



Young Athletes

Site Visits to Africa

January 2013

SPECIAL OLYMPICS YOUNG ATHLETES

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As we document the adaptations made to the Young Athletes program and the effectiveness of the YA program in five developing nations, we are also looking at the broader impact of YA on children, families, and communities. Through our visits to Kenya and Tanzania we met children and families whose lives were overwhelmed by the stigma associated with disabilities. It's hard to imagine, but in Kenya and Tanzania it is not uncommon for parents to hide their children with disabilities in their homes because of the shame associated with disabilities. Even if these parents are brave enough to venture out of the home with their children with disabilities, they very well may be denied the use of public transportation because of their child's disability.

Upon returning from our visits to Kenya and Tanzania, we realized YA provides opportunities that impact the child beyond motor skill development. Below we provide a glimpse into the people

and the culture of these countries.

Kenya

On our first day in Kenya, we met our university partners to drive to the first site visit at Little Rock School. To get to the school, we drove through Kibera, the largest slum in Kenya, located on the outskirts of Nairobi. We were taken aback as we drove through Kibera. We became acutely aware of the poverty that defines this area which is home to over one million Kenyans. Many of the small huts which serve as homes did not have roofs or doors. Animals, children, and adults dug through mounds of trash. There were huts set up as businesses that were selling small goods, providing medical care, or providing other services such as warm lunch, sewing, and shoe repair. Goats and chickens roamed the streets as people of all ages walked by with mounds of potatoes, coal, or timber on their heads or backs to sell.



When we arrived at the site where the Young Athletes program was being implemented, we were once again taken aback. Little Rock School is located across the street from the Kibera slums, which is where the children participating in Young Athletes were from. Even though none of the children were permitted to attend the school, one room was loaned out to the leaders of the Young Athletes program for three days a week. For many children, it was their first time they went to a school, rode a bus, and left their home.

At Little Rock School, we walked into a small room where the Young Athletes session was in progress. About 10 mothers were present watching their children complete the motor activities. Our Kenyan partner introduced us and then discussed with parents the impact of the Young Athletes program on the motor and social development of children with disabilities. She later communicated to us that most of the parents have limited education and know very little about motor development or children's development in general. For example, they are not familiar with certain milestones such as when a child should first begin to walk or talk. She informally educates these young mothers as they watch their children complete the motor lessons, and she also encourages parents to participate with their children.

It became clear throughout this session that Young Athletes may have a broader value than we initially anticipated in these countries. Young Athletes provides informal education for parents about their child's

development and it facilitates a relationship between the child and the parent, a relationship that might not exist because of the predominant cultural belief that children with disabilities are useless and worthless to parents. During Young Athletes, parents slowly joined in, filling the room with deafening squeals of laughter. Our Kenyan partner indicated that for some mothers, it might have been the first time they played with their child.

Additionally, Young Athletes facilitates socialization and communication among mothers of children with disabilities. In Kenya, we were told that, not only is the child with a disability stigmatized, but the family is stigmatized as well. Some families become the targets of insults and gossip, resulting in isolation from their village or community. The family becomes *that* family and becomes outcasts of the community. Young Athletes (YA) provides ways for families of children with disabilities to connect and share experiences and challenges they have faced.

Tanzania

We found similar compelling stories as we continued on to Tanzania. At Pugu Secondary School in Tanzania, one mother told us about her son, Kingston. "When Kingston first began YA, he was very quiet, and the only sounds he would make were animal-like. I was amazed when Kingston began speaking more and the teacher reported that he began cheering for his fellow Young Athletes." We were told that most parents have only heard what their children cannot do. As a result, parents of a child with a disability often do not believe their child is capable of

learning, so many parents are surprised to see the skills their child is gaining through Young Athletes.



When parents see their child learning how to jump or catch a ball, their perception of their child is altered, and they may be encouraged to play a more active role in their child's life. We heard other stories about how children developed self-help skills through Young Athletes—they learned to tie their shoes or put on their Young Athletes shirt. Young Athletes has the potential to improve more than the motor development of children with disabilities— it can alter parents' and communities' perceptions of children with disabilities.

Cultural Insights

One poignant observation captured the importance of Young Athletes in the east African cultures of Kenya and Tanzania. Throughout the trip, we participated in numerous traditional communal activities. Prior to and after meals, we participated in a community hand washing ritual. During a meal, we enjoyed the traditional meal of eating Ugali, a maize based food, from a common bowl. At the close of the YA program at Pugu Secondary School in Tanzania, we watched as the YA leaders called all the children together for a closing song and dance. The children stood in a circle holding hands and the YA leader began to sing in Swahili. The children, smiling ear to ear, full of energy, joined in. The YA leader took the hand of one of the children, Sonia, and brought her into the center of the circle. The leader began to dance and, grinning sheepishly, Sonia imitated the dance putting her hands in front of her body and rocking back on her heels. Her eyes lit up as she danced and she gained a confidence that we had not seen before. Sonia rejoined the circle,

and each child had a chance to step in the middle to dance. There was sheer joy on the faces of the children and some looked surprised as they participated in a traditional tribal group dance.

When commenting on how much they must love doing this dance, the YA leader said, "Well, you must understand, these children had never done this before. They had never been allowed by their village, because they were not accepted as part of the community." It was a startling realization: the need for our research team to understand children with disabilities in their culture and community through a non-Western lens. In doing so, you immediately realize that both the Kenyan and Tanzanian societies have their roots in a communal tribal culture. They participate in many daily communal activities such as hand washing rituals, eating out of a common bowl, and communal dancing. Because of the communal nature of the society, when children with disabilities and their families are shunned and excluded, the sense of isolation is acute. Thus, the opportunity to participate in a traditional dance or hold hands with someone or make a friend or to wear a Young Athletes shirt all signify *belonging*; all of these small moments confirm to a group of children and mothers that *they belong*. Being a part of YA creates a sense of belonging in a place where belonging and community is at the core their culture.

As previously mentioned, in both Kenya and Tanzania, we were told that the schools (Little Rock and Pugu) provided space for the children to participate in Young Athletes for 1-2 hours a week. However, none of the children

participating in Young Athletes could attend these schools. Although primary education is mandatory, very few children with disabilities attend school because schools do not allow children with disabilities to enroll, particularly children with intellectual disabilities. Bringing children with disabilities and their families together for Young Athletes may represent a foothold in the early childhood community for young children with disabilities.



While there is a renewed focus on early childhood education in developing countries, there are rarely adequate funds for programs for young children with disabilities or there are no programs. Notably, YA leaders from Kenya and Tanzania have asked the staff of CSDE to return to provide ongoing support as they continue to learn how to run evidence based programs and provide long term commitment to further developing the YA programs to include training of YA leaders and family members. In addition, they have asked Paddy to return to Kenya, to meet with the Ministry of Education to discuss the possibility of introducing YA into schools around Kenya as a motor program for young children with disabilities.

Next Steps

While we continue our site visits to Venezuela and Romania, we have already begun to think about the next steps for YA in terms of expanding/improving materials, programming and research.

Develop an Adaptations Guide

Our present study is documenting how YA is adapted in five countries. From our observations and recordings of adaptations in these five countries, a guide could be developed to help other countries make YA culturally relevant. Other suggestions include building an on-line database of translated YA materials: the YA Curriculum, the YA Motor Checklist, YA Progress Monitoring Chart, and other resources. A guide for adapting the YA program and improving the accessibility of materials will increase the likelihood of implementation of the program around the world.

Develop Family Resources

Leaders from Kenya and Tanzania indicated that parents of young children with disabilities often have challenges adjusting to having a young child with a disability and have limited knowledge about child development. Providing information on specific topics related to child development will give support to family members and empower them to become more invested in motor play with their children and YA. Suggestions include creating materials informed by the CDC and other agencies/research centers that support the understanding of developmental milestones for children birth-age 7, the sequence of motor development, and common early responses to having a child with disability.

Build Upon Progress Monitoring and Assessment Tools

It is critical to build upon the newly developed tools to ensure accurate assessment and high quality programs. To that end, SO leaders have provided suggestions to improve these tools such as including pictures and/or video of the skills assessed in the YAMC to ensure that testers know exactly what skills are tested as well as providing training for the YAMC (e.g., on-line video, a webinar) with information about how best to structure testing.

Expand the YA Curriculum

Like teachers in the US, SO leaders from Kenya, Tanzania and Venezuela have indicated the need to expand the Young Athletes curriculum in two ways: Firstly, it was suggested that YA include more physical activities so that children are given the opportunity to build upon newly acquired motor skills. Secondly, it was also suggested that the current YA program be used with preschool age children (ages 3-5) and that unit eight be expanded into a sports program for school age children (Kindergarten, grades 1 and 2) with age appropriate games such as T-Ball and three person soccer. Expanding the YA curriculum will bridge the gap between motor play, physical activities, and sports.

Conduct a Longitudinal Study

Follow the children who participate in the Young Athletes program in other countries to assess the impact of YA on

- The child: his motor development and readiness for education*
- The family: involvement of the parent in the child's development*

c) The community/country: changes in community response or policies across time that result from Young Athletes

Remember Inclusion

Some countries are just beginning to grapple with bringing young children with disabilities into the educational community. Therefore, it is important that we remember the broader goal to include children with disabilities and their families in all aspects of a normative life. In response to this persistent global push towards a more inclusive society, further collaboration and research is needed to support these efforts using YA as a vehicle for change. Suggestions include taking advantage of early education initiatives and taking advantage of an invitation by the SO Kenya leader for the research team to meet with the Minister of Education to determine how we can be a resource.



The Young Athletes program is breaking new ground in several countries around the world. Our CSDE team will continue to document the various ways in which YA is adapted in each country and continue these collaborative efforts with international experts, SO leaders and their university research partners to maximize the impact of the Young Athletes program on young children with developmental disabilities and their families.