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Preparing Educators to Coach for Equity: Title IX and the Power of a Coach

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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

It is 6:00 on a Friday evening, and in high school gyms across the nation, girls' basketball games are about to tip off. The girls on the courts were all born long after the passage of Title IX in 1972. They are most likely unaware of how much work has been done to implement Title IX over the past 50 years. It is also possible that they do not recognize how much work remains to open all of the doors that have already been propped wide for their male peers, who will take the court in an hour or so.

The girls' coaches are on the sidelines, analyzing the games and giving instructions. Before, during, and after the game, the girls will certainly rely on themselves and one another. However, throughout their season, they will also rely heavily on their coach, as a role model, teacher, guide, and advocate. For about 70% of these female players, that coach is a man.

The passage of Title IX in 1972 resulted in tremendous change in school sports in the United States. Prior to Title IX, only a small fraction of girls and women participated in organized sports; soon after, that number grew tremendously (Brake, 2012). While boys are still much more likely to participate in K-12 sports, the gender gap has narrowed (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017).

However, girls still face many inequities in school sports and their participation rate still lags significantly behind that of their male peers. There are multiple reasons for the perpetuation of these inequities. Facing these barriers, and breaking them down, is not easy, partially because male dominance in sport is normalized in our culture. Therefore, the barriers are often the result of multiple small decisions that are difficult to effectively legislate.

Coaches are deeply involved in making a multitude of these decisions that affect girls' sports. Therefore, preparing and supporting coaches of girls' sports is an important key in the strive for equity (Paris, 2021). It is essential that teacher preparation programs prepare their students, many of whom will become coaches, to coach for equity. This is especially important because most coaches of girls' sports are men.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate why coaching for equity is important, and to outline how teacher preparation programs might prepare their students to enact equity practices. This argument will present historical, legal, and the current factors that combine to perpetuate gender bias in sports as well as the state of gender equity in school sports today. Ideas for preparing coaches to work towards equity will then be presented.

Historical Background of Title IX

Title IX, the statute, does not actually mention sports directly (Kilman, 2012). Yet, it is best known for its impact on sports, and for good reason: Title IX changed the landscape of sports and gender dramatically. Within a year of the passage of Title IX, girls' participation in sports more than doubled (Brake, 2012). Today, 34% of girls in K-12 schools participate in sports, while 43% of boys do (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017).

It is actually quite likely that the lack of a mention of athletics is what allowed Title IX to pass. The statute begins with these words: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance…" (Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972). At that time, the climate of the nation was one that was open to addressing the discrimination that had faced women in the university setting. World War II had resulted in changes in gender roles, even though many gains for women in the workforce were lost in the 1950's. In 1968, for the first time, the number of women who voted equaled that of men. In general, a women's movement was forming, and women were gaining a voice (Hanson, Guilfoy, & Pillai, 2009). In short, many more people were open to the idea that no one should "be excluded from participation in…any education program" (Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972).

Yet, women were definitely being excluded in academics. One key pattern was that colleges and universities were often reluctant to hire women faculty. A woman named Bernice Sandler encountered

multiple examples of discrimination in her quest to get hired as a professor, including being told that she was "too strong for a woman" (Miller, 2020, p. 131). Sandler organized women in situations similar to hers to file a class-action lawsuit. The multitude of women's reports that came to light as a result of the lawsuit allowed U.S. Representative Edith Green to point to a constituency that was concerned about and affected by this discrimination. As a result, she drafted Title IX, a short, concise educational amendment. The timing, which was quick, and wording, which was non-specific, of the law was key: opponents did not push as much against the bill as they might have, had they realized it would impact sports, something that probably would have come to light with any significant delay (Hanson, Guilfoy, & Pillai, 2009). In fact, in debate in the Senate, it was asked whether the bill would require colleges and universities to allow women to join their football teams. Once assured that it would not, institutions of higher education chose not to weigh in on the bill, not realizing that other areas of athletics would be greatly impacted (Miller, 2020).

The passage of Title IX came at an interstitial time and space: it was at a time when conservatives did not feel overly threatened, as gender roles were still traditionally conserved, and yet a time when the women's movement had made enough of an impact for legislators to see the need to address women's rights. Any earlier or later, and the piece of legislature might have faced much more opposition.

Soon after Title IX passed, it became clear that sports would be affected. In fact, Title IX has made a large impact on the availability of sports opportunities for girls. High school girls had 3.4 million sports opportunities in the 2018-2019 school year. College opportunities have increased tremendously. We can see the impact in Olympic and other world athletic competitions, in which U.S. women achieve tremendous results (Staurowsky *et al.*, 2020).

A Leveling Off, Leading to Lawsuits

These expansions of sports opportunity did not come without opposition, some of which continues today. When boys' and men's sports are cut, Title IX is often blamed, although the statute does not require the cutting of men's sports opportunities (Brake, 2010). In fact, men's sports opportunities have only increased since the passage of Title IX (Hanson, Guilfoy, & Pillai, 2009). The great gains made after Title IX was passed leveled off in the 1980's. Once girls' sports grew to attain about 40% of total school athletics resources, stronger pushback occurred, and the proportion of resources for girls are somewhat stymied at this 40% level (Powell, 2022).

Therefore, even with the most basic measures of equal opportunity, such as number of sports teams, our schools are falling short. Although high school girls had 3.4 million sports opportunities in 2018-2019, that was only 43% of the total – the other 57% went to boys. Girls start playing sports later in childhood than their male peers, and are less likely to participate at any age (Staurowsky *et al.*, 2020). Unfortunately, this participation gap widens as students get older and is widest in the 12th grade (Meier, Hartmann, & Larson, 2018).

One response to the continued obstacles that girls in sport face is lawsuits. For example, one large area of continued inequity is when and where girls and boys play. The issue of "prime-time" play has been tested in the courts. This is easiest to see in basketball; girls' teams have played mostly on weeknights, while boys' teams have regularly played on Friday and Saturday nights. In one example, Amber Parker, basketball coach at Franklin County High School in Indiana, sued about this concern. A court's ruling forced the conference that Franklin County is in to arrange for double-header games on Friday nights (Weiss, 2012).

Title IX protects boys as well, and in one case, a situation in which a coach refused to let a boy play due to his long hair resulted in a lawsuit. A high school basketball coach in Greensburg, Indiana refused to allow any of his male players to have long hair. The parents of a boy with long hair sued, noting that the girls' team did not have a hair policy or any other similar, gender-specific policy. The

parents won the case on appeal, long after the family moved so that their son could play at another school (Stempel, 2014).

Sexual harassment and abuse are also an issue that might turn girls away from sports. Schools have failed to act in some of these circumstances. DePaul University is facing legal action after not only failing to act, but also retaliating against a whistle-blower. Dr. Jenny Conviser, a sports psychologist, had drawn attention to discrimination and even sexual abuse in DePaul's athletics department, particularly their softball program. DePaul terminated her contract. Conviser filed a lawsuit for Title IX retaliation (Sears, 10 January, 2023).

While it is the most common, court action is not the only way that change occurs. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces title IX, and while the OCR has never removed federal funding from any institution due to non-compliance, they do review school districts for Title IX compliance, including the basic of offering equal sports opportunities to boys and girls (Kilman, 2012). Title IX does not require the exact same number of opportunities, although that is one way to meet the requirement. Schools can also show that, if there are fewer spots for girls than for boys, they are surveying their female student population to ensure that they are not missing an unmet need. In a rare instance in which OCR oversight rather than a lawsuit was the impetus for change, the OCR investigated Indianapolis Public Schools and found them in violation of the statute. Only 35 percent of the students involved in IPS athletics were female, even though they comprised 50 percent of the student population. As a result, in 2014, the Office of Civil Rights required IPS to collect information about girls' sports interests (U.S. Department of Education Press Office, 2014).

These recent cases indicate that it is difficult to legislate equity. Male dominance is so ingrained in our conception of sport that perhaps we struggle to recognize the many ways in which we signal to girls that they are not as important, or to boys that being traditionally masculine is a part of being an

athlete. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that it is still true that fewer girls participate in sports than boys, and that this participation differential continues into college.

The Power of a Coach

This being the case, our girls need advocates, and coaches are in prime position to be these advocates. A coach can be a huge part of a student-athlete's career. Unlike the teacher of one or two classes that a student might take, a coach has the potential to be a part of a student's life for four years or more. A coach will spend time with her team after school and on weekends, and at very emotional times in students' lives, such as at tournaments or while accomplishing personal bests. Coaches have a clear impact on multiple aspects of their players' lives, and coaching style affects the retention of girls in sports (Staurowsky *et al.*, 2020).

Coaches teach their players a wide range of important attitudes and skills. They teach them ethics and fairness as well as how to deal with both success and failure. They also help students with self-discipline and time management (Lumpkin & Stokowski, 2011). Getting students to try, to work hard, and to improve are long-term goals of many coaches (Dimick Eastman, 2014).

Since so much of the impact of Title IX has to do with interpretation and implementation at the local level, and because athletic directors and coaches have at least some influence in both of these areas, who coaches and other athletic administrators are could make a big difference in making change. For our education system to realize true equity in athletics, these people need to be committed to achieving it.

Advocating for equity as a coach has its dangers. Amber Parker, whose lawsuit regarding prime time play in Indiana resulted in significant changes in her region, was fired for her actions. While she won a $28,500 settlement due to the retaliation (Weiss, 2012), the fact that she is no longer able to impact her team is one result of her work to advocate for her students.

There are also examples of male coaches who engage in this advocacy (Lagorio, 2004; *Jackson v. Birmingham Board of Education*, 2005). However, what they cannot do is to be female role models for their players, helping them see that they, too, could have a leadership role in athletics. They also cannot have had the experience of being systematically oppressed because of their gender. The shortage of coaches who are women is, in these regards, a real problem.

The Lack of Female Coaches

Prior to the passage of Title IX, 90% of coaches of women's sports at the college level were women. However, after Title IX, this rate dropped to 40% (Hanson, Guilfoy, & Pillai, 2009). Because coaching positions now had substantial salaries attached to them, men began to apply for these positions (Hanson, Guilfoy, & Pillai, 2009). The decline in coaches who are women has been exacerbated by bias against women of color and women who do not identify as heterosexual.

At the high school level, the problem is significantly more unbalanced. Analysis of rosters of more than 2,000 high schools and associated athletic staff in five states, with a focus on perceived gender of the coach's name (followed by a web search in cases that are unclear), revealed that only 30% of high school basketball coaches of girls' teams are female. In the meantime, boys' teams head coaches are almost exclusively male, with less than 1% of boys' coaches being women. In North Dakota, only 16% of girls' basketball head coaches are women; in Nevada, that number is still just 26%. The same methodology found that about 15% of high school athletic directors in these states are female (IHSA, 2023; IHSAA, 2023; KHSAA, 2023; NDHSAA, 2023, Nebraska School Activities Association, 2022).

Since equity in athletics depends a great deal on interpretation and implementation of policy, it is necessary to attain more women in leadership roles. This is not to say that women always can, or even will, make more changes than men. In fact, at first, when they are an extreme minority, it may be difficult for them to do so. Even so, they are role models for girls and other women, and they help girls see themselves in coaching and leadership roles.

However, given the numbers above, it is worth recognizing that male coaches will continue to have an outsized impact on girls' teams. Male, female, and gender nonbinary educators all need preparation to help them critically assess their landscape for gender bias as well as how to respond to inequities. Many of these future coaches are also preparing to be teachers. Therefore, it is imperative that teacher education programs teach for gender equity.

Teacher Education's Role

First, Recruit and Support Women in the Field of Coaching

A number of strategies may help increase the number of women who are coaches. Recruitment, preparation, support, and work with leaders, particularly male leaders, in the field are all necessary tactics. Following is a road map towards gains, focused on the possibility that a teacher education program can be instrumental in all areas.

Knowing that most coaches are men, teacher preparation programs need to recruit and prepare female candidates who might be interested in athletic coaching. To recruit, programs can work with college athletic departments to encourage athletes, particularly female athletes, to become teachers. There are many side benefits to this. The emphasis on effort and persistence that has been found in coaches (Dimick Eastman, 2014) would be a great asset in teaching.

To facilitate this type of recruitment, teacher educators should develop relationships with the coaches on their campuses. Coaches can steer interested athletes in the direction of teacher preparation. They can also recruit athletes who are interested in teaching. Noting that coaching is a way to stay connected with a sport long after losing the opportunity to play it at the high school and college level may be a way to engage athletes who love their sports.

Once they have recruited potential female coaches, teacher education programs need to prepare them for the job market. Women face significant ingrained bias in athletics across the board,

including from administrators, who control hiring (Cunningham, Wicker, & Walker, 2021). This unconscious bias plagues women in many stereotypically male fields.

Therefore, we need to prepare women for a job market that is hostile to them. They need, in effect, to be better qualified than the men around them. Coaching does not really have universal, traditional preparation (Drago *et al.,* 2005). Experience is one way for students to enhance their qualifications. Teacher educators can encourage preservice teachers to get coaching experience while still in their teacher education programs. While student teaching is a very challenging time, it is also a good time to gain experience. Many schools seek assistant coaches for low or no pay, and students who are looking for experience and more ways to connect with their students may choose to help out at their schools. This coaching experience can help athletes build upon their skills gained as players and try on the new role of coach. It can also help them network, which is a key aspect of getting a coaching job.

In addition to working to put more female coaches into the pipeline, college and university education departments can also support women who are already there. In the absence of many defined coaching preparation programs, it may be up to teacher preparation programs in colleges, universities, and other outside organizations to do this. Since female coaches and especially athletic directors are in an extreme minority, opportunities to network and gain support may help them to process their experiences and support one another.

Colleges and universities may also find it useful to center professional development around coaches or to occasionally have a coaching roundtable or breakout group at professional development sessions. This would allow teachers who choose to participate in summer or other professional development to get both teaching and coaching support. This might be particularly useful if certain sessions were designated for coaches who are women.

Equity Pedagogy for Coaches

Recruitment and preparation of women coaches alone will not fix inequities in girls' sports. As noted above, men will still be the majority of coaches for the foreseeable future, and women can also perpetuate gender inequity. Teacher education programs need to prepare all genders, including men, women, gender nonbinary educators, and educators of other genders, to coach for equity. This preparation, to be effective, needs to go beyond a single multicultural education course (Williams & Ogletree, 2018).

Ingrained bias is, by its very definition, difficult to notice. Yet, it is precisely this noticing that teacher educators need to ask their students to do. A first step in teaching or coaching for equity is to engage in regular critical reflection. This reflection has the potential to result in transformational learning experiences (Jenkins, 2018). Teacher educators can set the stage for this reflection by presenting evidence of inequity and asking questions, allowing students to make their own conclusions about why, for example, girls' teams often receive second-tier facilities (Coleman, 2021). Example questions that one might pose are: Which teams are given time on video announcements? Which games get the band and cheerleaders?

Critical reflection should be taught through both coursework and reflection on practicum experiences. Without deep reflection on clinical experience, including breaking down actual occurrences piece by piece, there is a chance of ingraining bias more deeply (Williams & Ogletree, 2018). Students need to consider their own and others' actions in classroom scenarios and adjust accordingly. The necessity of breaking down practical experiences can be applied to coaching experiences as well. Questions candidates might ask themselves could include: What interaction did I have with this student before she quit the team? Do I have high expectations for my female players? Do I encourage these players to seek athletic scholarships?

This work can and should continue beyond initial teacher preparation programs. Many schools of education offer higher degrees and certifications. Colleges and universities can often have connections

with administrators who are in positions of power with regard to athletics. Athletic directors may come from the pool of high school coaches, but also may come from college coaches or college athletic administrators. Certainly, many athletic directors and other athletic administrative personnel have earned master's degrees or other credentials from local colleges and universities, often from schools or departments of education. It is essential that colleges and universities embed diversity studies and education for equity in the coursework for these programs.

Conclusion

Title IX is a law that has greatly changed the landscape of athletics and gender in the United States. The nation has clearly made progress towards equity in sports, as well as in other areas of education. That progress is, however, not yet satisfactory.

One of the gifts of the bill written by Representative Edith Green over 40 years ago was the lack of detail. The bill called for equal educational opportunity based on sex. To a Congress that was heightened to the need for greater equity but not yet threatened by feminism, this concise request appeared both reasonable and doable and was, therefore, passed. It is distinctly possible that a more specific bill, or one written earlier or later, would not have been successful either in scope or in its ability to become law.

The concise wording of the bill, while helpful at the time of its passage, leaves schools with several open questions today. Video announcements and websites did not exist in 1972, and transportation, bands, and cheerleaders were not addressed even though they did exist. Transgender and gender non-binary students were not considered in the bill. However, there is wisdom to the wording of Title IX; the broad strokes of the bill can be applied to new, unanticipated situations. As a result, interpretation and implementation have a large influence on the impact of Title IX today. If we prepare them to be critical educators, it is coaches who can push us in these areas; it is coaches who will

advocate for their players and their programs and, in the process, move the needle towards greater equity in athletics.

Author Note

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