PEDAGOGICAL CASE #8 (Short Version)

MPE in Youth Team-Sports: The New Zealand Rugby Approach

Nick is the coordinator of a youth football (soccer) organization. Several years ago he, along with the help of a few involved adults from his community, created a youth football development program for players aged 6-14. The program was structured so that in each age group, players would be selected for either an A, B, or C team depending on their skill level. While the A team would often travel to compete in tournaments against high caliber teams from other cities and towns, the B and C teams played in fewer matches and mostly participated in intense practice and training sessions. Despite the success of the top tier (A) teams, several of the development program coaches told Nick that they were having trouble finding kids to come regularly to play/train for the B and C teams.

In the third pedagogical case in our series, we briefly examined how the features of Meaningful PE can be used to frame long-term participation without compromising the athlete’s individual success using ideas from Norway’s approach to junior sport. Following a similar line of thought, in this case we draw upon specific ideas from the New Zealand All Blacks’ approach to junior rugby player development that align with certain features of MPE. The All Blacks’ grassroots approach to developing young players is impressive for the lasting effects it has had on the activity habits of rugby players in New Zealand. By prioritizing junior player participation and experience, the organization has not only been able to help a greater number of children experience the benefits of regular physical activity, but has also led to the luxury of having a larger talent pool of future professionals to choose from.

Buck Anderson, the All Blacks’ head of youth player development, suggested in a recent interview that junior coaches are encouraged to think about the aspects of sport that are meaningful to young athletes, which may serve as one way for Nick to positively change his organization’s approach. The All Blacks advocate for an approach that provides players with as much as opportunity as possible to play, which is based on the idea that when people sign up to be involved in rugby, they sign up to actually play, not just to train for it – they want to be players, not trainers. In the fourth case in our series, we used the metaphor of an equalizer to think about how the features of MPE can be integrated into PE and the importance of ‘adjusting the levels’ of different features to reflect the ‘pitch’ of a particular lesson. Although the features of motor competence and challenge may be at the core of Nick’s own personal philosophy (and that of the organization), they would do well to increase the emphasis on fun and social interaction. Importantly, in structuring their junior development program, the All Blacks made certain to speak to the children, not the adults, to understand what it was they wanted to do and what would keep them coming back week to week and year to year. If younger athletes tend to enjoy the fun and social aspects of sport associated with gameplay then it may be beneficial to start there.

Rather than selecting teams based on skill-level, youth rugby programs in New Zealand
are also moving towards creating a greater number of equally balanced teams so that
more kids have the opportunity to participate and develop their skills, which is something
Nick’s organization could also benefit from. Since young children’s football abilities are
often more closely related to their development than their actual potential in the sport,
creating equal teams serves as a way to maintain a high challenge level for all players.
This also provides ‘late developers’ with the opportunity to regularly participate as they
continue to develop their skills, but without the negative feelings associated with being
cut from a team. If coaches still find that the skill level differences between players are
very large or that certain players are not being adequately challenged, coordinating player
matchups between teams or using small-sided games can serve as additional ways to help
maximize these early opportunities for athlete development.

If the All Blacks’ approach to player development has taught us anything, it is that a
junior sport program’s value should not be assessed solely on how many championships
they’ve won, but more so on how many athletes come back to participate each year. With
this in mind, Nick’s situation allows us to see how emphasizing features that players
identify as meaningful such as fun and social interaction, without compromising those of
challenge and skill development can help to ensure a more meaningful experience for
players of all ages.

***Case developed by the LAMPE team based on:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4q4abWsyOu8