed across multiple categories and how to create a program that begins to dismantle the systematic, multi-layered oppression.

Methodology

When students are able to analyze and question what is at stake for their school, their role as critical actors is centered (Diera, 2016, p. 218).

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways to use coaching and leadership through athletics to teach human rights education themes such as empowerment, leadership, and respect for people from all cultures. I used an interview format utilizing both group and individual interviews of students to ask what made them feel empowered. In order to find different skills they desire in a coach and in themselves, I asked the following interview questions:

- What types of leaders make a successful team and do these same leaders translate to everyday life? Why do you like sports or being part of a sports team?
- What character traits do you look for in a coach or teacher?
- What would you most like to improve in yourself and community and what are steps you can take to improve them?
- Describe your perfect day at school or with your team and why?
- Who is a role model in your sport, your life, or of your friends? What makes them

admirable?

By having students compare their lives to sports I could better understand in a less threatening way the tools necessary for their own personal development.

I used Duncan-Andrade (2010) as a resource and example when designing my study of how he established community within his high school basketball team. Teammates on the team he coached developed all the values in HRE (i.e. empathy, cultural understanding, empowerment, a passion for justice) through their sport (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). His team would not only practice but also have study halls and goal setting activities both as a team and individually. Duncan-Andrade was a prominent figure in their community but didn't tell his team how to feel, instead he asked what they needed with their goals or schoolwork and provided resources for them to accomplish their ambitions.

Description of the setting

The setting took place at two public elementary schools in very low socioeconomic areas in East Palo Alto (EPA) California. The schools combined ethnic makeup is 83% Latino/a, 9% Pacific Islander, 5% Black, 1% Asian and .5% White. 95% of the students qualify for a free or reduced lunch and over 50% are English language learners. 95% of the students come from low-income families (GreatSchools.org, 2017). Their test scores in math, English, and science hover around 20-30% below the national average (GreatSchools.org, 2017). While there aren't direct statistics, many parents are immigrants from Mexico working in restaurants, service, or construction jobs. East Palo Alto borders the Silicon Valley and both schools are less than two miles from Facebook headquarters. The stark poverty and lack of resources for students at these schools is disheartening when looking at the tremendous wealth compiled by the nearby tech industries of the Silicon Valley.

Description of participants

The participants are 4th and 5th grade students who have already been selected to be in a leadership program titled “Junior Coaches”. The Junior Coaches at each school are in charge of making sure they have structured, fun, and healthy games taking place during their school recess. They work within their own grade but also become mentors for the younger grades as well. When selecting Junior Coaches, teachers and principals work together to find students who are already reliable leaders but also look for students who could use this Junior Coach opportunity to gain confidence and leadership skills. Each school has 15-30 Junior Coaches. The students have a wide range of family income, athletic ability, grades, and confidence so I believe it will give a good sample size of the many different types of students representing these communities. I then selected a small sample from the Junior Coaches to interview.

Procedure to data collection

Once a month I have a Junior Coach meeting separately at the four schools. During the meeting I taught an HRE lesson on empowerment and related it to the sports we were working on at the time. After the lesson the students were asked to participate in a group interview to talk about what and who inspires them and their community. I also interviewed several students per school individually to obtain more qualitative data. The interviews were done one-on-one during school recess to ensure the students had enough time to appropriately answer the questions in a relaxed setting. I asked around five questions per student in hopes to get their story on what a human rights education would mean to them.

Limitations of the Study

The individual and group interviews were completed once over a two-month time period, I would have liked to have had weekly follow-ups. Many of the students already knew and

trusted me so although they were reminded to answer honestly, they could have had a biased or pre-determined opinion when answering questions about the lesson plan. In the group interviews there is always a possibility of groupthink where students are more likely to agree with each other instead of seeming as an outcast. The students were interviewed at school so there was limit to how a deep of a conversation I could have with them. I was only able to interview 4th and 5th grade students, as it would have been interesting to get both an older and younger perspective as well.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because I am applying my research into HRE, CRT, and coaching by including the voice of actual students. Theory can only take this study so far it is important to get an actual pulse of the athletes and their struggles and triumphs. By polling and interviewing youth I can see what type of lesson or conversation has the biggest impact for them. The results show of the variety of traits they look for in a coach or mentor. The research will be a key factor in creating my HRE lesson plans. If I want to create an authentic curriculum that helps youth and the community, it is crucial I ask they community first of what their needs actually are. I hope that it will not only be helpful to me as a coach but a resource to other coaches as well to create a team that inspires and empowers each other.

Conclusion

It is my belief that with athletics being incredibly popular and ideal for building community we can leverage the power of teamwork and mentorship created through sports practice to find ways to empower students to tackle their real life problems. Using a human rights education approach and a critical race theory lens, I utilize student voice in helping create lesson plans that can help inspire positive change for youth individuals and their communities. It

is important to acknowledge that our current education system is not always fair to youth in low income areas and it is crucial to find ways to teach empowerment and inspire it in different programs besides the school day. In chapter two, we will delve further into the research on what a human rights education actually means, what critical race theory advises to aide urban youth, and the best ways to empower students.

Chapter Two**Review of the Literature****Introduction**

American classroom pedagogy was developed by white elites and can distance many students from being able to relate to the material (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This common pedagogy and curriculum continues to keep many students and especially low-income students of color struggling to understand their coursework and often doesn't allow the space for students to share their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). This research paper is intended to create a praxis where sports programs allow for space to develop the community and personal awareness that can be lacking in the classroom and create a safe place to empower youth. There are some holes in current research on how to specifically teach HRE through sports; through this literature review section, I present what theories and evidence are already available and what still needs to be further investigated. Sports can develop passion and athletics can be about so much more than a game. From my own experience as a coach and once a youth athlete: I've found sports can create essential habits like leadership, healthy competitiveness, teamwork, goal setting, and practice habits. An effective sports program can develop discipline within oneself and team work skills that can be translated to many other areas of a student's life.

This chapter explores how youth athletics, physical activity, and sports teams can help better a student's education and development of personal and life skills. Throughout this literature review, I highlight theories developed in CRT on how to best analyze the struggles students might face in both their school and home life. I specifically focus on intersectionality, counter-story telling, and interest convergence. After exploring the realities of students in urban education, I explore the fundamentals of HRE focusing on the teacher as a facilitator and

students working with their teacher to find solutions that cater best to the individual student.

HRE is designed to empower and this section will further examine what empowerment really means and why this is so important for youth. Bringing together CRT and HRE, I seek to create a foundation for an athletics program that can offer students tools and skills for transformative learning.

My goal as an educator has always been to give the space and knowledge for students to do three things: question the limitations they've been taught, think bigger, and take risks with planning educated experiments in order to follow individual dreams. CRT is a theory that often is not taught in traditional K-12 American schooling and can be a valuable tool in questioning limitations that are assimilated throughout one's life. HRE is a helpful framework to understand and empathize with diverse communities on a large scale. Teaching empowerment skills help students categorize their thoughts and dreams while giving them the confidence to take on challenges. As a coach and educator, I believe sports can be a vehicle that helps navigate students through these phases. It is important to first look at the challenges of education to help see where a sports program can help fill the gaps.

Critical Race Theory

We dare say that the only way we will get an equitable education for all marginalized children and families affected by the intersection of race, culture, language, poverty, and disability is to identify them with oppressed children and families in urban settings and everywhere in the world. (Blanchett et al., 2009)

Intersectionality is a term that describes how different social identities (race, gender, wealth, religion, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, mental ability, physical ability, etc.) within a person or group can lead to oppression and discrimination. These identities are not mutually

exclusive but instead combined together create how people are often perceived or treated by society (Crenshaw, 1995). Globalization and the increasing connection of diversity amongst people around the country and world should mandate us to use intersectionality as a tool for helping understand the “intertwining matrices”, privilege, and oppression that shape the experiences of people and society (Zwier, E., & Grant, C. A. , 2014). Thus intersectionality should be researched and taught in education to appropriately examine ways to interact with each other. Often in an urban classroom the idea of intersectionality isn’t focused on because this concept isn’t in state mandated teaching requirements and quite controversial. Students of color living in under resourced communities are at such a disadvantage due to all the intersecting biases held against them that often counter-story telling can be a strong tool to fight the common narrative.

Counter-storytelling:

Counter-storytelling is a method of telling stories by the people whose experiences aren’t often explained (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The power in counter stories is exposing the difficulties that many marginalized people go through in order to challenge the common narrative. By allowing students to share their experiences together it can help create a shared truth that might not be always told in a textbook or popular media (Yosso, 2005). Being able to speak a truth that has been trapped or masked can often be liberating for the author and those who share similar experience (Freire, 2000). If teachers, coaches, or mentors can include opportunities to share personal experiences that challenge common conceptions it can help give strength to those who are oppressed to know that others are going through similar experiences (Duncan-Andrade, 2010).

Interest Convergence

The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery (Du Bois, 1935, p. 26).

Interest convergence is the theory that often whites in power positions will support racial justice laws and movements only when it has something in it for them (Bell, 1980). Dr. Derrick Bell uses *Brown v. Board of Education* as an example of when on the outside it appeared the American Supreme Court struck ended “separate but equal schools” for civil rights but instead interest convergence theorizes it was done during the Cold War to help appear to the world that the United States was taking a stand for human rights. Bell argues it was not done out of pure authenticity for the morality of integrated schools but done instead because it would benefit white Americans in political power and help America win the Cold War by appearing more moral to the world. This idea of interest convergence is important for students to contemplate because it can help make sense of their situation or community’s needs. Struggling urban communities, families, or youth are often at a disadvantage for a reason. Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* (2011) demonstrates that many politicians and white elites have continued to profit off urban communities of color for decades with the prison industrial complex. Prisons are now big business and made for profit with the United States having the highest incarceration rate in the world with prisons populated of primarily people of color (Alexander, 2011). Research shows that even though middle class white youth are more likely to sell and use drugs, urban communities are much more likely to suffer from arrest and conviction by our criminal justice system (Alexander, 2011). Being aware of this unfair racial caste system in America due interest convergence and intersectionality is important for students in urban communities to be aware of. Knowing the reality of America today and the history of discrimination can be important to overcoming obstacles and finding resources to follow ambitions. Understanding

these extremely disheartening realities, it is important to define empowerment, how to empower, and the relationships between sports and empowerment.

Sports as an Academic and Empowerment tool

Empowered individuals come to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings and their ability to contribute to personal and social betterment. They develop the capacity to critically examine their lives and broader society and take action toward personal and social transformation. (Murphy-Graham, 2012, p. 3)

Empowerment skill building is so crucial to youth because it can help foster confidence, critical thinking, and transformation that can lead to action (Kober, 2016). Empowerment not only betters the individual but also can better society as a whole because individuals feel confident enough to challenge problems they see in their community. Although empowerment can be hard to specifically define, a broad definition is the ability to gain power and control over one's decisions and resources that affect one's life (Shah, 2011).

The US Government and Accountability found evidence that when students are getting exercise it makes it easier for them to learn because of the increased ability to concentrate and an overall happier mood. Not only can athletics be a great aid to education because of the mental benefits of exercise but it also can be used a bonding resource for children and adults.

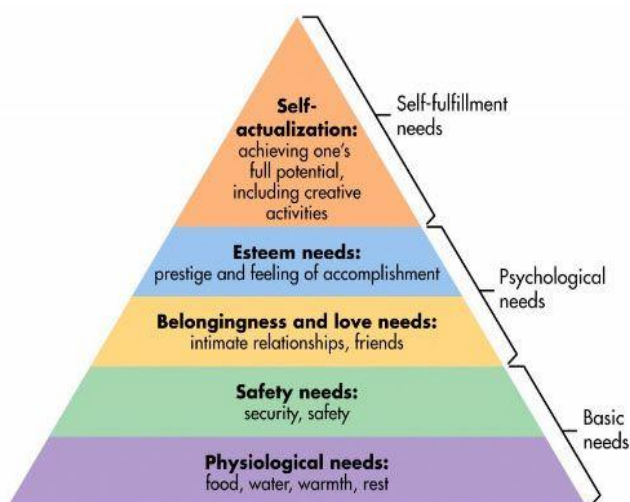
Physical activity in general is associated with improved academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores. Further, such activity can affect attitudes and academic behavior, including enhanced concentration, attention, and improved classroom behavior. (United States Government and Accountability Office, 2012)

Research has shown that instead of teaching students through a deficit model we should engage with them in activities and knowledge that they are already familiar with and interested in (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). Admittedly not all students will be interested or familiar with sports and this program might not be for everyone, but I believe a majority of students could greatly

benefit from an HRE and athletics program. Sports have a popular and important role in our American culture. In a recent Harvard poll, 73% of adults once played a sport and 89% of parents whose children play or played sports say their children now benefit from being a participant (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard/NPR survey, 2015). Sports also have a positive psychological affect with youth including self-esteem improvement, goal setting, and leadership (GAO, 2012). A student who hasn't had much success in the classroom might not be excited to pick up an unfamiliar textbook but what if that same lesson could be held by a coach on the hardwood or field with a community of teammates they are comfortable with? Jeff Duncan-Andrade in his book, *What a coach can teach a teacher: Lessons Urban Schools Can Learn from a Successful Sports Program* demonstrates the importance of using students' knowledge of pop culture (i.e. sports, music, television, social media) as a tool to empower.

If students can connect with something because of prior knowledge it is possible for a teacher or coach to use that expertise as a springboard to teach further lessons. Duncan-Andrade (2010) admits, "I believe the continued trend of athletic participation by socially marginalized youth holds the possibility for academic and social empowerment" (p. 39). Many students find sports exciting while textbook pedagogy is often looked at as boring, why not use what they love to teach them tools to learn about themselves and their communities?

Figure 1: Data on the Power of Sports



Coaches can act as the facilitators and use sports as an avenue to direct learning about other fundamental subjects (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). When looking at the graph of Simply Psychology's depiction (2017) of psychologist

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs it is clear to see the opportunity that athletics can provide. The second level of the chart demonstrates that an individual needs to feel safe and secure in order to have personal growth. Often in urban areas schooling doesn't feel safe for students because of the unfamiliarity of the material, the Eurocentric structure, and both the structural and physical violence that takes place (Duncan-Andrade, 2011). Sports programs feel safe because a student is choosing to participate in this activity and athletics provide a built in community. Coaches can create a safe space and being part of a sports team can add to the feeling of security. Intimate relationships are the third tier of the chart and these can be developed through teammates. When youth practice, compete, and work for each other as a team this can create strong friendships that are so important to individual growth. School often can be a place where students don't see much success; sports can provide important self-esteem within youth. The fourth phase of the chart emphasizes the importance of feeling accomplished and if an athlete is able to improve after practice or experience success with their role on the team then this can offer a rewarding feeling of accomplishment because they were able to successfully take on challenges. The top phase of the chart emphasizes self-actualization and empowerment. The games and practices can act as a metaphor to real world challenges; with structured goal setting programs and constant practice these skills can help guide athletes to further success. Teammates can serve as the community to support and coaches as the facilitators to distribute knowledge. Sports can be a tool to help teach HRE to fill the gap that traditional teachers and schools cannot provide.

Critical Pedagogy & Human Rights Education (HRE)

Tibbitts (2002) described HRE using the learner goals as typologies with the “Values and Awareness Model”, “Accountability Model”, and “Transformational Model.” The Values and Awareness Approach is aimed at students and the general public being taught human rights law, human rights global issues and human rights history to create a consciousness for HRE. The accountability model is for professional groups to help teach and further the legal political policies for human rights. The transformational model focuses on healing and action by providing empowerment for vulnerable or existing populations of human rights violations. My main focus for my human rights and athletics research will be on this transformational process. How can we best transform our youth to take on their challenges with using sports as a common interest to create an empowering community?

HRE is often taught to include goals that provide content, emotional skills, and that encourage action-oriented behavior (Bajaj, 2011). I focus my research on what teacher and coach approaches inspire students to action. Amnesty International’s Human Rights Friendly Schools outline describes HRE to be *about* human rights (cognitive information), education *through* human rights (practices to make for active learning and citizenship), and *for* human rights (developing students ability to take a stand and act in when they witness injustices) (as cited in Bajaj, 2011). HRE should give the learner three important skills: fostering and enhancing leadership, collation and alliance development, and personal empowerment (Tibbitts, 2002).

Research shows that in order to make a program that supports youth leaders there must be an element of competence or proficiency being taught in the subject (Bean, Harlow, Kendellen, 2017) . When using an HRE framework the theory of critical pedagogy developed in *Pedagogy*

of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire (1970) is a great place to start to begin to understand how to best serve youth in a teaching competency. Critical pedagogy is a framework that advocates education should not be controlled by a textbook or dominant narrative because history affects communities different. Freire wrote that consensus viewpoints should be challenged by those who are being oppressed because often their story or rights can be excluded from policy or history. Critical pedagogy would argue people learn from best from learning about personal experiences and social justice issues shouldn't be frowned upon in education but need to be spoken about to create an emancipation of oppression (Freire, 2000). Students acquire actual knowledge not by a teacher or book but by listening to the many opinions of not only their class but hearing different perspectives of many diverse communities (Freire, 2000). This is an important tool for a coach because if you want students to really learn to be proficient you cannot tell them everything but instead let them work together to form opinions and create strategy.

Coach Gregg Popovich of the San Antonio Spurs states a similar belief that true knowledge doesn't come from a single perspective but by many. Popovich has 6 NBA championships and is considered one of the best coaches of all time. When his team makes important decisions they have a vetting process where many people in a room are evaluating players and strategy together (Fiba, 2012). Coaches, managers, and front office executives all work together. During game time timeouts he doesn't pretend him or any other coach to be the knower of all information and often leaves his players alone on the bench to make game strategy decisions on their own (Fiba, 2012). Many other coaches when their players are struggling often yell or tell them what to do, Popovich prefers to listen and let the players help make team decisions. He understands that if he is constantly telling his players everything it is most likely

to go in one ear and out the other, instead he knows for them to truly learn and take action they must be involved in learning and strategy.

A Teacher/Coach as a Facilitator

A crucial factor in HRE is a pedagogy that is facilitated through students' viewpoints. Paulo Freire (2000) writes in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding" (p. 83-84). In order to create a space for students to share their viewpoints it is crucial to create an authentic environment where students feel safe that they can express their own opinion.

In order for education to be freeing students must feel protected to speak their own truths and develop education through their own experiences. A coach should also be willing to let the individuals share and allow the team give to feedback when they need help or disagree with something. A coach just like the teacher can't be the only one to share knowledge; teammates can help share best practices that are not only sport specific but school and life tools as well. The teacher or coach allowing space for authentic voice within the classroom or field can create empowerment. It is important we examine examples of this student empowerment working in our current education system today so we can use this as a model in other schools and programs. We have seen an HRE and a Freirean model used at "Prep Academy".

"Prep Academy" is a public high school in New York City that has seen amazing results when teaching with HRE principles including project-based learning. Students are given a topic but are allowed to explore what they want to learn based on experiences in their real life. Instead

of answering questions coming straight from a textbook, students might be given a time era and allowed to research what culture they want to study. Teachers importantly embrace the students' culture (Ladson-Billings and Donnor, 2005) and act as facilitators for the students (Freire, 2000). The teacher is not the master but instead an ally to help the students become who they dream to be and learn concepts that they are passionate about.

This flexibility to not be tied to only a textbook has improved "Prep Academy" student's national and state tests scores dramatically. More importantly the classroom passion for learning has amplified tremendously. Students who might have dropped out at other schools were now excited to learn and come to school. Maria Hantzopoulos (2012) conducted a case study at Prep and recorded this from a student,

I wasn't happy at my old school... it wasn't that I didn't care about school it just made me lose interest I guess... I loved Prep! I loved all my classes and I was encouraged to have a voice in the classroom... We were seen as individuals and embraced for it.
(Hantzopoulos, 2012, p. 40)

Prep has provided both qualitative data with student empowerment quotes and quantitative data with improved test scores to make a strong case about the power of HRE. This evidence is substantial because it demonstrates what adding a HRE student driven approach can do to inspire students and the possibilities even in a public school setting with mandated curriculum. HRE makes school stimulating and a student who is involved is much more likely to want to learn (Hantzopoulos, 2012).

Conclusion

In our current state, the majority of American schools will not allow the focus to be on project based learning because of tradition and state requirements. It is imperative we also

emphasize in finding ways to empower through other avenues to teach HRE besides teachers and classrooms. With interviewing current students, I hope to better understand how the concepts in CRT like counter-story telling, interest convergence, intersectionality play out in their lives. My research will investigate what and who empowers them in hopes to make a sports program that transforms them like “Prep Academy” where students learn because they feel empowered and not for a grade. I hope coaches can use this research to further advance youth in urban communities to learn and take action on their dreams. Sports teams occur at almost all schools and communities and this resource can be a valuable tool to teach empowerment to students in their everyday life. The focus of this paper will now to shift to interviewing students from urban low-income neighborhoods to find more about their struggles, opportunities, role models, and dreams.

Chapter Three

Results

Introduction

One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding (Freire, 2000, pp. 83-84).

It was important for me as a human rights educator to do research that uses my students' actual voices, opinions, and understandings. I knew that it would be essential for the students to be able to communicate how sports, school, coaches, and teachers actually affect their life and the decisions they make. I originally thought of creating surveys, but found many students unresponsive to them and treating them as if they were taking another dreaded multiple choice test. I soon realized that group and individual interviews utilizing counter storytelling from the students would be the most effective way to conduct my research because it allowed for a unique look on the education process. If I wanted to create a program for my students and other youth across the world, it would be important to hear directly from the students to better understand their viewpoints and experiences.

I knew that I must get to know the students and their cultural wealth (Ladson-Billings and Donnor, 2005) and then act as facilitator for the students pointing them in right direction with lessons plans and resources (Freire, 2000). Chapter 3 and my interviews will be used to understand their cultural wealth while Chapter 4 will allow me to engage with their answers to best facilitate a lesson plan. In order to make my curriculum for coaches effective I wanted to hear what the students enjoyed about learning in the classroom or playing their sport and create from there. My interview questions asked about role models in their lives, their favorite aspects

to school and sports, what their perfect day at school would look like, the qualities they look for in a coach or teacher, and what they enjoyed about teamwork or athletics.

I wanted a diverse group of students to interview in order to get a better understanding of how best to empower a wide range of youth. With this diverse group of students, my goal is to make lessons plans that are transferable to all communities no matter their economic or living conditions and inspire all athletes, coaches, or teams to take positive action. The interviews outlined in this chapter were informal taken during recess and after school. The students were part of a sports leadership program (junior coaches) and interviewed both individually and in groups. Throughout the interviews I describe their grade, gender, and ethnicity. For many of the students, I put “Latino” for privacy reasons, I didn’t ask their immigration status or parents home countries. Based on conversations with school facility many of the students interviewed are immigrants from Mexico.

Main Street and Garden Elementary

I began my interview process with a group interview during our junior coach monthly meeting. I interviewed at two different schools in East Palo Alto. Being a junior coach at both schools is a very coveted position with only 3-4 Junior coaches per 4th and 5th grade class. The junior coaches are responsible for creating a healthy and fun recess that requires: bringing out game equipment, setting up and playing games, and resolving conflicts. There quite often is tension on the playground and junior coaches do a great job of helping students focus on playing instead of fighting.

Main Street Elementary is in a very low socioeconomic part of East Palo Alto and a very small elementary school where everyone seems to know each other. My junior coaches at this school meet once a month to learn new games, develop new leadership strategies, and to discuss how recess is successful and approaches for improvement. The interview started with the junior coaches (8 students) sharing pizza and sitting at a large table. I've found that if the group is "breaking bread" or sharing food it gives us a deeper connection. After checking in with the students I asked them to describe their perfect day at school. There were some common themes but many described a longer recess or more scheduled playground time. When I followed up with asking why this would make the school day better, I received some interesting answers. Several students said that recess gave them time to let out their stress. Other students shared that recess made students smile and be happy. Everyone agreed that exercise made them feel better but no one could really explain why. Five of the students begin to explain their love for soccer. They loved the teamwork and seeing improvement within themselves or teammates. Soccer motivated them and one student said soccer empowered him because, "Sometimes you might fail and that might get you to practice and get better." I then posed the question of what they wanted in an ideal coach or teacher. One of the girls explained that she wanted a teacher that was nice but strict because she wanted to make sure the class was on task so the "class could learn as much as possible". One boy said he wanted a coach to be very serious about the sport and treat them like professionals because that's how players could get better. All of the students mentioned that they wanted teachers to both support them (to act nice and know about their interests) and push them (strict and get them to learn).

Ricky

Ricky is Latino, male, and in the fourth grade. Ricky is incredibly energetic and has an extra bounce for life. He is the first person to say “Hi” to me in the morning and I’ve seen him break up a fight on the soccer field by hugging one of his teammates and reassuring him that fighting wasn’t the way to solve problems. Ricky does satisfactory in the classroom but every so often doesn’t complete his homework, which means he can’t be a junior coach that day. Ricky gets confidence from the soccer field and being a junior coach because this is where he can really show off his leadership skills. Ricky described his living situation as not the best with them moving every so often but described his parents as superhero’s because they worked so hard. His Dad works a day job from 8:00am-4:00pm and then goes back to work from 7:00pm-2:00am Ricky explained this to me in admiration for his father because “he doesn’t need sleep”.

Ricky spoke about his passion for soccer. Just saying the word soccer gave him an extra bounce to his step and an enthusiasm for sharing. When I asked about who taught him the sport he spoke with a huge grin and excitedly proclaimed his Dad, “He used to play, he wanted me to play, he (bought) soccer balls to play with me and we go to the park.” Ricky said that his Dad taught him soccer when he was very little and even though his Dad works two jobs, one during the day and one at night he always was nice and ready to play soccer. I asked what made his Dad a good coach and role model and Ricky proudly said, “He teaches me how to play and teaches me tricks. He’s Nice!” When asked if his father is ever mean or forces Ricky to practice, Ricky said no and playfully said, “I force him to play.” Ricky said his favorite thing about soccer was being part of a team and helping other players improve. He said he enjoyed being a junior coach for similar reasons he liked to help students, to stop bullying, and to calm students down when they were upset. What really stood out to me in this conversation was that soccer seemed to be more than a sport to Ricky and it was more like a synonym to peace or happiness. Ricky

described that his Dad was very busy but soccer always connected them together and this is why he loved everything about the game.

Jeff

Jeff is Latino, male, and in the fourth grade. Jeff describes his home life as very nice with a loving family and a brother in college. Jeff is incredibly smart and one of the top students in his class; his peers call him “dimps” because of affectionate dimples when he smiles. Jeff has clearly had strong role models in his life because he has no problem leading games or creating new games on his own. Even though he is in the fourth grade I have seen him stand up to the biggest 5th graders when he notices something unfair with how they’re treating others on the soccer field. Jeff is an excellent resource for me as a junior coach because all of his peers respect him, I know he will be honest when discussing events and students.

Jeff spoke for his love of soccer because he enjoyed exercising, playing with friends, and that soccer also helped him make new friends. He expressed loving exercise so much because it made him feel “healthy.” Jeff also smiled when speaking about the joy and challenge of working together on a soccer team. He liked the idea of players working together to help win the game. Jeff said that he wanted a “strict” coach that “makes you work hard” and that is very knowledgeable about the sport. Jeff also spoke about school and that he loved science and working with chemicals because experiments were fun! Jeff liked being a junior coach because he wanted to help others and make sure there wasn’t fighting during recess. For Jeff soccer connected him to other students that he might be too shy to otherwise meet. Soccer helped him build friendships and take risks when meeting people.

Stephanie

Stephanie is Latina, female, and in the 4th grade. She has described her home life as somewhat chaotic because her Mom has to constantly work to provide for her and her sisters. Some days it seems something at home is really bothering her because she will come to school and not want to talk, or participate in much but she will still stand by me just wanting comfort and support. Stephanie is a generally shy person especially public speaking in front of her peers but really loves her role as a junior coach. She often talks to me individually about how much fun she is having when in leadership roles but is always reserved whenever we have meetings or play games with students her age. She is always on time, asks questions, and works hard to make sure recess is going well for everybody. Stephanie is not a natural athlete but said her favorite thing about school was sports because she liked learning the rules, helping set up games, and aiding others.

In our interview Stephanie was confident that the most important aspect of a coach is that they are respectful and nice. Her perfect day at school would be where everyone has a good time and some math lessons were taught. She enjoys math because “it helps you learn more than just equations,” she explained. Her role models are her sister and Mom because they work hard, provide for the family, and include her. She also spoke very highly of her teacher because she described her as having the unique capability of being both very strict and extremely nice. She was nice to the students and had them back since the first day of school but strict when students were acting up. Stephanie respected that unlike other teachers who would let up throughout the day her teacher was consistently strict.

Fernando

Fernando is nine years old, male, Latino, and in the 4th grade. He is very energetic and often has trouble focusing in the classroom and remembering to turn in his homework. Fernando is a great soccer player but often has difficulty staying out of trouble in class so recess and being a junior coach is something he really looks forward to. Fernando doesn't talk much about his home life but does have a little sister who also goes to the school who he cares for very much. Some teachers have described him as a troublemaker but I've always found Fernando with great intentions but can get bored or frustrated when not challenged. Fernando means very well but can be talkative and high energy, which is not always allowed in the classroom setting.

Fernando really shines in his leadership role as a junior coach because he loves sports. He said he likes sports for three reasons: teamwork, they are fun to play, and others like sports too. Fernando described that sports can teach life lessons; through teamwork and teammates working together. Fernando described that a coach should always be nice, not afraid to discipline the team if they are not listening, and knowledgeable about the game they are coaching. Being a junior coach gave Fernando a confidence to be a leader where the classroom didn't because in sport being active was encouraged instead of being seen a distraction to others in a classroom.

David

David is nine years old, male, Latino, and the smallest boy in the 4th grade. If a student ever needs to be cheered up, I tell them to go see David because he always has an optimistic outlook and a smile on his face. I once saw him get tripped by another student, fall down, get hurt, but check to see if the student who tripped him was ok before he worried about his own injury. What he lacks in height he makes up for in confidence and leadership. He has no problem helping solve disputes between fifth graders on the playground or organizing a tag game

for kindergarten students. He seems to be a natural born leader who always has a smile on his face. He is always positive and would never say anything bad about his family or upbringing so I am not sure on what his home life is like but he definitely has incredible role models in his life.

David told me his favorite thing about elementary school is that he was selected and able to be a junior coach. He said he loved the position because he gets to help others learn; he admitted it's a huge responsibility that challenges him. His eyes lit up and said he "loves to be challenged"! David continued to explain to me that his favorite sports were soccer and tag. He enjoyed soccer so much because after watching professional soccer players it reminded him that young boys could become that good one day with hard work and goal setting. He liked being on a soccer team because he enjoyed the challenge of working as team and helping his teammates learn. David explained that his perfect day at school would consist of a quieter and more responsible class. David also clarified that his role models were his sister, parents, and coaches because they helped him and were very responsible. He finished his interview by saying that I inspire him because I picked him to be a junior coach and helped teach him games so that he can teach those same games to others. David really respects people who are "responsible" and this is part of the reason why he loved being a junior coach so much because it makes him see the responsible side of himself.

Garden Elementary

My next interviews took place at Garden Elementary. Garden is a bigger elementary school in East Palo Alto that has a much stronger focus on community. At this school I see much less screaming by the teachers and more compassion and patience. This school is also in a very low socioeconomic area but students seem to be more optimistic because of the culture of

the school. The coaches were asked to brainstorm on what was important for students to demonstrate at recess. They came up a list of answers: sportsmanship, teamwork (working together and not giving up on each other), fairness to everyone, ownership (don't blame others for what happens) hard working, responsibility, caring for the entire team, and friendship. These values really stood out to me and guided our interviews. I wanted to research further, how and who taught them these crucial character traits.

Blokus and Fortune

For this interview I had two 5th graders who are some of my best junior coaches because of their leadership and thoughtfulness when helping other students. They wanted their pseudonyms to be named after their favorite board games.

Blokus is in the 5th grade, male, and African American. Blokus leads with love and instead of using a loud or commanding voice he often shows his character with hugs and compliments. He said he enjoyed being a junior coach because he really liked to hang out with younger kids and “give them hugs, so they don't get into fights”. Blokus is a student who hasn't grown up with a father and at one time asked if I could be his Dad. He now calls me his “school Dad” and this same love he craves he uses to help other students during recess. He is popular with the kindergarten students because his sister is also in Kindergarten and he is always extraordinarily nice to her friends. For him being a junior coach gives him time to make other people feel special and that in turn gives him pride. He likes being a junior coach so much that he wished the school day would be extended to make recess longer to give him more opportunity to coach.

Fortune is a 5th grader, male, and Latino. Fortune is not cautious like Blokus but confident and loves to talk and share his feelings with his peers. He had similar answers to Blokus when asked about his favorite part of being a junior coach; “helping kids when they’re feeling down, and bringing them into games when they’re lonely” was his favorite part of the job. He suggested to improve the school day would be to change the playgrounds to make them more organized and a gardening section to make it “beautiful”. Fortune said his ideal teacher needs to “be themselves” and authentic not trying to be someone they’re not. Blokus commented that it helps if teachers make learning fun with games like math competitions.

When talking about their favorite sports both became nostalgic with memories and vividly told me details of how and with whom they learned to play. Blokus said his brother taught him to play in their backyard and when he improved his brother would take him to the YMCA. He would eventually join a YMCA team and loved being on a team because his teammates shared the ball. Fortune described his experience with baseball and his dad purchasing a plastic bat for him and would underhand pitch to him. He was smiling as he told his story. He also said that he loves basketball and plays with his cousin at his cousin’s house, often they play one on one. Fortune explained that his role models were Steph Curry and Buster Posey because both are great people who always do the “right thing” and don’t fight unless they have to. “I want to be like that,” Fortune confirmed. Blokus said I was his role model because I had good games, fun ideas, and that I was fun to help coach and play with. The boys closed the interview with Fortune explaining that in the future he’d like to attend UCLA and become a baseball player, an engineer, and purchase a Nissan GT-R car. Blokus explained that he would like to be a writer and movie director because he loved a comic book lesson in the fourth grade.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a 4th grader, female, and Latina. She is a new junior coach and always acts respectfully and responsibly as a junior coach. Jennifer was recommended by her teacher because she is a strong student and being a junior coach might be helpful to push her out of her comfort zone because she is somewhat shy. Jennifer has done an excellent job of helping students but can lack confidence to start games on her own.

Jennifer explained that she liked being a junior coach because she likes helping solve problems when kids fight. She also said that she likes being a leader to help choose games and have kids play them. Jennifer explained that she loved her teacher because she is nice but gives them hard work so that they can learn and helps them learn all of the hard work. She said her favorite subjects were math and science. Her perfect day would be if she were able to read more. Her role models are her parents because they help her solve her homework problems. What was most profound was when answered that she is most inspired by herself because she knows she works hard. She also impressed me by saying her favorite sport was any sport that challenged her because if she's challenged she knows it will help her become a better person.

Victoria

Victoria is a 4th grade student, female, and Latina. She is very intelligent and outgoing. She isn't the best athlete but is always willing to lead a game or try anything suggested to improve recess. Her teacher recommended her because of her strong morals and faith in the goodness of her classmates. It is clear she has strong role models in her life because she is always optimistic even when describing serious problems.

Victoria explained that she wanted to be a junior coach because she wanted to help those students who need it the most with making friends or finding games. Her role model was her

Mom because of how hard she worked. Her favorite sport is basketball because it allows her to play with her friends. Victoria said she would want school to be longer and a teacher or coach should be hardworking, helpful and a leader. Her dream was to become an actress and said she knows she can become whatever she wants if she works hard.

Raul

Raul is a 5th grade student, male, and Latino. He is popular amongst his peers and seems to get along with everyone. He is not an elite athlete but able to play all sports relatively well which gives him confidence as junior coach. He has no problem coming up to me and having honest conversations about problems he sees or worries he has. He is very mature for his age and often thinks in the big picture. He thinks about his values instead of his wants in many situations.

Raul said that his favorite part of being a junior coach was helping kids that don't have friends to play with. His role models were his Mom and teachers. He admired his mother because of how hard she works to take care of the family and his teachers because "they keep teaching even when kids are bad". He liked that teachers treat people equal no matter how they act. He described it being important for a coach to understand all the students in a classroom or a playground and to check in on them. His favorite sport is soccer because his Dad taught him in their front yard and he loved playing one on one as bonding time. His perfect day at school would have longer recesses so students can get their energy out. He explained, "(recess) helps us in the classroom so were not as energetic in class". He said he liked school but wanted to be a "coder" that designed video games when he got older and hoped that school would teach him more about computer engineering. His biggest inspiration was to "live a good life". He said that

his parents taught him to work hard so you can live a good life and don't end up living on the streets with a bad life.

Johnny and Kevin

Johnny and Kevin preferred to be interviewed together. Both Johnny and Kevin are in the 5th grade, male, and Latino. They are good friends and great junior coaches who advocate healthy play and don't take sports too competitively but have a lot of fun playing them.

Johnny said his perfect day at school would consist of completing his homework and finishing a book. While Kevin said his perfect day would be more time outside to play with his friends. Johnny said that his favorite sports were soccer and basketball because his Dad taught him how to play soccer and he remembers his father giving him a soccer ball and letting him score goals. Kevin preferred baseball because of how much attention you had to pay to a small ball. Kevin also said that he loved being on a team because he liked facing challenges with his friends. He confessed winning baseball tournaments made him feel really good.

Johnny explained he liked teams because he knew he could trust his teammates and make new friends. They agreed that important teacher and coach character traits should be fairness, trustworthiness, and sportsmanship. They also said that leaders should be both strict but nice to students. Johnny said his mother and father were his role models because his Dad taught him to play soccer and that they both model how to be good people. Kevin said something very poignant he said his Dad was his role model because he makes him feel good and teaches him lessons. He explained his Dad told him, " You might not have accomplished all your goals but still can do something really good. You have to fail first. You need to learn to loose". Johnny would someday like to be a soccer player, veterinarian, or surgeon. Kevin explained he would

like to be a doctor that helps people. Kevin described his reasoning, “So I can help other people. My Mom told me if I help people, I can save the world. We still have to keep people alive”.

Roxy and Zuzu

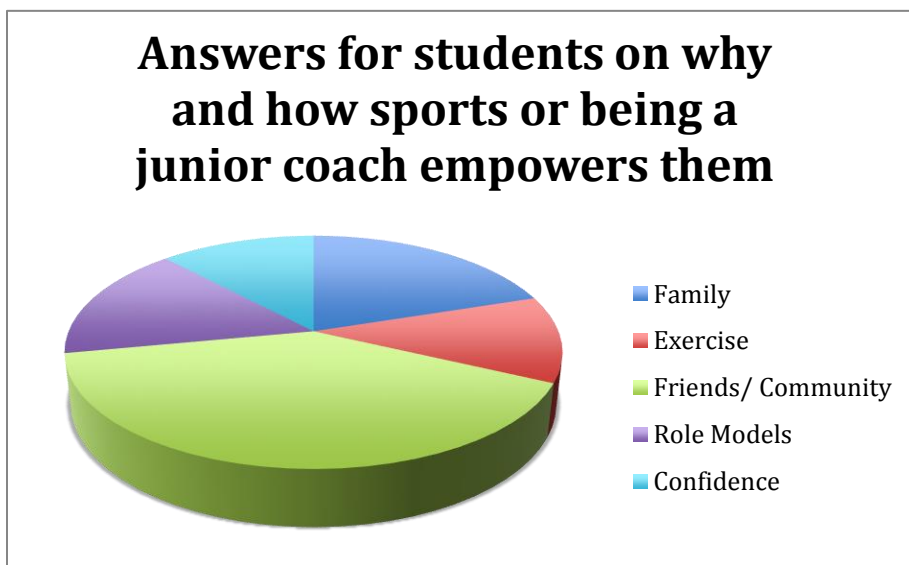
Roxy and Zuzu are 4th grade girls who are both Latina. Both girls have big hearts and are very smart and thoughtful. At meetings they always explain the importance of being responsible, doing the right thing, and caring about others. They aren’t necessarily strong athletes but like being a junior coaches because they can help others. Both agree that their perfect day at school would be a day where they could have free dress and a longer recess. Roxy backed up her statement, “ I read online that if kids play outside more, it will help them when they go inside and learn more”. They are tired so they can learn more she explained. Zuzu who likes fashion said her perfect day would be if she could wear hats or bring toys.

Roxy described her favorite sport as soccer because her brother and Dad played. It was a bonding sport for her dad and brother because often they would play soccer at the park together. Zuzu described her favorite sports as soccer and tennis. Her uncle taught her soccer and her Mom taught her tennis. Roxy who is very considerate of others and their feelings described she liked being a junior coach because of how important it is to help people. She said liked helping students make new friends, facilitating with the kindergarteners, making students “have a happy day at school”, and preventing bullying. She concluded helping people makes her feel better. Zuzu said she wanted to help kids and find friends. She described friends as very important and if students are lonely it is important to be a friend. Roxy said that both coaches and teachers are similar. Roxy explained, “A teacher focuses on you having a better future and a coach helps you stay healthy for the future. They should both be nice and strict because if teachers aren’t nice nobody would want to come to school”. She also described that teachers should really know their

students “so they know what and what not to mention”. Zuzu said both teachers and coaches most significant quality is to be nice to people.

Roxy described her mother who is a single parent and raising three kids by herself as her role model. She also said her Dad is a role model because he cares about the family and tries to be there. Zuzu said I was her role model and so was her friend Jesus because we know what to do when there are problems. Roxy said she wants to be an artist or president of the United States when she gets older. She explained she wants to help get poor people resources. She clarified, “just cause your wealthy doesn’t mean you are kind”. She also explained additional human right goals, “I want to help other countries get food and water”. They both described problems they see in their communities as people walking around hungry and alone. “We see homeless people and poverty” Roxy clarified to me. Roxy described she wished her education would eventually teach her how to pay her bills and taxes because she would need to know that when she gets older.

Figure 2: Data on the Power of Sports



I interviewed 14 students who all had their own individual story but also shared similar answers. I really wanted to study what made them like sports or being a junior coach for recess. The most popular answer was related to the ability connect with friends and community. The students used teams and leadership positions to build community with the friends they already had, help others or themselves make new friends, or compete on a team with friends. The other surprising answer was a sport was a nostalgic activity that reminded them of a family member or role model who had taught them how to play. Sports represented far more than just a game when the students could recall a memory of playing with family or close friends; it was a way to share memories and love. The other two answers that came up often were the importance of exercise and confidence. While students couldn't explain it scientifically they knew anecdotally that exercise made them feel healthy and happier after playing.

Summary

My absolute favorite part of this research was being able to interview my junior coaches. Some resounding themes resonated with me: teamwork, discipline, and leadership. The number one reason they loved sports was because they enjoyed the community and challenge of being on a team. They valued being able to help friends and overcome problems as a part of a team. On the contrary when they described their classroom or school they didn't think in community terms. Instead of wanting to help others in the classroom as they described when helping teammates on their sports team, school was seen as a competition to get the best grades or learn more than the next person. What surprised me was how many students described the importance of discipline. They continued to praise teachers or coaches who were "strict" because they liked being held to a high standard.

They enjoyed being a junior coach because it helped discipline them to be a responsible leader. I think many adults, coaches, or teachers want to be liked on a friend type level with students but these junior coaches admitted that they admired nice mentors but real models also were strict enough to discipline them or the class when they expected better. The last theme that stood out to me was the repeated excited tone around the opportunity to be a leader. Students liked being a junior coach because they enjoyed helping others and having responsibility. In Chapter Four, I will further delve into what the interview responses represent for an athletic program and how we can use these authentic responses to combine athletics, human rights, and empowerment in lesson plans.

Chapter Four**Discussion, Conclusion, Recommendations****Discussion**

It is clear that our education system is failing students in urban areas because of the unfamiliarity and inability to relate to the curriculum. Throughout my interviews with fourth and fifth grade students in the urban area of East Palo Alto they took pride in being able to help their community. They were excited to be a junior coach because they were able to help others make friends and organize games to make students happier. The interviewees expressed their love for athletics by mentioning how it was fun to compete with a community that has your back and shared a mutual love for the game.

As we enter a new age of technology, I can't help but envision a better education for our students. Soon computers, artificial intelligence, robots, and various "apps" will take many of the middle class jobs that we have today (Shewan, 2017). Our education system was designed to teach factory workers to be efficient and obedient but not to problem solve (Strauss, 2015) It is clear that we need to adjust our education system to our new reality and find unique, exciting, and relatable ways to teach problem solving. These interviews were encouraging because students showed the power that sports play in their life. Athletics are not just a hobby to them but instead an outlet to build community, a tool to develop leadership values, an outlet to compete, take risks or maybe even fail but with low stakes. The students felt that with sports a community was supporting them and in contrast the classroom felt like a stressful competition even if most students admired and respected their teacher.

I found the concept of intersectionality fascinating when interviewing my students. Where as classroom pedagogy is geared primarily toward a white elite perspective (Ladson-Billings, 2006) sports were seen for my youth as a place where anyone no matter their gender, race, or ability could not only participate but also excel. Students reminisced on their love for a sport not because they were good at it but because of the community or family bond it allowed them. This contrasted their explanation for school subjects; students would say something to the effect of “ I like math, because I’m good with numbers” but athletics were relished because it was fun to be part of a team or community. I also think sports would be a great place to talk about the idea of intersectionality and how some sports have not always been available to everyone. Sports could lead to a conversation about many topics relating to intersectionality, some examples being:

- The original Olympic games that excluded women
- Baseball that had the Negro Leagues for African American Players
- Homosexuality/Transgender Athletes in Modern Sports
- The Creation of the Special Olympics

Counter-Storytelling was an important part of the interview process. I wanted students to be able to share their own truths when discussing mentors, athletics, dreams, and school. Several students came up to me after and actually thanked me for being able to tell their story. I now can talk to them about their family, passions, or communities because I know so much more based on our interview. When they spoke I was also able to open up about myself which has lead them to be more comfortable to approach me. I also know which students to challenge for more effort and what students to support based on how they answered what types of traits they feel comfortable with in teachers and coaches. I think all teachers and coaches should begin the year or season

with an interview to establish those relationships and should continue this process with various check-in's though out the year.

Although the idea of interest convergence did not directly come up with the interviews I think this would be a noteworthy theme to explore. Several students said they wished they had baking classes or engineering class because they loved cooking and programing. The schools in East Palo Alto do not have the resources to provide any extracurricular activities like the ideas the students presented but I work at schools in wealthier areas that have these resources. At these schools in higher real estate areas they have access to band, robotics, engineering, sports clubs, gymnastics, and many other programs designed for students to pursue their passions. These resources and classes are often provided within the school budget or Parent Teacher Association's. Ironically and sadly the students who have the least means to be able to travel or afford to pursue their passions also aren't provided these resources at their school. The wealthier students have a huge advantage because not only can their families afford to provide more resources their schools have a larger budget to provide extracurricular activities as well. So even though Brown v. Board of Education ended racial segregation minority students still have unequal education (Bell, 1980). I think students understanding the concept of interest convergence and researching opportunities and organizations that will provide them resources for their passions can be incredibly empowering.

Some sport specific and relevant interest convergence topics to bring up with an HRE athletic program could be collegiate football and collegiate basketball. These athletes are primarily African American and in a billion dollar industry they receive no financial benefit but a scholarship to the school (Out of Bounds, 2017). The schools argue that they are providing a

free education while athletes dispute that they are working for free and risking their health to provide institutions billions of dollars in revenue (Out of Bounds, 2017).

The idea of a teacher or coach as facilitator came up several times throughout the interview. Almost all the students said they wanted their teacher/coach to be nice, authentic, welcoming, take time to get to know the student, and disciplined or strict to get the class to focus so they could learn as much as possible. Many students when talking about sports said they wanted to practice like the professionals learn advanced techniques, and they wanted a coach who would be able to help teach them these skills. When students spoke of their future career goals like being a doctor, engineer, writer, or various other passions they wanted a teacher and classroom that could give them these resources. I think it is so crucial that teachers or coaches find out these career goals and provide resources based on the individual to pursue their passions. A math, history, science, or writing lesson in school that was centered on the student's passion has the potential to be a lot more empowering than answering questions from a textbook.

One of my concentrations for this paper was on the transformational model of healing and how to use it. How do we create a human rights education that uses an athletic program to empower students who are living in communities that constantly endure trauma and witness human rights violations everyday? I specifically remember two students Roxy and Zuzu who spoke about the importance of helping the deprived people in their community get resources. They spoke of seeing homeless people walking around hungry or alone and how that they wanted to help them. Roxy went on further to describe that she wanted to be President of the United States because she wanted to help other countries get food and water. I think to truly empower Roxy, Zuzu, and other students in similar situations is to facilitate accurate information

that interests them, put them in leadership positions to problem solve, and then organize action to help with the problem.

With Roxy and Zuzu, as a coach or teacher I would provide age appropriate material on the problem. This would be an opportunity to discuss homelessness with sensitivity and discuss how many of these people are veterans or living with a disability. After facilitating information it would be key to have the students be put in small groups within the team or maybe the team as a whole to research ways they could help. It is essential that students are given the chance to problem solve and not just handed answers by the facilitator. Students liked being a junior coach because they were given an opportunity to lead and solve problems independently. After this research with the students, it is important to build community within the team. This could be a team fundraiser for an organization that helps the homeless population, a team bonding helping serve food at a homeless shelter, or as simple as a canned food drive but for real empowerment, I believe there must be an action step that directly helps the underserved population.

Conclusions

Through CRT, HRE, and research with my students the theme that really stood out to was the importance of students feeling as a part of a community. To create an education that is meaningful and empowering students need to be part of a community they trust. Athletics give such a unique opportunity to empower because it provides this necessary community. The number one reason why students enjoyed sports or being part of a sports team was because of the community in playing and competing in a shared interest together. Sports were often described as a flow state with that community, where students didn't have to worry about a test, their family problems, or studying. They were able to just play and problem solve without having to

worry. It felt more acceptable than a classroom to lose or fail because they had their teammates to support them along the way. I think that this community is incredibly valuable and should be challenged to be about so much more than just a sports program. Life lessons, individual and community problems, and outside interests can be discussed and acted on within these sports communities. This is not necessarily easy but can be done with a skilled coach.

What also stood out to me was the importance of a coach being balanced in teaching but also allowing room for the students to make their own decisions. Students loved being a junior coach because they were provided autonomy to lead and problem solve based on their instincts and trainings. A coach should teach the fundamentals and practice different game or life scenarios with the students but then provide space for the players to make their own choices. If athletes have communities and coaches they trust will support them even if they fail then they are much more likely to be confident in leading or following their dreams.

The power of counter-story telling was an empowering insight for me. These fourth and fifth grade students were incredibly profound and thoughtful when given the chance to share their story, thoughts on human rights, and goals for the future. Without being provoked several students discussed the dilemma of wanting a career that makes money but also helping others. One student even said, “Just because your rich doesn’t make you nice or a good person”. Many of them explained values that their parents taught them of how important it is to help others. It is important to provide an education that takes these strong values on why it is important to help others, gives students accurate information on how to help these specific communities, and advocates action to help others. Along the line of our educational system: students can grow up with competitive test taking, a capitalism mindset, and are part of a society that promotes being rich as the American dream and can forget these values in human rights and helping others. At

the end of the day HRE should empower students to help problem solve for communities and people they care about. If our youth develop strong skills in being able to problem solve and lead then they will have a limitless amount of opportunities presented to them, as they get older.

Recommendations

I believe that future studies with middle school, high school, and collegiate sports teams on how and why sports empower them should be done to get a better sense of the student-athletes as they age. I also plan to start a human rights athletic education program of my own and would like to study how the program impacts a student's ability to lead and take action on their dreams, as they get older. We need more research to measure the amount of improvement in confidence, grades, willingness to fail, and overall well being as students age with their HRE sports teams. It will be very valuable to study sports teams and coaches that pose daily human right exercises and conversation before or after practice with the students keeping a journal of their thoughts. It would be fascinating and significant to read a personal narrative of a student's growth over time.

Below are the questions posed at start of my research and my findings based on my interviews. I answer the questions with recommendations on what I believe is needed to create a positive athletic HRE program based on research and my experience through interviewing students.

1) What successful ways is HRE already being used in the classroom and how can we translate these techniques/benefits to an athletic program?

Some of the best HRE examples in my literature research were project-based learning combined with the teacher as a facilitator to students. This helped students find meaning in

learning and also have a space to ask questions with their community or teacher. My interviews found similar results; as students often expressed their favorite activities in class were science projects or comic book writing activities. Students enjoyed being presented a framework or problem, given a prompt and tools, and then given the space to find solutions. In the athletic realm we can provide students leadership opportunities and challenge them as well. When students spoke about why they loved sports they often said being able to face a challenge with a team as something that really empowered them. An athletic team creates an incredible opportunity to create a community and I think the coach has the opportunity to empower students to do more than just win games. Practices and team meetings should be used for more than just sport but also to discuss shared individual or community concerns and goals. Coaches can use this as an opportunity for athletes to counter story tell and find ways for the team to provide support with one another to take action. A practical example with would be a 5-15 minute check in or group discussion and the beginning or end of each practice and the coach following up with resources or an action plan to help relating to the problems or goals discussed.

2) What skills are students in urban communities wanting but not getting from school and how can we use an HRE athletic program to provide these?

Many students interviewed expressed they wanted additional information on how to learn more about their passions or career goals. A coach can have the opportunity to meet with individuals and the team to talk about these individual ambitions and then use the resources within the team or community. For example, if an athlete wanted to be a writer or doctor a coach could use the community resources available. Such as finding team parents who might have these professions, league sponsors who might be

corporations linked to these jobs, local community outlets that can provide information, or even find ways to link the sport and the profession as a way to peak interest. A sports team doctor or sports writer would be example for some of the students I interviewed.

3) What skills and knowledge are most needed in today's America and how can we provide these through an HRE athletic program?

We need students who are leaders, have strong values, are creative, and problem solvers. No longer is an education designed for factory workers appropriate with the technology we have today. Technological automation will take over many of the jobs that don't demand creativity or address unique or new problems. In addition to be able to solve problems it is important they have a grasp of human rights and awareness for people around the world. With globalization, the Internet, and social media there is seemingly more information accessible than ever and we are more connected as a world population than ever before. In my interviews all the students had career goals that would demand problem solvers and an understanding of human rights. These skills do not always get developed in a education designed around unfair standards, high stakes testing, and skewed textbooks. The more we can challenge students to research and take action with giving them the tools to find accurate and appropriate resources the better. A sports team that provides community that can help support a student and empowers them to problem solve is what is necessary.

4) What is the role of the coach, individual athlete, and teammates in creating a dynamic and empowering HRE athletic program?

Perhaps the most fascinating part of my research was hearing how much being a part of a team empowered students. All the students expressed feeling privileged, encouraged, supported, and positively challenged when on a team. Coaches were described during the interview to be at

their best when they were knowledgeable about the sport, nice people to be around, showed that they care about their players by asking questions about the students lives, and strict at times to make sure practices were structured. Athletes described that individually they loved the challenge of finding their role on the team; practicing to see how continuous hard work would help them improve, and being able to feel free to express themselves through playing.

Teammates were described as the absolute backbone and support system of the team.

Conclusion

We are at a fascinating time in education because the technology of the Internet combined with the convenience of smart phones, online social networks, and portable computers has made it easier than ever to access information. Being able to memorize facts or choose the correct multiple-choice answer does not have the same value it once had because of our new advances in technology. Instead, the research provided in this document shows that students need communities where they feel safe to take risks and asks questions. Students want teachers that are role models who know about them and put them in leadership positions. Students thrive in a network of peers that act as a support system and community when the student needs advice or encouragement. Sports teams and athletic programs have the potential to be an incredible tool to help educate with the challenges of today because of the community that is developed within a team. Athletes, parents, and coaches often share a passion for the sport, which creates a community that is so needed in a Human Rights Education. The coach should act as a facilitator of knowledge of not only about specifics of the sport but material that matters to the students after getting to know the team on both the individual and community level. Often in education and especially in urban communities school curriculum can marginalize students. Sports programs have the potential to empower by valuing the community and student needs.

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Appendix

HRE Athletics Practice Plan

Practice 1: Share your history with the game

Introduction (5-15 minutes)

- Coach Introduces why he coaches, who taught him the game, and his/her community within the sport.
- Ask Athletes to form small groups (2-3 people) and talk about why they enjoy playing, who first taught them to play, who is their community within the sport?
- Coach has players share responses.

HRE Community building Lesson (10 minutes)

- Coach explains the value of community** and creates a chart where the team shares examples of why a community is important to them (i.e. friends, connections, support, family, they are there for you no matter what).
- Coach explains that he wants this team to be a community and **has students give agreements** and also chart how they will treat each other (i.e with respect, acceptance, willingness to listen).
- Coach has **teammates sign the document** and takes a picture and emails the document to the students and guardians.

HRE Athletics Practice Plan

Practice 1: Share your history with the game

Future Practices :(FIRST 5-25 minutes of every practice)

Each practice or weekly the coach asks a community building question and takes notes answers to provide resources. Students can answer in groups, pairs, or individually. The goal is to empower the student to help and take action within their own community and get support from their team community.

Practice 2: Coach asks what skill you think you need to practice most to improve in your sport? Coach then asks what they need to improve most as a student?

Practice 3: Coach asks sensitively if they know anyone who has ever been excluded from their sport professionally (Baseball example could be the Negro Leagues) . Coach explains the significant actors who helped change this. Then coach poses who is being marginalized in their community and asks the team to brainstorm how they could help the community. (Resources provided below for this activity).

Practice 4: Students plan to help marginalized community with support within their own community (examples: fund raise, collect: supplies, toys, or cans, volunteer at shelter or hospital)

Practice 5: Students spend the practice participating in the community helping activity.

Resources

[List of Resources]

Listed after this document are three examples of a Human Rights and Sports Issue.

Evaluation

After this 5 week activity the team should feel empowered both individually and as a team because they created their own plan to help the community.

For future the goal would be for the students to lead conversations on what can be changed or helped in their community to better the lives of others.

HRE Athletics Practice Plan
Practice 1: Share your history with the game
<i>Keys</i>
Coach should be a facilitator but not provide all the answers. There must be an empowering activity that leads to action to help the community. The more of the team community that is involved the strong the bond will be within the team. The athletes should be able to lead discussions after week 5.

Resource 1: The history of the NBA color barrier

(Found and created by

<http://www.nba.com/history/season/1950-1951.html>)

1950-51 SEASON OVERVIEW

NBA's Color Line Is Broken

Clifton was the first black player to sign an NBA contract.

The NBA went from an unwieldy 17-team league to a more manageable 11 teams in

two divisions, with Minneapolis, Rochester and Fort Wayne reverting to the Western Division. The Eastern Division began the season with six teams, but Washington, which had lost Coach Red Auerbach a year earlier, disbanded after going 10-25.

The season also marked the first appearance of black players in the league. Chuck Cooper became the first black player to be drafted when he was chosen by Boston; Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton became the first to sign an NBA contract when he signed with New York, and Earl Lloyd became the first to play in an NBA regular-season game because the schedule had his Washington team opening one day before the others.

Philadelphia won the East by 2½ games, while Minneapolis bested Rochester by three games in the West. The Playoffs were a different story, however. New York blitzed Boston and barely edged Syracuse to reach the Finals, while Rochester, behind 6-9 Arnie Risen and backcourt star Bob Davies, defeated Fort Wayne and finally overcame Minneapolis to meet the Knicks in the Finals. For the first time, the NBA Finals came down to a seventh game and Rochester prevailed 79-75, in a close, exciting finale.



Resource 2: The Negro Leagues
(Found at created by www.Nlbn.com)



They Were All Stars: An Introduction and Overview of Negro Leagues Baseball

Key Features of Powerful Teaching and Learning:

(National Council for the Social Studies: "A vision of Powerful

Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social

Understanding and Civic Efficacy."

<http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful/>)

Meaningful: This lesson focuses on American history from

1880-1960, with special emphasis on 1920-1950.

Integrated: Students will engage the material using traditional means and technology.

Value-based: Students will learn and discuss the value of diversity.

Challenging: Students will come to understand the social conditions and race relations of American history in the first half of the 20th Century.

Active: Students will engage their listening skills for accuracy in gathering information.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject: Social Studies

Standards

NCSS Standards: I, II, III, V

ISTE Standards: 2, 3, 5

Missouri Standards: 2, 5, 6

Purpose/Rational/Introduction: This lesson will offer a general introduction and overview of African American baseball history, with the focus on Negro Leagues baseball, its major events, and important historical figures. The lesson can supplement materials while studying United States history from the Civil War to World War II.

Objectives:

1. Students will gain a basic knowledge of Negro Leagues baseball.
2. Students will identify the important individuals and events associated with Negro Leagues baseball history.
3. Students will be able to identify key vocabulary related to this period of American segregation.

Materials/Primary Resources:

- *They Were All Stars* (16 Minutes), Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and First Generation video, 1997.
- Handout review worksheet (attached)
- *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues*, by James Riley
- www.nlbm.com, www.baseballlibrary.com, www.baseballhalloffame.org, www.mlb.com.

Procedures & Activities:

Opening Activity [5-10 minutes]

- Ask students to write a list of some of their favorite or well know athletic personalities.
- Students can be motivated by “sports related” music playing in the background. (optional—*Jock Jams vol. 1*, *Jock Rocks*, or *Baseball’s Greatest Hits*)
- Review the lists with the class and ask each why they chose that person. Create a list on the chalkboard or a pad for everyone to see. You may list them in general order or, if you have enough familiarity with the athletes, separate the list based on the person’s ethnicity.
- Make a point after the list is complete to note which players are minorities.
- Critical thinking—Ask students to imagine how they could enjoy these sports without the presence of the minority individuals? Ask them to

try to imagine the minority players not being able to compete with and against the majority players listed in particular sports? Gather their feedback.

- Transition into the next activity by explaining that there was a time when separate opportunities existed for athletes to compete. Baseball was one of the most significant sports that, because of laws and social mores, was segregated.
- Show the film and review the handout (20-25 minutes). ***Note to students that they need to pay close attention to the film in order to complete the worksheet. Much of the information appears rather quickly.***
- After discussion, use the *Biographical Encyclopedia* and the web sites listed in the primary resources section to find additional information about the names featured on the worksheet. (10 minutes)

Use the following for lesson and discussion:

Show the film *They Were All Stars* (16:00 minutes) to the class. The film will give students a general overview of Negro Leagues baseball history, major events and major individuals involved. During the viewing, students will complete a worksheet featuring names of important people featured in the film. Students will match the names to the descriptions of the people in the film.

As the class reviews the worksheet, the teacher should promote further dialogue and discussion of the history. Students will then be assigned to retrieve additional information on the individuals using the websites listed in the primary resources section.

Using the web sites, the students should focus in on these key points:

- What was the person's full name?
- When and where was the person born?
- When and where did the person die?
- List of 3-5 points of interesting information about this person and why they are significant.

Conclusion:

Review the names and terms most noted with Negro Leagues baseball history.

Resource 3:**Biography of Famous Female athlete and Serena Williams and her Human Rights work**

(Found at created at <http://www.timeforkids.com/news/serena-williams/133521>)

Serena Williams

TFK 2013 Person of the Year Nominee

DECEMBER 05, 2013

By TFK Staff

MATTHEW STOCKMAN—GETTY IMAGES

Serena Williams became a professional tennis player in 1995 and has not slowed down since. Along with her older sister, Venus, Williams has dominated women's tennis for nearly two decades. This year was especially amazing for the all-star athlete.

Williams was born in Michigan in 1981, the youngest in a family with five girls. Her family soon moved to California, where she first learned tennis from her father on public tennis courts outside of Los Angeles.

Williams would practice for hours every day. In 1991, she joined the junior United States Tennis Association tour and ranked first in the age 10-and-under division. By 1997, just two years after turning professional, Williams was ranked 99 in the world.

Serena was the first of the Williams sisters to win a Grand Slam title. In 1999, she won the U.S. Open. At the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia, Serena and Venus won gold medals in the doubles event. Serena went on to sweep 23 Grand Slam titles during the decade. But in 2011, Williams had a blood clot in one of her lungs. Her health issues kept her out of the game for several months.

After taking time to recover, Williams came back strong. In 2013, she took her second French Open title, and first in more than a decade, and fifth U.S. Open singles title. She currently holds the most singles, doubles, and mixed doubles titles combined amongst tennis players, male or female. Williams had a total of 78 wins in 2013. At the age of 32, she continues to be at the top of the game, while many tennis athletes her age begin to wind down their careers.

Off the court, Williams serves as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador.

She also founded The Serena Williams Secondary School in Kenya, Africa. Williams continues to make appearances at schools and community organizations, particularly for at-risk students.

For her history-making wins and charitable work around the world, Serena Williams is a nominee for TFK's 2013 Person of the Year.

