



Globalization of Young Athletes: Bringing YA to Developing Countries

**Paddy Favazza, Gary Siperstein,
Kathleen Ghio**

**Center for Social Development and Education
University of Massachusetts Boston**

There is currently a movement to globalize the Young Athletes program, and, as part of that globalization, we are piloting the Young Athletes programs in developing countries including Kenya, Tanzania, Venezuela, Romania and Malawi. As we document the adaptations made in these programs, we are also looking at the broader impact of YA on children, families, and communities. This is our initial report from site visits to four of these countries, describing what is most salient across the different sites through our site visit observations in various communities and interviews with parents, YA leaders, university partners, and volunteers, you will see there are both common threads and unique features and challenges across sites. We are presently working on a follow up report that will document the impact of the Young Athletes

program on the motor skills of the participating children.

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 having a disability. 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. We quickly realized that the Young Athletes program provides opportunities that impact the child beyond motor skill development. Below we provide a glimpse into the people and the culture of these African 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. Tin huts were set up as businesses, 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 carried 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 reported 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 in YA with their children.



It became clear throughout this observation and interview 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) provide 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 from Africa

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 Tanzanian and Kenyan 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 that we 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.

As we continued to Venezuela and Romania we met children and families whose lives were impacted by the presence of their disability against the backdrop of political turmoil.

Many children with disabilities in Venezuela and Romania either struggle to find schools to accommodate their needs or remain at home or in orphanages, removed from society. However, in the face of these and other daunting odds, we saw spirited YA leaders and student volunteers helping children realize motor achievements as well as helping families learn about their important role in their child's development. Below we provide a glimpse into the people and the cultures of these countries.

Venezuela

In Venezuela, there is a persistent stigma associated with having a disability which results in thousands of children with disabilities hidden at home, or placed in segregated schools or orphanages. While recent federal legislation focused on inclusive public education for children with disabilities, schools sent families away because of a lack of resources and training. Yet, in the face of stigma and the current political quagmire, there is determined optimism from Young Athlete leaders who continue onward, seeking out families and children hidden in the mountains and barrios, bringing them to Young Athletes for motor play and family support while taking advantage of the contagious enthusiasm of high school volunteers. These are their stories.

Gaicca Escuela, a school for children with disabilities and a Young Athletes site, remains closed, still unsafe for children to attend. It is located in the Altamira community in the heart of Caracas, where the presence of army tank and riot police has prevented children from attending. Vigils held for former

President Chavez and riots related to the recent elections meant schools were closed for weeks at a time. YA leaders at this special school remained determined to restart school and the YA after school program again, now that the elections and riots have ended.

Leaving Caracas, we traveled on through the immense traffic to another YA program in a special school for children with disabilities in Caricuao, on the outskirts of Caracas. As we traveled by car, parents and their small children also traverse down from the surrounding mountains, many walking long distances or taking 2 and 3 buses to come to the new Young Athletes program.



In this community, numerous incentives are provided to encourage parents to bring their child out from hiding such as bus stipends, play time in a nearby park with new-found friends, and guest speakers who discuss the role of parents in their child's development. They are occasionally provided snacks and dinner by the YA leader. During Young Athletes, the surrounding political tension dissipates, replaced with laughter and excitement in the school's outdoor pavilion as parents and children participate in the Young Athlete lessons and high school volunteers enthusiastically cheer them on.

In another YA program in the remote town of Colonia Tovar, located in the mountains of the Venezuelan Coastal Range, Young Athletes leaders described recruiting challenges as they began their YA program. Many families in this mountainous region turned the Young Athlete leader away, some parents insisting that they did not have a child with a disability. We began to recognize the familiar challenges that accompany working with children with disabilities. As in other developing countries, children and families are overwhelmed by persistent stigma and a lack of programs which force parents to make difficult decisions to keep their child at home or send them to nearby orphanages.

Lastly, we observed a YA program that has started an innovative swim and gymnastics program for families and their infants and toddlers with intellectual disabilities who are between 4 months to 2 years of age. There is great excitement surrounding this downward extension of YA, evidenced by the impressive



involvement and collaboration of local government, family members, athletic coaches, university partners and physical therapists. Clearly, in the face of many challenges, we see glimpses of the great strides made in Venezuela that provide much needed programs for young children with disabilities and their families. Thanks to the remarkable national volunteerism requirement, there were plenty of high school and college volunteers to assist in the Young Athlete programs. We also saw effective collaboration between local governments and YA leaders to provide space in recreational centers and bus stipends to some YA programs. In addition, one YA program had connected with the local medical clinic which resulted in 45 new YA participants identified by medical staff. All of these creative efforts are promising reminders of the need to be forward thinking, strategic and collaborative to maximize human capital which will ensure the sustainability of current and future YA programs.

Romania

As we traveled to Romania, we found another country that has made great strides in recent years. They have joined the European Union, worked on their country's infrastructure and, developed new laws that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities.



Nevertheless, Romanian children with disabilities are still abandoned daily and families who keep their child with a disability wait for the new laws protecting the rights of persons with disabilities to be realized. But on a cool spring afternoon, in the absence of programs for children with disabilities under the age of 7, we saw preschoolers join in YA and play with new found friends at the National University of Physical Education and Sports in Bucharest.

As we walked into the university gymnasium where Young Athletes is held, one of the most notable observations was the presence of over 20 university students from the Sport Therapy and Physical Education programs. They assisted the children, one-on-one throughout the lesson. University students were learning to teach young children with disabilities; young children with disabilities were learning how to play in a group setting; parents were learning how to support their child's development through motor activities. The result was a striking example of synergy in action.

In the absence of programs for young children, Romanian parents of children with disabilities, start their own Non Government Organization (NGO) to provide individual therapies, and services for their child if they can afford it. Because of this phenomenon, many families are often isolated in their search for services and were initially reluctant to attend Young Athletes. However, after we observed the Young Athletes program, parents and grandparents gathered and proudly spoke about how much more their child plays, talks, laughs, and is more coordinated since coming to Young Athletes.



For many of the children it was the first time they had attended a group activity. For many of the parents it was the first time they had seen how much their child could benefit in group lessons designed just for them. Likewise, university students described the positive changes they had seen in the children's motor and social abilities and their own new found confidence in working with young children with disabilities and sense of pride in helping another person.

Without a doubt, in Romania, a Young Athletes program serves several purposes. YA fills a void in programming while demonstrating to parents and future educators the need for and importance of group play for young children with disabilities. YA enables both university students and parents to learn new ways of nurturing development in young children, while fostering collaboration with parents, university partners, and student volunteers. YA provides an opportunity to see the benefits of volunteerism, in a country that has yet to fully embrace this concept. Clearly, Young Athletes is transformative at every level.

In many ways, it is a new day for Romania. They have come a long way since the fall of Communism and Young Athletes is part of that changing landscape. In essence, the Young Athletes program in Romania has put an end to the waiting for programming as it represents one of the few publicly available group programs for children with disabilities under the age of 7.

Cultural Insights from Venezuela and Romania

There were several common themes that emerged as we thought about the Venezuelan and Romanian cultures. The influence of government on the status of individuals with disabilities is clearly evident in both countries as they gradually moving towards a more inclusive society to address complex issues related to education, training, and resources. YA leaders described how all of the challenges they face are compounded by the persistent underlying stigma associated with having a child with a disabilities and YA leaders in both countries described their unsuccessful attempts to bring YA to the most marginalized children, those who languish in orphanages.

Yet, in the midst of these very real cultural constraints, there is a steady step forward evident in YA programs and the leaders and parents who champion these efforts. Vital to their success is the need for coordination of services and collaboration of experts, the need for providing university level training needs and parent education which will result in the mobilization of experts, families, and volunteers. It is critical that as we think about next steps in the globalization of YA, we are sensitive to their historical and current climate and do not forget about those who are the most isolated in each country.

Next Steps

Since returning from the site visits, we have begun to think about the next steps for YA in terms of expanding and improving materials, programming and research.

Collect and Synthesize Data
Data collection and analysis is underway as countries are

completing the evaluation of YA in each country. We will then synthesize data, reporting on the impact of Young Athletes on children and families and the challenges and ease of YA implementation across all five countries.

Follow Children and Families

It is critical to follow the children and families who participated in the Young Athletes program in other countries to learn about the sustainability and expansion of YA. Specifically, we hope to learn about the sustainability of the child's motor development, the impact on family, and the changes in community response or policies across time that result from Young Athletes.

Develop an Adaptations Guide

Our present study is documenting how YA is adapted in different countries. From our observations and recordings of adaptations in these countries, a guide will be developed to help other countries make YA culturally relevant. Across site visits, many suggestions were made that could increase the utility of YA in countries that have wide variation with regard to culture and human and monetary resources. The guide will include areas of focus such as structure and organization, equipment substitution, suggestions for cultural and inclusion adaptations of YA. An Adaption Guide for YA programs will increase the likelihood of implementation of the program around the world.

Expand the YA Curriculum

Like teachers in the US, SO leaders from Kenya, Tanzania, Romania 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.



In addition to an upward extension of YA, Venezuela has begun to implement an innovative swim and gymnastics program for families interested in starting their child in motor programs before the age of 2.

The cursory evidence they have collected is impressive and warrants further support to develop and investigate its impact on motor skills in infants and toddlers with intellectual disabilities, utilizing the expertise of YA leaders.

Continue to Expand and Develop 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 an upward and downward extension of the YA Motor Checklist (YAMC), the inclusion of pictures and video of the skills assessed in the YAMC to ensure that testers know exactly what skills are tested and training materials. In addition, other tools need development to reflect the broader impact of YA, such as tools to assess YA's impact on social skills and school readiness.

Develop Family Component

The need to facilitate family involvement in children's development and education is a universal challenge which requires culturally sensitive approaches and intentionality to find a solution. Strategies for increasing family involvement need further attention and development.

Family involvement can be conceptualized into 3 levels. The first level of family involvement is for families to bring their child to YA and actively participate in YA. This type of group experience is critical for a young child's overall development and crucial for parents to both observe and actively participate in the motor play with their child.

The second level of family involvement involves parents and family members in informational meetings and connects them socially to one another. It is recommended that this level becomes a standard component of YA with a cadre of informal educational supports created specifically for families as well as an on-going social to build social networks and alleviate isolation.



The third level of family involvement is preparing parents for leadership roles in YA programs and enlisting them as strategic planners in broadening the use of YA. Simply put, parents have first-hand knowledge of the challenges of using YA in their neighborhood and home. Utilizing this knowledge will foster ownership of the YA program and ultimately, sustain family involvement. To that end, leadership training materials for parents is needed to foster consistent and high quality use of YA.

Given the overwhelming need to support families who have young children with disabilities, a culturally responsive family component to Young Athletes needs to be developed in collaboration with SO Family Networks and informed by resources and expertise available from other international agencies such as International Society of Early Intervention.

Include Incentives in Newly Funded Projects

As Special Olympics moves to the next round of funding programs in developing countries, it is important to include incentives in the proposal process that identify challenges to

programming for young children with disabilities and strategies to address them through YA. Adding this component to the funding process will enable YA programs to play a role in addressing some of the barriers in their country related to YA expansion and sustainability. While all countries identified challenges, they were not the same across all countries. For example, in many YA programs there is a need to collaborate with key players (local government, universities, schools, NGO's), the need for systems that support volunteerism, and the need to strategize about YA program sustainability for children with disabilities in orphanages. These broader background issues will require incentives built into future YA projects that find creative ways of forming YA programs that lead to sustained policy changes within ministries of education, more inclusive community initiatives, and collaborative efforts across NGO's. Incentives exist in Venezuela for volunteerism as a part of the high school and university requirements. This concept could be introduced to universities and ministries of education in other countries with an incentivized strategy that would benefit not only YA but other organizations that provide much needed programs for individuals with disabilities.

Post Script: Remember Inclusion

Outside of the United States, the Young Athletes program is at "a moment". It is at a moment because many nations are at a moment where there is a heightened focus on early

education for young children with disabilities; a moment when many countries are trying to make strides towards becoming more inclusive societies. This slow but sure progress has been influenced by governments around the globe that have embraced the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Simply put, the YA program is at this incredible moment because it is situated within this dynamic and pivotal global context.

YA has been embraced by inclusive preschool teachers in the US while YA leaders and parents in other countries are still striving to realize their dreams of early education and inclusion for their children with disabilities. As many countries grapple with bringing young children with disabilities into the community, 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. Clearly, Young Athletes programs are breaking new ground in several countries around the world. Our CSDE team will continue to document the ways in which YA is adapted and continue these collaborative efforts with experts, YA leaders and their university partners to maximize its impact on young children with developmental disabilities and their families. To be sure, thousands of children are counting on it.

