



The Quest for Mastery

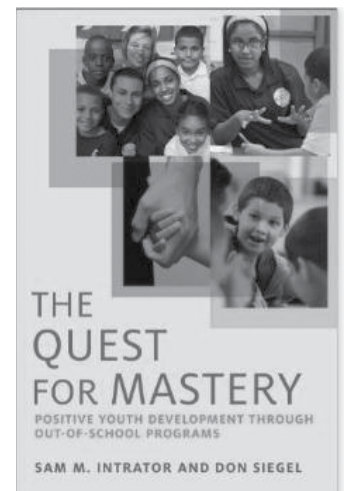
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Intrator, S., & Siegel, D. (2014). *The quest for mastery: Positive youth development through out-of-school programs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

With low graduation rates affecting many communities, afterschool programs serving at-risk youth look for ways to close achievement gaps and level the playing field for all youth. Intrator and Siegel investigated how teaching youth to master a sport could help close the achievement gap by developing “leadership, communication, and conflict resolution skills” (p. 28). Both authors were interested in finding ways to “bridge the economic, educational, and social division” (p. 177) in an economically challenged community in Massachusetts.

This book provides a detailed account of the interviews, observations, research, and successes and failures that led to the development of Project Coach, a program that helps youth gain life skills through mastery of a sport. Project Coach also empowers and employs teenagers to become coaches and academic mentors to elementary school youth in their community. A deliberate and focused approach to teaching a sport can help youth develop skills they need for success in school and beyond.

In the development of Project Coach, the authors each followed their own professional interests. Intrator was interested in “how people develop expertise and the role that coaching plays in overall development” (p. 8).



Siegel was interested in “how youth engage or disengage, particularly in urban schools” (p. 8). Together the authors, both professors at Smith College, set out to explore emerging trends in out-of-school time programs that teach mastery of a sport—programs that focus more on “super-cognitive” or “soft” skills than on academic learning. Project Coach evolved from insights gained from 10 years of interviews, observations, and lessons learned from other successful sports-based programs. Intrator and Siegel learned from what those programs were doing and implemented the strategies they felt would work in Project Coach. What they found was that successful programs did not just teach youth how to play the target sport. They “infused learning, teaching, and socialization into the process of engaging in the activity” (p. 48).

According to Intrator and Siegel, youth learn the skills for success over time through a five-part process including a community of practice, a mastery mindset, intrinsic motivation, enhanced social capital, and transfer of skills. Detailed examples and supporting research explain how each of the five parts is essential in helping youth develop vital life skills. For example, one youth who was introduced to a new sport said, “I had no idea what I was doing, but I stuck with it . . . and I learned that if I stick with something I will get better at it and can get somewhere” (p. 85).

The book first explores how afterschool programs differ from schools and how they engage youth in educational experiences. The next few chapters examine the structures that need to be in place for successful program implementation and youth engagement. Chapters 4–7 examine four exemplary programs, highlighting how they help youth master activities and make a commitment to the program. The final chapters explain how to help youth transfer the skills they learn in afterschool programs to other areas of their lives. The authors conclude that, if youth are fully engaged in mastering an activity, they develop confidence, learn to regulate their emotions, develop positive social norms, and gain a sense of belonging in their community.

Potential audiences for this book include afterschool program directors, university educators, and community leaders interested in developing sports-based programs. The authors provide specific criteria and strategies for building a sustained and successful program.

Although the book is filled with anecdotes and interview quotations, some sections are a bit dense. The book’s heavy theoretical and research-based emphasis can help the reader understand the intellectual framework but can also distract from the authors’ main point. By providing insight into how afterschool programs can better serve our nation’s highest-need youth, the book leaves the reader with a feeling of hope that its framework can help in closing the achievement gap.