



Research Report of the Month
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Darwinism in the gym.

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THE STUDY

This investigation examined the social ecology of "free gym" as it was observed to occur during school lunch hour (the study also involved observation of after-school community settings for recreation, but that component will not be reported here). The authors argue that such extracurricular (school-based) opportunities for participation in physical activity and sport have high potential for impact on adolescents' values, beliefs, and subsequent behavior. This would be particularly true for youth in an urban setting where they increasingly are driven to seek safe indoor sites for physical play and sport. As physical education in many urban schools remains sex-segregated, such extracurricular activities also take on special meaning as venues for socialization with the opposite sex.

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

Shady Woods is an urban, public, co-educational high school with over 800 students, of whom 66% qualified for free or subsidized lunch. In all, 65% of the students were identified as African American, 25% as Caucasian, and the remainder as Asian, Hispanic, Native American or "other". Boys slightly outnumbered girls (51 vs. 49%). The gymnasium that served as the primary observation site consisted of a double sized basketball court surrounded by bleachers. When bleachers were retracted, that provided six backboards and, potentially, space for six 3X3 or 4X4 pick-up games. During the daily free-gym period (between 10:30 and 11:30 each morning), the single entrance to the gym was continuously monitored by a physical education teacher or coach who handed out basketballs that were the only activity equipment provided. Between 80 and 130 students occupied the gym at any point in time, the number constantly shifting during the period as students moved in from, or out to, other spaces and activities within the school. Presence was entirely voluntary, but the period was regarded by all as an important part of the school's extracurricular offerings. Faculty described it as "a cathartic outlet," one that was particularly important because it was available to all students who wished to be active, and because what they chose to do was determined by the students rather than by adults. Basketball, however, was the only activity ever observed during free-gym.!

DESIGN AND METHOD

As part of a larger two-year study, the investigators periodically visited free-gym at Shady Woods for five months, staying the entire period and occasionally beyond. They observed from the top rear row of the bleachers, or, from courtside when they wished to be closer to a particular group. They took field notes with a microcassette recorder, or, when that might have been intrusive, with a small notebook. Additional notes were made after exiting the building, and each evening the investigators made individual entries into a continuing computer log (a common strategy in qualitative research, used to record ancillary material such as hunches, questions, reminders for future action, problems encountered, etc.).

The focus for observation moved from general to specific over the five months. It began with: Who was there? What age and gender? What are they wearing? Who are they interacting with? What are they doing? How long did they do it? Where did they do it? As data accumulated, the observations were increasingly guided by more specific questions based on emerging interpretations. At courtside, informal conversations with students allowed questions to be asked and responses to be noted.

All field notes were fully transcribed and data were placed in the computer-based qualitative analysis system called NUDIST. Coded data then were grouped; first to create descriptions of the primary

events taking place during free-gym (the what), and subsequently as interpretative categories devised to explain the social machinery at work (the why). Then, the interpretations were refined (some were discarded and new ones added), tested for consensus, and fully described with appropriate examples from the data set.

RESULTS

A student-imposed hierarchy determined the nature and degree of participation each student could assume during free-gym. The rules of permissible behavior were implicit, but also absolutely clear. The rules were rigorously and promptly enforced. There was a small degree of mobility within the hierarchy, but this was available only after a period of apprenticeship at a subservient level – and only through display of physical skill and strict observance of the social rules governing play. On the floor, 90% of the participants were boys and almost all were African Americans. If girls played at all, it invariably was on the least desirable court where interruptions were frequent. Students who frequented free-gym period were loosely clustered into:

1. *Bullies*. Usually seniors and highly skilled males, when playing, their activity resembled an exhibition punctuated by much personal display and loud verbal attacks on other players. From the sidelines, their main activity was constantly trashing those on the court.
2. *Jousters*. Exclusively comprised of boys, their primary activity was disrupting as many games as they dared risk. Generally, not skilled, they rarely played.
3. *Posers*. Exclusively boys who often stripped to the waist and displayed their physique (sometimes adorned with gold chains), chinning on baskets, punching wall mats – and generally being ignored by all.
4. *Benchies*. Mostly boys, there always were 30-40 students who patiently waited for a chance to play. They arrived early, made their presence obvious to those on the court, and stood at the ready – with little success.
5. *Hangers*. Evenly made up of boys and girls, they came regularly to socialize, read, eat, and "hang out."
6. *Venerators*. All well-dressed girls who used free-gym to be seen, check out others, and make their presence felt by walking up and down the sidelines. Many of them made persistent efforts to catch the attention of a player whom they particularly admired.
7. *Contestants*. With the exception of three or four girls, these were all males. They ignored everyone and played with great intensity until the bell rang. They were confident of their place, highly competitive (often they were members of the school's varsity basketball team), and intolerant of anyone who trespassed the implicit rules. They took the best courts, used the most space, and often attracted a substantial audience of onlookers.

Free-gym was a male world, dominated by the skillful. There was no room for less able and less aggressive students to participate in a positive physical activity. With rare exceptions, girls were entirely marginalized into roles as nonparticipants. Adult supervisors never intervened in any way, and made clear that they thought it would be unwise (or impossible) to rock the boat of free-gym student culture. Based on interview data, Pope and O'Sullivan concluded that what happened every day in free-gym had the tacit (if not explicit) approval of the physical education staff. The real world of physical activity and sport during free-gym at Shady Woods seems to have been a long way from the idealized world in which enjoyment, learning, and access are available to all who seek them.

It would be tempting to interpret at least some of the observations at Shady Woods as a reflection of race and race-based cultural norms. I can report to you, however, that I have seen many of the same behaviors in affluent and predominantly Caucasian suburban schools (at all levels), and seen it displayed not just in the extracurriculum, but also in physical education classes. What the authors saw may well have been an extension of social learning (the authors call it "street literacy"), acquired in the neighborhood, but if that is so, then there must be similar "hoods" in places that are neither urban nor poor! My own guess is that age and gender are the core driving mechanisms behind Darwinism in free-gyms everywhere – not race, poverty, or class.

The authors might have left their work as a straightforward ethnography, a kind of "Street Corner Society" in the gym. Because they are educators as well as researchers, and because the venue was a public school and not just a street corner, they felt obliged instead to confront the moral questions raised by their work. I can do no better here than to quote their eloquent appeal:

As teachers, we have a moral responsibility to arrest socially chronic situations such as free-gym. While such a context is "free" of teacher authority, it cannot really be termed free unless all restraint, including that which is placed by dominant peers upon their less dominant peers, is removed. (p. 324)

As physical educators do you think we have that moral responsibility? What about the argument that it would be really difficult (and perhaps disruptive) to attempt interventions designed to change such deeply ingrained and socially reinforced behaviors? In schools, are teachers responsible for always modeling and insisting upon adult behavior when their students are not acting as adults should in a civil society? Do we even have the right to impose our values about positive social interaction when those values are consequent to our privileged position – and when the student culture holds different norms? Must we always practice a pedagogy that challenges the kind of reality present in the extracurriculum at Shady Woods, or is it all right for us to stand at the door of the gym and say, "Oh, that's just the way these kids are, they'll grow out of it"?

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