



# Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

## **Teaching Character: Competition and Collaboration in School Sport**

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Sport in schools has traditionally been a place with competition encouraged using a zero-sum approach where the winner takes all. In many environments, this has driven sport educators to prioritise the outcome of competition over the development of people. With a world increasingly focused on nationalistic and self-centred goals it is important that we use all educational means to help develop global citizens who value collaboration *with* 'opposition'.

The literature on educational collaboration focuses on a student-to-student or a teacher-to-teacher approach in the classroom, with a gap as to how intra-school collaborative approaches may benefit the learning of students. A more inconspicuous gap exists in the literature on inter-school collaboration around sport. An inter-school collaborative approach to sport may have the potential to develop character that will enable students to flourish in an environment where the other team or competitors are seen as equal partners rather than as an opposition alone. This article will describe practical applications of sport collaboration including the sharing of team information, inter-team feedback during competition and a constraints-based approach to coaching, with all methods rooted in the science of character education.

Collaboration is profound because the "demands of a shareable pedagogy challenge us to devise those practices that will implement a common experience" (Kaplan, 2014).

Innovation is therefore key to developing scenarios where both teams in a competitive situation have appropriate challenge. This can be difficult to achieve with individuals of differing strengths making up each team. It is therefore important to find the right challenge for the individuals involved as well as the team. This has been done by using a constraints-based approach (Williams and Hodges, 2005; Shuttleworth et al., 2010).

Constraints placed on individuals during game play restrict their advantages and challenge them to find new ways of succeeding while offering team-mates and opposition a more appropriate challenge themselves. Team selection may be adapted to support this with players relocated out of their favoured positions to have less or a different impact upon the game.

A constraints-based approach relies on coaches and teachers reflecting *during* competition to adapt to meet the needs of the situation. The non-linear learning process means that

progress will be 'messy', and the best plans will need to be adapted mid-competition to gain the best outcomes (Schollhorn *et al.*, 2012). One-sided games are proven to have little positive effect on the development of either the winning or losing side, and importantly, the focus should be on *all* students involved in sport rather than just those the coach is traditionally responsible for on her team. Collaborating with the opposition means the game may be highly competitive with the result undecided until as close to the end of the game as possible, one recognised hallmark of a great game.

Kaplan (2014) explains how collaboration "stimulates educators to think about pedagogy in terms of what we share with others". In environments where winning takes priority over development, teachers and coaches are reluctant to share information with opposition to maintain a competitive advantage. This replaces the emphasis on educational development with one focused on the outcome. Bishop (2020) persuades us that this short-term thinking isn't conducive to long-term benefit. For some schools who are in a position to share video footage of their teams in competition, doing so with a future opposition before you play gives the opposition a tactical advantage but also encourages both teams to change the way they prepare for that game. It stimulates a new problem-solving approach that is driven by a conscious decision by the teacher or coach to share. This relies on the schools involved agreeing what the educational and developmental purpose of sport is at this level.

Schools have a vital role in developing social capital and cohesion. Putnam's (2004) notion of 'bridging capital' helps to explain the influence that schools have in developing connections between different social groups whether that is within the school or outside of that immediate community. Sport has a unique position in schools with regular opportunity to connect with other schools in competition. Inter-school sport collaboration may lead to wider scale cooperation between schools to use their resources to support each other's needs. Indeed, "without collaboration... we cannot hope to [meet the needs] for a prosperous state" (Hunter, 2023).

The idea of an interdependence between schools should lead us to work together rather than to simply provide opposition for each other. To be the best we can be takes a twin mindset which both looks to improve opposition while improving ourselves, and to focus on the long-term rather than the short term. The concept of only realising your potential if

those around you reach theirs is known in some southern African cultures as 'Ubuntu' and is recognised in elite sport within a team, but less so between teams. Intentional planning that focuses on the aims discussed above brings with it the potential to change the experience of all those playing sport, re-routing it away from a result-focused success metric towards an emphasis on developing the character of all. It starts from a foundation of coach and teacher empathy and a generally increased awareness of others.

Sport is often called a microcosm of society. In a world where distrust is rife, learning and progress cannot flourish (Kaplan, 2014). Positive inter-school relationships are a means of promoting trust between groups of students who may see each other as opposition rather than as a vital part of their own development. To thrive we must develop relationships and connect with others. To promote collaboration between schools we need a shared purpose and then to establish a shared vision (Sutton and Shouse, 2016). I hope this article will help to start conversations between teachers and sports coaches on how schools can work together to use sports to develop students *from both sides* and to help create a generation of global citizens who will look outside of their immediate environment or local community and see others. Sport provides the opportunity to balance intense competition *with* collaboration in a way that other areas of school life cannot.

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