An Analysis of Future Coaches’ Emerging Dispositions on Social Justice: The Wooden Effect

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Analyzing future coaches emerging dispositions on social justice: The Wooden Effect

Brian Culp
Abstract

This study explored the extent to which an archetype presented through a non-fiction text could impact aspiring coaches’ (AC’s) views on social justice. Journaling on issues related to inequity represents a valid method used to engage students in critical-democratic education as it values divergent and dialogical inquiry, open-mindedness and alternative pedagogical approaches to instruction. Over a three year period, forty-three aspiring coaches at a Midwestern university were studied in three intact foundations courses. Results indicated significant changes in AC’s philosophies on social justice, how they recognized inequities in their work and emerging perceptions of inequity when examining sport processes. It is thought that the use of critical approaches to social justice in pre-professional training could assist aspiring coaches as they meet the needs of the individuals they will impact.

Keywords: sport literature, archetypes, coaching education, diversity
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Social justice has garnered attention in recent years as a means whereby all groups are afforded full and equal participation in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. In this framework, there are social actors who “have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live” (Bell, 2010, p.21). However, one question that has not been answered sufficiently in coaching education literature is how to develop social justice mindsets into those being prepared to coach individuals from diverse backgrounds. A glance at recent occurrences such as FIFA’s struggle to combat racism, various attempts to promote acceptance for GLBT athletes in sport and the global challenge of providing safe and fully resourced playing fields for lower income communities, are a few of the issues that underscore the rationale for work in this area.

Dover (2013) astutely describes how teaching for inclusiveness has emerged from a rich history of equity oriented education reform in the United States that is noble in intent. This teaching encompasses democratic education, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, culturally responsive education, and social justice education. It could be argued that coaching sport with a social justice lens is similarly noble. Like teaching, exemplars of the best coaches actively create a climate that promotes equity and respect for the values and viewpoints of others. In the United States, these coaches are regularly considered to have almost mystical characteristics, as their accomplishments transcend the playing field and impact society. Thus, they move into another persona—that of archetype. This research outlines a process whereby aspiring coaches in a foundations class were taught using the iconic coach John Wooden as an archetypal teacher for social justice.

Archetypes as a theoretical framework
Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the founder of analytical psychology, defined archetypes as a set of universally understood symbols, patterns of behavior, terms and models by which symbols are created, patterned or emulated. Innate, archetypes stem from universal psychic dispositions that are components of the collective unconscious and inform, organize and direct human thought and behavior. Archetypes are represented in forms such as philosopher, judge, parent, counselor, or master teacher.

Specific to the archetype of teacher, Mayes (1999) notes that great educators who transcend their jobs, have ontological care for their students. They are not mechanical in their actions, but distinct in instructing. As such, they are mentors who have ‘ultimate concern’ for those who look to them for guidance, insight and awakening. Additionally, great teachers care about students’ emotional states, spiritual dispositions, and the processes that shape their learning.

As alluded to in the introduction, superlative coaches are known as memorable and remarkable teachers of impact. Many have transcended their respective sport. Few however have impacted society like John Wooden. A full examination of Wooden provides an appropriate archetype for the teaching of social justice. His background, persona, philosophy, and ability to negotiate challenges during the midst of a turbulent period in American history provide an exceptional foundation for discourse on inequity. For the purposes of understanding the rationale and scope of the research presented in the next few pages, it is first necessary to discuss John Wooden as an archetypical teacher for social justice.

**John Wooden as an archetype for social justice**

The scope of this paper does not allow for a full biographical overview of John Wooden (see Wooden & Tobin, 2003). However, a brief deconstruction of central key events in
Wooden’s life that may have influenced his feelings on equality and later, social justice is appropriate. Wooden, born in Hall, Indiana in 1910 would be provided by his father Joshua with his first set of core values and model for behavior:

“My father had great inner strength. He was strong in his moral principles, values, and ideals, and like any good father he wanted to instill them in his four sons…He was a good man, strong and positive, who wouldn’t speak ill of anyone. Dad was quiet, but when he did say something, he said something. He was the kind of man I set out to be. He was the model” (Wooden, 1997, p. 6).

Barely in his early twenties, while serving as a high-school English teacher and coach, Wooden constructed the widely known Pyramid of Success. An extension of his own philosophy that evolved over his coaching career, each of the fifteen building blocks of the Pyramid are distinctive. Yet, after his retirement, Wooden spoke regularly about events involving two of his players and his need to be proactive in finding solutions to inequities they faced during the American civil rights movement.

In 1947, Wooden coached Clarence Walker at Indiana State University (known then as Indiana State Teachers College). Walker, a reserve, helped propel Indiana State to the National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball Tournament (NAIB) where the winner in the thirty-two team competition would be crowned the small-college national champion. Upon word that Walker was black, tournament officials explicitly informed Wooden that his team could not compete unless Walker was removed. The tournament banned participation by African American players. Wooden promptly turned the invitation down.

The next year, Indiana State was invited for a second time to the NAIB tournament. With the policy still in place, Wooden again refused the invitation. Officials quickly relented, offering
a stipulation that Walker could play, but was not to stay in the hotel with the rest of the team. Wooden displeased and irritated nearly declined participation in the tournament for a third time.

As they had been monitoring the situation from the previous year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), met with Wooden and persuaded him otherwise, seeing this as a groundbreaking opportunity to integrate the tournament for the first time. Indiana State went on to finish runner-up to Louisville. Walker during the tournament stayed with an African American minister and ate meals with the Indiana State team in a private dining room. Shortly after Wooden’s death in 2010, Kevin Walker, Clarence’s son, provided his perspective of the situation:

“Coach John Wooden meant a lot to the Walker family in that he was a God fearing man; a man of his word; and was color blind to racism and discrimination. He stood for something that was not popular when he did it, but his stance along with my father’s willingness to stand with him opened the way for today’s athletes and most of them really do not realize it” (Meyer, 2010).

Wooden in his later years mentioned his satisfaction regarding this historical event and his role in it, primarily because Clarence was an equal member of the team and needed to be treated as such. As unintentional as Wooden felt his actions were at the time, by the 1960’s he advocated passionately for social justice, particularly in the years that Lew Alcindor played under Wooden at UCLA (1965-1969).

Alcindor, a heralded high-school basketball player and academically gifted student from New York City was recruited heavily by a host of colleges in 1964. Before his visit to UCLA, Wooden felt a duty to inform Alcindor and his family on aspects of life on campus that had nothing to do with basketball. Reinforcing his stance on inclusiveness, Wooden provided
opportunities for Alcindor to meet African Americans affiliated with UCLA. The first of these meetings were in New York City, where Alcindor’s family met gold medalist Rafer Johnson. Johnson, in addition to being an athlete at UCLA was a former student body president at the school elected by a predominately White student body.

Alcindor in his recruitment received letters from Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Ralph Bunche, baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson, as well as numerous other recognizable minorities who attended UCLA. The letters spoke of Wooden the person, as well as his philosophy, demeanor, and acceptance of difference. Similar to the countless meticulous practice plans Coach Wooden produced, these details made a lasting impression. Alcindor would later be known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, becoming a cultural icon in his own right. However, in recalling his collegiate experience Kareem never questioned how Coach Wooden viewed him as a person. Speaking about a public incident at UCLA, Alcindor reflected on how Wooden dealt with racism and ignorance:

“Walking into a restaurant with Coach Wooden, I was greeted by a shout from a woman: “Oh look at the big, black freak.” Sensing my shock at the slur, Coach Wooden did his best to diffuse the situation. Fortunately, I had enough maturity and self-confidence to refrain from responding, even though I was angered. It wasn’t until years later that I realized how absolutely upset he was at the moment. He did such a great job of remaining calm and cool that while I was angry and wanted to be angry, he wanted to teach me that the most important thing I could do right then was to pity her for her ignorance. Coach’s ability to work with me and understand how best to turn that moment into a classroom of sorts helped me move past a painful moment” (Wooden & Yaeger, 2009, p.113).
Coach Wooden dealt with other situations unrelated to race that had social justice implications. Routinely, he fed players who lacked the money to get home during the holidays despite rules that forbade favoritism towards athletes. He was a supporter of Bill Walton’s use of free speech, although he disapproved of Walton’s methods of communication. Wooden supported Alcindor’s conversion from Catholicism to Islam, regardless of his own strong Judeo-Christian beliefs. Regardless of the scenario, Wooden by all accounts remained supportive and non-judgmental while challenging players to find meaning in their experiences. These seminal events and occurrences frame Wooden as an archetype for social justice.

Theoretical perspective

Social constructivism espouses that knowledge is social in nature, with reality constructed by individuals as they observe, name, interpret and give meaning to the world they are surrounded by (Hansen, 2004). Education that is constructivist in nature provides opportunities for teachers and students to question, consider, and invent knowledge. The overarching intention of the foundations course sought to introduce and inform students on principles related to social justice. Assignments included volunteer service-learning opportunities, observations of sport and physical activity settings, a creation of a philosophy, and a health and physical activity assessment of a country outside the United States. Additionally, a common reading was added to the course.

Common reading experiences foster conversation about controversial issues on many universities between students and faculty (Thorne, 2010). Schools in their use of common readings in introductory courses strive for intellectual discourse among peers and ultimately higher academic standards. Through the use of a coaching icon as an archetype for social justice education, it was thought that aspiring coaches (AC’s) could reflect uniquely on their thoughts,
experiences, and dispositions. The book *Wooden on Leadership* (Wooden & Jamison, 2005) was utilized for the foundations course as a common reading, in addition to a well-respected text in kinesiology.

Response journaling was chosen as a method to help encourage feedback from AC’s throughout the course. Such journals involve students in recording “their personal reactions to, questions about and reflections on what they read, write, observe, listen to, discuss, do, and think” (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007; Parsons, 2001). Particularly when weighing discourse on social justice, topics such as racism and class disparities can be politically charged. Further, these topics frequently elicit a range of experiences, such as shame, guilt, anger, or other negative feelings (Mio & Barker-Hackett, 2003). Thus, journals were used for this study to capture a range of reactions from participants in a less threatening fashion and compare dispositions of AC’s throughout the foundations course.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

At a Midwestern university in the United States, forty three students (27 male; 16 female) from three foundations classes participated in the study. The three-hour course is composed of physical education candidates, with minor representation from students in additional kinesiology-related professions (exercise science, fitness studies) and core school subjects (math, science, history, English), who self-select into the course. Barring an exemption, the foundations course is a required prerequisite for moving into additional classes for physical education teacher education majors.

Under the global curriculum of kinesiology, students take courses in planning for individuals with disabilities, cardiovascular and resistance training, teaching and analysis of
motor skills, and principles of exercise and health. Civic engagement opportunities in the
surrounding diverse and multi-ethnic community are utilized in the training of future
professionals in the program.

After approval of the study was granted by the institutional review board of the
university, data collection spanned a period of three years (2008-2010). Participants provided
consent indicating their intent to take part in the study. All participants in the study were
sophomores or juniors who identified themselves as aspiring coaches via a pre-survey.

As a participant observer in the role of teacher, there was exposure to aspects of the class
that may have influenced participants’ narratives from an insider perspective. In the role of
reflective practitioner, this unique access to what participants completed during the course of the
class could imply a power imbalance. In an attempt to further decrease the effect of power
relations by collecting data from students, a stipulation of the research design was included by
the human subjects review board of the university.

This stipulation held that data collected from students in the foundational courses could
not be analyzed nor disseminated for a period of three years after the last class was researched.
Further, all journal information and other identifying documents related to the research were to
be destroyed after data was summarized, recorded and published. These two specific questions
framed the study:

1) Where was Wooden’s impact most evident in regard to assignments that aspiring coaches
(AC’s) completed in the foundations course?

2) What aspects of the “Wooden Effect” did aspiring coaches find was most impactful for
them in thinking about social justice?

Data collection
During the first week of the course, students were informed about the intent of the course and given a pre-survey of attitudes related to coaching, inequity, and ideals such as sportsmanship. The purpose of the response journal was explained. Specifically, students irrespective of their participation in the study were asked to provide a journal response to each assignment they completed. Over a 16 week period, classes were held twice a week for an hour and forty five minutes, with journals submitted biweekly. This provided six entries per participant or a total of 258 notations to review. Word-length for reflective journal responses averaged 753 words per submission. Each entry was typed and submitted through a secure online course management site.

Data analysis

Given the context of the study, inductive analysis was used. According to Johnson & Christensen (2004) such analysis requires "immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; begins by exploring, then confirming, guided by analytical principles" (p. 362). Inductive analysis serves three purposes. First, it condenses varied raw text data into a brief, summary format. Second, it establishes clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings drawn from raw data and provides a level of transparency. Finally, inductive analysis develops a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes evident in the text.

The first review of AC’s journals enlisted a research assistant to monitor potential biases in teacher-research and to help identify preliminary themes. Further systematic reading and coding of the journals allowed major themes to emerge in the study. The construction of themes for the study drew from the representation or specific of Wooden (i.e. name, quote, story) in AC’s reflections.
Results

Wooden’s impact on field observations

Aspiring coaches’ observations of diverse settings for physical activity were influenced by exposure to the Wooden archetype. AC’s participated in two hours of observation in a physical education class and two hours of a sports practice in the local community. Thirty-four of the forty-three observations (79%) made specific mention to Wooden’s instructions (22/34; 65%) or opinions (12/34; 35%) regarding routines. Raul for example, discoursed on specific instructional practices for diverse learners during his observation of a teaching setting:

I could tell that Mr. Waters maintains complete control of his class, by the rules he had posts and reminds students of. Many of his students are Spanish-speaking, so he has his rules in English and Spanish. When I interviewed him, he let me know that he enforces rules when students arrive in August, so that by October, things should be going to plan and they carry that on each year through elementary school. When I look at what we covered in class related to Wooden and how he got freshmen into a routine at UCLA, the two have a similar methodology to me.

Simon, during an observation of a football practice, referenced an incident that made an instant connection:

…as I began to watch one of the line drills, I could see that the tackles were having problems not getting their hands up fast enough to stop the defensive ends from collapsing the pocket. Evidently, they weren’t doing too well with their footwork either.

After a few more reps that went about the same, an assistant coach stepped in.

During his talking he gave some pointers saying things like “you guys have gotta get this down, we don’t have time to do it all day. I have faith in you”. Real positive and
calm. It kinda reminded me of one of the things Wooden said, if you don’t have the
time to do it right, you won’t have the time to do it over.
At a glance, this scenario provides little to suggest that a social justice lens may have
been employed. Further reading of Simon’s entry would detail a conversation that would
provide a broader perspective:
Coach Davis asked me after practice if I had seen anything interesting in my visit. I told
him about what I saw with the line coach and he smiled. He told me that most of the
kids were from the local neighborhood and didn’t have a lot of parental support or
stability.
Most of the time, if you scream too much, players will shut down. They deal with a
lot of insecurity and they don’t have much to start with, so the main thing is getting
them involved first, so they can gain confidence by the time they become adults.
Simon and Raul’s experiences document an area of social justice that is overlooked-
understanding of the contexts that students often face in lower-income communities and the
willingness to provide an atmosphere of success and high-expectations. Social justice is routinely
referred as a movement that demands political action. While structural change is a rationale and
necessary goal of social justice, it might not be practical at first for teachers and coaches to fully
immerse in without guidance. Thus, these leaders may be better in implement small changes that
can be built upon over time until they get the support they need.
To truly break down barriers, it is incumbent on coaches in a leadership role to know and
appreciate the situations of those they wish to serve. In this way, they are representing one of
Wooden’s most discussed principles—Making greatness attainable by all. In reflecting on these
two entries in particular, Schon’s (1983) discourse on the parallel relationship between seeing, knowing, and the importance of previous experience has merit in implementing social justice.

Wooden’s impact on aspiring coaches’ philosophies

Brookfield (1990) espoused that developing a philosophy provides “a distinctive organizing vision or a clear picture of why you are doing what you are doing that you can call up at points of crisis, crucial to maintaining personal sanity and morale” (p.16). This vision requires educators to consider if their practices have an effect on students, learning outcomes and personal meanings that may result. Thirty-two of the forty-three journals (74%) analyzed referenced Wooden as an influence on aspiring coaches’ philosophies. Of these submissions twenty three of these journals (71%) made particular mention to the importance of creating an equitable environment for physical activity, regardless of setting, such as Ned’s:

Wooden states that, parenting is the most important job in the world, with leadership not being far behind. Both he says are similar to being responsible for a team. For me, this hit home. Wooden describes an effective leader as one who has love for those around him. If a teacher or coach can show love to the people they deal with most directly, then it is easier to treat everyone as a member of a family.

If the players or students around you don’t feel that you have some amount of love for them, they may not give their all to what you are asking them to accomplish.

Wooden in his time dealt with a lot of young men from various social situations, but he treated them all the same in spite of their differences.

A few aspiring coaches such as Alan discussed the importance of a strong philosophy and lauded Coach Wooden’s efforts in social justice, but questioned whether such an approach was easier:
“... given all of the craziness going on at the time, Coach Wooden showed a lot of character and strength. For a White coach to do what he did in recruiting black players was unheard of. If I were in that situation, I would want my players to feel comfortable coming in, so I would find people with shared experiences. Wooden gained massive respect from everyone, but you could do that in California because it’s historically known as a place more diverse and laid-back. I don’t know if that would have been that easy if Wooden was in say, Kentucky or Purdue during the 60’s”.

Lauren noted that Wooden’s choices alone indicated to her what she would add to her emerging philosophy:

I can take some things out of what Wooden said in the book, but for me it is about his actions. Coach Wooden is a religious person, which I am not, but despite this, he never pushed his religious values on his players. This is the biggest point I’ve taken that I will incorporate into my philosophy.

These reflections show the potential impact that person-modeling using non-fiction literature and structured assignments can have on aspiring coaches’ dispositions on how they could incorporate a social justice focus. A philosophy though, in a structured course so early in the preparation of aspiring coaches is but one aspect of a development of a social justice disposition. There must be an actual commitment to change along with recognizing inequities as they occur, not after the fact. The last section details an event of this nature.

**Emerging critical thinking on social justice**

Throughout the course, AC’s documented tough negotiations in recognizing inequities, particularly as related to sport. One memorable example arose in the 2009 class in a discussion on Serena Williams at the U.S. Open. Williams while trailing 6–4, 6–5 (15–30), incurred a foot
fault, resulting in two match points for her opponent Kim Clijsters. Williams gestured with her racquet to the lineswoman who had made the call and cursed at her, resulting in Williams being penalized a point for unsportsmanlike conduct.

This penalization along with a previous warning earlier in the match for racket abuse awarded Clijsters the match 6–4, 7–5. The following day, Williams was issued the maximum permissible on-site fine of $10,000 (plus $500 for racket abuse). After further investigation, the Grand Slam Committee in November of that year fined her $175,000, instead of opting to suspend her from the 2010 U.S. Open or future Grand Slam events. Williams was placed on probation for two years and voiced displeasure over the decision, but did apologize.

Williams’ episode was discussed in week 13 of the course during the midst of lectures on the impact of Title IX on sport. During one lecture, two contrasting videos were shown. The first video showed the aforementioned U.S. Open outburst by Serena Williams. Later, John McEnroe’s memorable outburst at Wimbledon in 1981, known infamously as the “You Can Not Be Serious Match” was shown. McEnroe in the segment angrily disputed a line call where he felt a ball he had returned from his opponent, Tom Gullikson, was in. A handful of aspiring coaches, chose to discourse in their journals on these videos of Williams and McEnroe, implying that there was a “double standard” still imposed on women that involved the additional element of race:

…the videos shown last week made me think of how far we still need to go. McEnroe has been making money off disrespecting authority for years. Serena if she did that all the time would lose money because she is a woman and she’s black. White athletes who get out of line have a longer leash. -Jamilla
Wooden probably isn’t a big fan of these two. Really. Both of them are egomaniacs who think the world revolves around them. Like we talked about in class, young athletes look at these two as role models. If my daughter were like McEnroe, she probably wouldn’t make it too far with that behavior unless she’s lucky.-Ronald

The aforementioned quotes infer that a handful of students over the course of the study began to demonstrate a critical thinking pattern that recognized forms of institutionalized domination and oppression. In the case of these comments, AC’s felt that this inequity was targeted toward women. What is not known is if AC’s saw this as an important issue under the larger umbrella of social justice. It is entirely possible that their comments were made due to personal characteristics or experiences (i.e. Jamilla being a woman, Ronald having a daughter), that made them want to provide their opinions in the journal.

Discussion and Implications

This study sought to meet the challenge of finding new avenues for coaching science to explore in relation to raising critical consciousness of issues that confronts inequalities, and places moral order, ethics and social transformations in a greater light (Abraham & Collins, 2011; Bush & Silk, 2010). By using the notion of ‘border intellectualism’ (Giroux, 1995), it was thought that a study of this nature would bridge different paradigms and disciplinary boundaries in the hopes of providing an alternate iteration to how aspiring coaches are trained. In retrospect, there are a number of perspectives that should be shared which have implication for future studies of social justice and coach education.

The design of the study posed some unique challenges. First, one could argue that the examination of aspiring coaches in a physical education teacher education course is not a valid population to draw participants from. In conceptualizing the study, this was an initial concern,
which was alleviated after discussing the proposed outcomes of the research with senior faculty in departments of physical education at other universities. What I was told, and later found to be accurate before embarking on the study, were that programs that focus solely on coaching education in the United States are rare and generally housed in departments of physical education or kinesiology.

Regardless of my personal feelings regarding the needed separation of both, the reality is that many physical educators are expected to coach a sport upon graduation. Further, many of these same individuals choose to be physical education majors because they expect to coach in addition to teaching. These actions are also indicative of my experiences as a PETE major and teacher educator.

Second, there is the question of what AC’s need to know about social justice and at what point in their preparation they should learn it. Coaching education, similar to other kinesiology related professions do not have a robust history of making concise declarations regarding the importance of social justice as practice, whether it through initiatives, strategic planning or position statements. This may contribute to the importance placed on research and programming in this area, which indirectly effects curriculum decisions and what is ultimately taught. While there is no need for an overhaul of curriculum, there is certainly room for social justice to be incorporated into coach training through lectures, service-learning and civic engagement opportunities, and routine dispositional assessments. Utilizing these strategies may help prepare future coaches for the myriad of situations that they will likely face in their careers where a social justice ethos is needed.

Third, there is the question of the use of John Wooden as an archetype and whether it has relevance in today’s age. Some may not appreciate or feel that literature which provides maxims,
models, philosophies with religious overtones (Christianity), or political viewpoints (Wooden described himself as a liberal-democrat) are appropriate in classroom settings. I was exposed to Coach Wooden in my own professional preparation and found his philosophy of leadership to be particularly effective and instrumental. Thus, there was some bias on my part in using his work as part of a larger effort to teach AC’s about social justice. For this course and the students in it, the application seemed logical and the perceived reward outweighed the risk.

Thus, a final recommendation for others looking to emulate this method of teaching would be to find an archetype that has a connection to the environment or locale students are from. Coach Wooden was raised in the same state (Indiana) of the bulk of individuals in the study. Also, he coached basketball, which is woven into the fabric of the Midwestern United States. Most importantly, he considered himself foremost a teacher. This provided a context that students could relate to easier, even if they did not have a full grasp of the realities of the time period where Wooden made his greatest impact as a cultural icon.

**Conclusion**

In a world of increasing diversity, a commitment to educating future professionals on social justice issues is an indispensable action. This study sought to explore the extent to which an archetype presented through a non-fiction text could aid in aspiring coaches views on social justice. While this research primarily analyzed what students learned through their respective journals, it represents a valid method used to engage students in critical-democratic education. Education of this sort values divergent and dialogical inquiry, open-mindedness, critical thinking, issues of equity, and considers alternative pedagogical approaches to teaching (Portelli & Solomon, 2001). Coaching is a multi-dynamic action that involves social dynamics that are difficult to quantify, but are evident on a continuous basis. Thus, the use of critical
approaches to social justice in pre-professional training could assist aspiring coaches in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse generation.
References


