



Everyday Pedagogy: Lessons from Basketball, Track, and Dominoes

A bright, confident high school basketball star becomes embarrassed and withdrawn when asked to solve a math problem. What would it take, Ms. Nasir wonders, for him and others to flourish as successfully in a classroom setting as they do in their out-of-school learning contexts?

BY NA'ILAH SUAD NASIR

MIKE, an African American high school student and a basketball player at an urban public school in Southern California, is sitting with me in the coach's office at his high school. Normally, he is the picture of confidence.

He is tall, has a huge smile, and walks with a swagger that carries him down the hallways with as much grace as he shows on the basketball court. He is a leader on the team and often directs his teammates during the games.

Just a moment ago, I asked Mike how he calculated the average number of points he scored from the free-throw line. "Say, for instance," I asked, "that you take 11 shots from the line and you make 7 of them. What is your percentage from the free-throw line?" Mike answered me with his usual smile, fully attending and highly confident. "Well, if you had taken 10 shots and made 7, that would be 70%. But then you took that extra shot, and you missed it. So it would bring it down . . . to about 65%."

But Mike's confidence is fading fast, and now he is sinking into his seat, looking as if he could just disappear right from his chair. He looks at me sheepishly. "I'm not really good at math," he mumbles. In front of him is a math worksheet, and on top is the problem $7/11 = \underline{\quad}\%$. But Mike misremembers the algo-

rithm and divides 11 by 7. Then he doesn't know what to do next.

Mike was a participant in a study I conducted on thinking and learning across contexts, and he was not alone in his apprehension about math. Almost all of his teammates displayed similar patterns of response that indicated that they could think in complex ways about averages and percentages but did not apply that complex thinking to the school versions of problems involving these concepts.¹

In subsequent studies, I became concerned both with understanding these knowledge differences across contexts and with the kinds of teaching that gave rise to them. Clearly, Mike's difficulty had nothing to do with his ability to do the mathematics required. I wondered how out-of-school settings provided opportunities for young people to learn and develop in ways that some classrooms seem to struggle with. That is, how were teaching and learning organized in out-of-school settings? And how were young people offered access to a sense of themselves as competent participants in these practices?

In this article, I explore common characteristics of some out-of-school learning environments for African American students, drawing on findings from several studies of cultural and community practices — the game of dominoes, high school track and field, and middle and high school basketball. While Mike's story is an example of learning in a specific content domain, I focus here on the broader question of how students in out-of-school settings learn to be competent in those settings. The environments I studied had two critical char-

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acteristics: 1) participation in them was organized to support key psychosocial issues, such as belonging and identification; and 2) learning in them was scaffolded in multiple ways by expert participants.² I conclude by discussing potential implications for classroom learning that can foster the success of a wider range of students, including those like Mike who currently tend to be marginalized.

BELONGING AND IDENTIFICATION

I highlight four aspects of teaching and learning in out-of-school practices that support learners' sense of belonging and identification: fostering respectful relationships, making mistakes acceptable, giving learners defined roles, and offering learners ways to participate that incorporate aspects of themselves.

Fostering respectful relationships. In basketball and track, coaches spend a lot of time developing and supporting positive relationships with the young people in their charge. They make the team a place where everyone is accepted and everyone has a place. In basketball, while interactions between players can be competitive, coaches don't allow "put-downs" and often give positive reinforcement to players who support one another and behave in respectful ways. In track, the coaches not only attend to athletes' desire to feel comfortable, they actively work to foster relationships between athletes, suggesting to parents that they organize sleepovers with members of the team and taking the students out for food after practice or meets. These informal activities are more than just a kind gesture, and in interviews coaches discuss these actions as purposefully designed to make the team cohesive and more of a family for the students.

Making mistakes acceptable. In addition to being places where positive interactions and relationships are nurtured, basketball and track teams are also places where it is acceptable to make mistakes. For instance, in one interaction on a high school track team, an adolescent girl is learning to run hurdles, but she keeps knocking them over. After several tries (knocking over hurdles each time), she expresses her frustration at her poor performance out loud. The coach interrupts her lament. "Look here," he says. "You're going to be a hurdler. That was the best that you've ever gone over any hurdle. Did you feel how much speed you had when you came off? But you have to control that speed and when you get to the next hurdle, one, two, three, up, and out." He demonstrates for her, moving his own body. She asks a question, then walks back to the starting line and gets in line to repeat the exercise.

In this interaction, the coach took an incident that the athlete initially viewed as a failure and reframed it as a successful performance. In doing so, he made the environment psychologically safe for her. In this instance, psychological safety included being supported in the construction of a positive view of oneself and one's potential contribution to the learning setting — in this case, the track team.

Giving learners defined roles. In both track and basketball, athletes are not simply members of the team in general; they are members with particular (and formal) roles to play. In track and field, athletes specialize in such events as hurdling, sprinting, jumping, and distance running. In basketball, players are point guards or off guards, forwards or centers. These specialized roles mean that each athlete is responsible for contributing something slightly different to the team as a

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whole. Each has a different set of expectations and responsibilities. Because to some degree they are uniquely responsible for their given set of tasks, the athletes strongly identify with being a member of their specialized group. The assignment to a specific role reinforces an overall sense of expertise, belonging, and identification.

I should note, though, that athletes rarely have much say about which specialization they will take up. Rather, coaches typically assign these roles. However, the roles are in no way randomly assigned. Coaches assign positions based on an athlete's proclivities and skills. For instance, the female track athlete described above was assigned to be a hurdler, but this assignment was made in line with the coach's assessment of her skills and natural strengths. Nor are most athletes — with the possible exceptions of decathletes and utility players — expected to perform well in every conceivable aspect of their sport.

Offering learners ways to participate that incorporate aspects of themselves. Learners in out-of-school activities sometimes talk about the importance of feeling connected to an activity because it gives them opportunities to be themselves within it. This feeling may be heightened in sports because the coach assigns roles that match a player's skills and personality. Although roles also exist in dominoes, they are less formal and

are mutually constructed by the players. For instance, some players are leaders or teachers, while others are learners/novices, jokesters, or rule keepers.

One basketball player spoke explicitly to researchers about feeling that basketball was the place where he could best express who he really was. He said:

Basketball to me is like an art form. The better I am in myself, the way I play describes who I am, you know. If it's dunking on somebody, going up strong and powerful, . . . I'm aggressive and I'm powerful and I'm really straightforward. But if it's sort of like a spin move, a finger roll, it shows finesse.

This comment illustrates the sense on the part of this player that basketball is a place where he not only learns, but where he expresses himself through his basketball activity.

Furthermore, in addition to the formal roles described above, each player also has an informal social role. Such informal roles tend to build on who the players are and a shared sense of the ways that a particular athlete acts to support the collective effort — as a motivator, a leader, a role model, or a teacher. These informal roles support a sense of belonging, for they allow students to feel that who they are matters to the success of the activity.

SCAFFOLDING FOR LEARNING

Findings across a range of these out-of-school practices show that these learning environments offer multiple kinds of scaffolding for success. That is, students are offered multiple ways of learning and accomplishing tasks. Below I discuss three kinds of scaffolds.

1. *Ongoing evaluation and correction.* In the out-of-school practices that I studied, while there were no formal tests, adult leaders engaged in ongoing evaluation and correction — usually conducted on the spot as the activity unfolded. This was clear in the track example presented above: the coach interrupted the flow of activity to offer immediate constructive and evaluative feedback, after which the athlete returned to the back of the line to try again. Similarly in dominoes, partners often respond during the play of the game with a correction or with supportive feedback.

In track, this feedback often occurs during all-day meets, when coaches and athletes have opportunities for extended interaction. After each race, the coach can ask students watching in the stands to evaluate the performance of their teammates. And when athletes return to the stands after their events, they are asked to evaluate their own performance.

Similarly, in dominoes, evaluation occurs not only during the flow of play but also at the end of each game in a postmortem analysis, in which players debrief the game and interpret and reinterpret pivotal plays they made with their partners. In basketball, the coach engages in evaluative conversations with players during downtime (e.g., on bus rides or in the locker room) and maintains a constant stream of feedback as needed during practices and games. Such routinized and regular feedback and evaluation both normalize the giving and receiving of evaluation and provide ongoing information about improving one's performance. This feedback also helps students monitor their own performance. It should be noted that there are multiple opportunities for athletes to practice and improve, which means that the stakes for an error-free performance at any one time are relatively low.

2. *Access to experts and learning endpoints.* Observation of expert practice as a learning strategy was apparent in the earlier example, when the hurdler-in-training was given access to the thinking, evaluation practices, and even proper body movements of the coach, as he demonstrated them for her. In the following example, a novice domino player has access to the play of more expert players, which he uses strategically to learn by observation.

David is in third grade and is very new to the game of dominoes. As a beginner, he simply wants to be able to put down a piece appropriately when it is his turn. He has a rudimentary notion about matching numbers, but how to use matching as a means to create a play in the game is not clear to him. When it is his turn to play, David holds out the 5-3 domino and taps the table with it, indicating for his partner Timothy to take it. Timothy takes the domino from him and asks, "Where do you want to play it?" David motions ambiguously (pointing to all of the board in a circular motion) and says, "Play it right here." Timothy plays the 5-3 on an appropriate tile. David's turn is over.

Here, David actively orchestrated a situation in which he could observe the play of a more expert player, thus creating his own opportunity to learn. We see in this example how the teaching and learning structure of out-of-school practices is facilitated by the presence of both relative novices and relative experts. When problem solving is distributed, it is highly likely that one can find a more knowledgeable helper. The presence of a wide range of ages and experience levels also means that one can have a vision of the activity not simply at the next level above one's own, but also at even higher levels of expertise.

In dominoes, young people often play with older

family members, from siblings to grandparents. In other practices, such as track and basketball, coaches purposefully create social networks so that newcomers have opportunities to observe both other novices and experts play. For instance, in basketball, the second-string team regularly watches the first string play. And everyone observes the play of those at the highest levels of expertise, college and professional players. In addition, high school players tend to know college players who graduated from their own schools and have gone on to higher levels of play. Coaches regularly tell stories about athletes they have coached who have gone on to success on college teams.

3. *Teaching (and learning) as a normal part of the structure of practice.* Since feedback is ongoing and participants have access to the activities and strategies of more expert participants, teaching and learning become ingrained as a natural part of the process of participation. In part, the teaching and learning are in the service of other goals, such as scoring points, winning games, or becoming champions. However, the important point is that teaching and learning in these practices simply become a part of what one does as a participant. As a novice, an individual might do relatively more learning than teaching. Then later, as an expert, the same individual is likely to do more teaching. In all of these practices, newcomers come to understand that their ability to learn and teach is very much related to their success and expertise in the practice.

In sum, learning in settings outside of school is supported both directly and indirectly. It is supported directly by the provision of access to information and knowledge, along with the tools, strategies, and resources that enable one to learn something one does not already know. It is supported indirectly through the creation of a supportive environment in which a learner's competence is not at stake, because teaching and learning are simply a part of the practice.

AND IN SCHOOLS?

Should any of the features discussed here be a big surprise to educators? Not at all. Studies on the effective teaching of students in schools repeatedly stress the importance of supporting students' sense of themselves as capable learners and helping them build solid relationships with teachers and peers.

The findings from learning settings outside of school do alert us to the critical social, relational, and interactional dimensions of all learning settings. At some level, these aspects of learning settings can seem obvious, but they are too often forgotten in the frenzy of

high-stakes testing and in policies that overlook the social aspects of teaching and learning and are solely concerned with the "right" inputs and outputs.

Does this mean, then, that I am advocating that teachers and schools make schooling more like out-of-school practices? Yes and no. On one hand, I have no reservations about arguing that schools should be places where students feel psychologically safe and have a sense of belonging and personal identity. Settings for effective learning nurture students emotionally and psychologically, as well as cognitively.

It would be naive to propose that these psychosocial aspects of out-of-school learning environments can be imported into school settings wholesale. Indeed, some would argue that one of the major purposes of schooling is the sorting of students into successes and failures.³ Such a sorting function may inherently be antithetical to providing the kind of scaffolding that assumes that all students are capable of learning the necessary content.

Furthermore, for many marginalized students, making school more like learning settings outside of school won't necessarily equalize the pervasive differences in achievement and resources. These students and their schools are wrestling with multiple forms of inequity, both locally and in society more broadly. One important barrier to achieving such equity outcomes in schools is the continuing stereotyping of students of color with respect to learning. It has been found that students internalize such racialized messages about who they are and what they can learn.⁴

Nonetheless, what we learn from out-of-school learning offers a reminder of the importance of attending simultaneously to the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of learners. Schools should be places where students are valued, where their participation matters, where they are viewed as capable, and where they have access to a wide range of supports for their learning.

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