CAPTURE THEM GREEN: THE WAY TOWARDS SPORT TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT AMONG CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTERS

Mugari Abisha
Department of Physical Education and Sport, Zimbabwe Open University, Marondera, Zimbabwe

Abstract:
Late talent identification of sport abilities endowed among the little boys and girls especially in under developed nations has delayed the proper attainment of sport prowess among most players. A huge desert of unnoticed talents is created and unknowingly let it grow between the tender ages to junior levels of the child. African education systems are devoid of the expertise or might be incapacitated to identify and tap the sport potentialities born in our children during their early ages of growth. The adoption of Early Child Education by numerous African states is silent about sport talent identification; talented players are picked at adult ages, unfortunately, nearing retirement from sport show-casing. This scenario has not benefited the players as well as the nations. Therefore, this study aimed to identify strategies Early Learning Centers can utilize in identifying sport talents in children enrolled in their centers for the benefit of sport coaches, player-agents, the child and the nation at large. The study has concluded that it is possible to introduce children at early age of growth to any sport skills provided proper approaches, modifications and training is done. Furthermore, the theory Capture them Green, is vital if all ECD teachers are properly oriented to it. The study also recommends the adoption of the concept Capture them Green, in order to start developing children into future elite sports persons. This study recommends for further researches into strategies to value-add and beneficiate our African players before they are whisked off by dodgy sport agents from developed sport nations.

Keywords: talent, identification, development, detection

Correspondence: email abishamugari@gmail.com
1. Background to the Problem

Over a time, immemorial, the sports industry has been one of the fastest growing markets, (Collington and Sultan, 2014). Africa, in particular, is a breeding ground of talented athletes, but there are two pronged shortfalls i.e. late talent identification and ignorance of value-adding and beneficiating athletes at early years of their growth.

That unfortunate scenario has allowed Africa as a continent from which every year thousands of young players (footballers) in particular to be illegally transported to Europe with hopes of becoming professional players (Goffe, 2015). Very few luckiest ones sign official contracts, most are exploited by some Western clubs who benefit much from the salient African sport talents, yet African economies could have benefited from their human sport-talents either through remittances to home clubs or into state fiscus.

For instance, it is true that only transfers in the football industry from 1994-2011 and their associated value has benefited immensely European economy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Number of transfers</th>
<th>Value in Pounds</th>
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<tr>
<td>1994-1995</td>
<td>5 735</td>
<td>402 869 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>8 531</td>
<td>1 704 603 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>15 951</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>18 307</td>
<td>3 002 198 000</td>
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Source: CDES (based on data provided by FIFA and CIES)

The data above prove a point that sport contributes substantially to European economies, a practice that African states could copy since much endowment is plenty in terms of talent. However, the anomaly starts from failure by African states to identify and nurture sports talents salient among their boys and girls at tender ages. (Goffe, 2015), noted with dismay that ‘dodgy agents’ come and whisk off those talented athletes for no financial returns to their countries of origin. Zimbabwe is also a victim of this ‘talents–free-exportation’. Therefore; it is the focus of this study to come up with new insights on how or why to identify talent at tender ages of our players, hence, at ECD Centers and nurture those talents with the hope to value-add those players so that as they are marketed abroad they would be of greater value to countries of origin. This culture should be developed right from ECD.
2. Statement of the Problem

The identification of sport talents in Africa is done not at the earliest age groups of the child, but at senior level or out of school level. That practice has delayed to nurture and develop the player to maximum length of performance-time. Such practice has not benefitted the player, and the nation, as the player is left with a reduced period of being actively participating in sport and eventually is of less value.

2.1 Research Questions

1. What is the value of involving children in sport during their earliest ages?
2. How can children at their earliest ages be involved in sport?
3. Which strategies are most ideal to be implemented by ECD centers to identify sport talented kids?

2.2 Research Objectives

1. To justify the value of involving children in sport at early stages of growth.
2. To identify games which ECD children can be involved to show case their talents.
3. To explain the strategies for ECD centers to implement in their bid to identify and value-add sport talented children.

2.3 Significance of the Study

Ministries, Sports Associations, and sports academies are in need of talented players whom they sell at substantial amounts because they possess sport abilities, but identification of those talents endowed to players at earliest ages is not done due to various unknown factors. It is the focus of this study to provide strategies to responsible organizations in charge of children, to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and reasons to identify untapped sport talents in children during their tender ages so as to nurture and develop such talents so that nations will enjoy or loan their players when they are still young and marketable, than having players identified at adult age nearing their retirement.

2.4 Assumptions

The researcher assumed that:

1. Sport talent identification is an economic issue in African countries.
2. Early Child Learning Centers are best incubators for talent identification and development, but have no capacity in terms of human expertise and financial resources.

2.5 Definition of Terms

Talent detection: in this study, it is a process of discovering potential participants who are not currently involved in the sport in question.

Talent identification: it is a processing of recognizing and predicting current sport participants with potential in sport through measuring physical, psychological, physiological and sociological attributes.

Nurturing talent: provision of a supportive, responsive and a conducive learning environment to an athlete who has shown talented skills in sport.

Developing talent: is an attempt to provide players with suitable learning environments so that sport talent can be realized.

Selection of talent: an ongoing means of identifying at various stages participants who demonstrate prerequisite levels of performance.

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1 Introduction

The literature was confined to discuss the rationale of agitating talent identification endowed to ECD learners as opposite to the old school system according to various perspectives in the education history. Types of kids games which can be undertaken and suitable involvement methods were brought in as new knowledge and insights. The readership was provided with identification strategies necessary for ECD teachers to use in their bid to identify and nurture talent as early as Early Child age group.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

‘Capture them green’, is the concept leading the arguments and insights in this study. This concept relates to the idea of bending a young tree than bending an old tree which results in breaking it. Another adage says ‘you cannot teach old dog new tricks, but it is easier to do that to a puppy’. Therefore, ‘capture them green’ entails early identification and early training the children at their earliest possible ages in sport disciplines they are fit and good at. Such a practice makes nations and communities produce excellent sports personalities. The merits involve value addition and beneficiation of our own sport human resource base so that the nation realizes monetary benefits through exporting sport skilled personnel to those developed nations globally.
3.3 Theoretical Framework
The theories that underpin this study are the theories of maturation and emancipation. The propositions of the maturation theory are that, the child’s growth or development is influenced by two major factors which are his/her environment and the genes, (Gesell 1992, in Daly, W.C. 2004). Therefore, given a rich sport equipped environment, parental and school support, the child at that tender age can develop and exhibit sport talents. On the other hand, the emancipation theory observes that there are certain groups of people that remain subjugated by other dominant groups who continue show-casing their leadership and enjoy advantages at the expense of others. In this case, little toddlers are an insignificant lot in terms of participation in sport activities in the view of adults and sponsors. However, this study sought to speak on behalf of the voiceless, i.e. the little children in ECD centers, given that the new Zimbabwean School Curriculum is reckoning these little ones in terms of sport participation and development.

3.4 Rationale for talent identification in ECD Learning Centers
The contemporary studies and insights have argued that young children as early as 2 years can be taught sport skills provided the approach is done appropriately as long as maturation is considered by the trainer/coach.

In the field of education, art, sports and music, talent identification (TI) is a remunerating business into which a trade by so called sport-agents is a rewarding life. Finding the most effective and efficient talent identification methods has proven to be a complex issue for quite a while, www.sportscotland.org.uk noted. In this view, Bompa, (1999) identified two talent identification methods, i.e. the Traditional method and the Scientific procedures. Traditional Talent Identification procedures (Bompa, 1994, 1999) aims at identifying individuals already in sport, whereas Scientific procedures involve introducing individuals who fulfil the correct psychobiological criteria to sports they might otherwise never have tried.

It was proven that the Traditional Talent Identification methods were surpassed by the Scientific Talent Identification in producing quality players. For instance, records say 80% of Bulgarian medalists in the 1976 Olympic Games were the result of Scientific Identification processes. Similar results were demonstrated by Romania and East Germany athletes in 1972, 1976 and 1980 Olympics, success again being attributed to their scientific selection processes adopted in the late 1960s (Bompa, 1994).

Overall, researchers seem to agree that talent appears to depend on genetics, environment, opportunities, encouragement and the effect of these variables on physical and psychological traits, www.sportscotland.org.uk.
The raised arguments seem to put it clear that children as early as possible can be taught sport techniques for the reason that involving children in early sport talent identification enables coaches to establish a template that becomes the basis of a number of specific skills, the development of these basic movement skills is seen as the building blocks for future successful performance and involvement in more specialized games, sports, dance and recreational activities (Armstrong, 1990, DES, 1991, Sports Council, 1993, Jess, Collins and Burwitz, 1998)

This assertion can be a contemporary basis for starting to expose children to sport skills without out rightly waiting for maturation. This study sought to encourage parents and coaches or teachers not to stick to rules of maturation as if they are cast on rock, by delaying children at tender ages to learn and practice sport techniques because, the philosophy is to wait for maturation. The emerging new school of thought in this study is that coaches/trainers or teachers reduce the learning style of the sport techniques to suit the child’s capability without hating the child or creating ‘burn out’.

As noted by Alicia (2014) in www.activeforlife.com multisport approach can help children to be active for life by i) building a solid foundation for the children to learn movement skills, which can be transferred to a variety of sports disciplines. ii) through playing different sports , children develop fitness components like: flexibility, core stability, stamina, power, speed as well as improve their all-round physical conditioning, iii) children will develop sport and life skills like problem solving, communication, team-work, competence, confidence, connection, creativity, character and caring.

These attributes are important to be developed at early stages of the child so that it will not be difficult to be inculcated at older ages. More so, it is imperative that a study that looks into strategies to involve children in sport activities at tender ages is valuable nowadays for developing countries who should harness their human resource endowments to the fullest. In Zimbabwe, the introduction of the so-called New Curriculum is promulgating this school of thought to introduce teaching of sports from ECD to secondary levels. Unfortunately, there is lack of trained personnel, resource deficit, and negative attitude from responsible stakeholders at the moment. Furthermore, the methods of talent identification are not known by almost every ECD teacher. That anomaly leaves this study the most valuable one in terms of sport-talent identification.

3.5 Kids Games as Talent Identification Strategies

Talent identification is an important exercise that requires expertise in the field of sport, an essential service to developing nations like Zimbabwe, unfortunately, this is a rare
commodity. Every coach needs a player who exhibits talent in a particular position in a game. According to (Saether, 2014), even though researchers have focused on talent identification, few have paid attention to the criteria the coaches use to identify talent.

The controversy is that ‘let’s wait until the child is ready or mature before teaching a particular game skills’. This is the theory of maturation, (Gesell, 1992 in Daly, 2004). Contrary to this school of thought are contemporary scholars who argue that, waiting is time and talent wasting, all what is necessary is to reduce the method of ‘doing’ the learning to the level and ability of the child, but doing the same skill. This study also subscribes to that new school of thought; hence, there is this empirical attempt to come up with correct kids’ games and strategies to identify talents as early as ECD level of learning.

A plethora of games suitable and effective for kids were identified which can be played by our young children at ECD centers. A child is a bunch of bubbling energy; therefore, it is unfortunate to keep children in an inactive mood, lacking manipulating and interacting with concrete learning environments.

Children can be involved in ball, track, and field games like:

a) Soccer games

The study has identified several kids’ games that teachers or trainers can expose to the young children under their custody in ECD Centers. However, through one’s creativeness, a teacher can introduce soccer games which do not involve running the whole normal football pitch. As shown above, some set-pieces, like penalty-kicks only can be a funny activity to young children. A teacher can modify the length of the penalty distance from the goal-line to 4-5 m, reduce the distance length of the goal-line 4-5 m, and the height of the goal-posts to 1.75 m. After a bit of training, children can do min-games involving penalty shoot-outs only, children taking turns in goal-keeping,
ball chasing stop turn and pass to partner activities. Once these skills have been mastered, increase the number of mini-games to improve perfection and coordination.

In a rural set-up, ECD Centers can do the same, using locally available resources like poles for cross-bars and goal-posts. For young children to be motivated adequately, the Centers can invite parents of the children during competition days so that the parents appear to praise their children. It is very imperative to use much safer play-fields to avoid injuries for these tender groups, once they incur injuries, they hate to try. Use sandy or grassy arenas.

Those activities are meant to provide the talent identifier to pick potential players during their tender ages. ECD Centers with these projects at heart could turn themselves into incubators of talents in soccer.

The ideas behind the use of this football pitch is to copy the correct field dimensions, but the essence here is to modify the dimensions to the capabilities of the young children who have talents in different positions of the game, Kanhukamwe
(2004), calls it adapted sport. For instance, the coach can use half of the pitch, i.e. placing the other goal posts at center of the pitch to reduce the length of the normal pitch and reduce the width of the pitch. Practical experiments undertaken in this study involved kids running with balls from center to the width dimension of the pitch. Those who can complete the runs faster after several practices can be potential footballers ready for skills development and nurturing. Aesthetic performance e.g. ball juggling, ball controlling, accurate passing, and fine dribbling and stability can be awarded marks which can be used to rate a potential footballer for further training and development.

Another modification to the ball is to deflect it a bit so that the ball does not roll faster to offend the learner footballer since the learner is still young and has limited speed. This is a biomechanical principle of reducing velocity (McGinnis, 1999).

This is the Illinois testing method, which is also suitable to test and identify a child’s agility rate. This method is capable of exposing the athlete’s endowed leg, hands, and eyes coordination capabilities which embraces all the skills. Once the child is proficient in this game and others necessary as far as the coach’s creativeness can stretch, it can be easier for the coach to select the talented player and expose him/her to further development. The researcher strongly attests that ball games like defending, dribbling and ground ball control are enhanced in this game practice.

Children can compete on time to complete that game from start to finish and accuracy in going round the zigzag style and straight shuttle-runs. Much guidance and
teacher demonstrations are needed at first for the children to follow. It is the duty of the
talent identifier to pick children who have completed the rounds displaying best agility
tactics, fast and accurate in less time.

b) Athletics games
Young children at a Child Center can be made to run some reduced distances together
with the trainer. Short distances like 10-20 m in the football pitch. Introduction of some
traditional games like ngwadzai, a Shona game in which players run clock-wise round a
group of team-mates standing in a big circle. The idea being to make each nominated
runner to overtake the other as they run round the circle.

To motivate the players, parents of the children could be invited on special day
for the athletics competitions. Some awards can be offered so as to further the
motivation level. During such activities, a talent identifier can spot talent of a sprinter,
middle runner or long distance runner. In advanced environments with modern
gadgets, one can determine who is a distance runner or a sprinter looking at Fast
Twitch Fibres or Slow Twitch Fibres children possess, and finally classify them into
these categories of runners. According to Kanhukamwe, (2004) those who fall into Fast
Twitch Fibres are special for anaerobic events and those in Slow Twitch Fibres category
are special for aerobics events.

c) Traditional Games
In Zimbabwe, among several games are:

- Dzamutsanamuchuru tsuro nembwa (hare and the dog) –this game involves two
  children chasing each other and demands speed to catch or to avoid being
captured. This game is a platform for the talent identifier to spot those children
  who can react quickly and sprint
- Hwahwai (sheep and hyenas)- this game demands an athlete to exhibit dodging
  skills, speed and accurate judgments against your opponents, which are much
  needed in a game or competition.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction
This part of the study involved the mixed paradigm, with quasi-experiments as designs,
the population, sample and sampling procedures, data generating instruments, and
finally the data analysis and ethical considerations.
4.2 Research Paradigm

The mixed-paradigm was deemed an appropriate one in this study. These mixed methods have provided the researcher with a more complete analysis of the research problem (Maree, 2007) and offered the best chance of answering the specified questions and raised some new insights on early child sport participation and encouragement.

4.3 Research Design

The researcher employed a quasi-experiment method in this study. This method was deemed ideal as it provided a true practical picture and ideas of what practices were most ideal on the ground to answer existing controversies and enabled the researcher to create new insights. More so, the experiments with the trainers and the kids led to the coming up with a new theory known as “Capture them Green”. The researcher gathered original data for purposes of answering and correcting certain perceptions, opinions, attitudes, relationships and orientations that are held in educational circles in trying to pick talent among the young children.

4.4 Population

The population that was privy to information vital to this investigation consisted of ECD teachers, parents and sport coaches, and elite sports clubs.

4.5 Sample and Sampling Techniques

The ideal sample for this study was made of 10 ECD teachers, 20 parents, and 20 sport coaches to make a sample size of 50 rich participants. These people are a vital stakeholder group in this investigation because of their closeness to little learners. The sample was drawn-up using purposive sampling. This technique gave the researcher the opportunity not to waste time, but to work with those participants convincingly possessing relevant knowledge.

5. Results of the Study

5.1 Value of involving children in sport at earliest ages

It has emerged that there were mixed perceptions from ECD teachers, parents and sports coaches on exposing children to sports activities. Coaches and ECD teachers were adamant that there should be a certain stage and certain activities children of different age-groups can be trained. These seemed to subscribe to the theory of maturation, of Gesell, (1992, in Daly, 2004). Their perception was disapproved by the study’s practical experiments; they discovered the shortfall of the theory with today’s
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kids who are more adventurous and curious in sports activities. Teachers and coaches who participated in the involvement of young children later on concurred that if children are exposed to sport activities appropriately, with proper motivation, skills and modifications, they can do any sport skills without waiting for them to reach the widely accepted age of maturity. The concept of maturity was misinterpreted to mean grown-up, with 100% of the participants pegging maturity in sport at 9 years of age.

This meant that from ECD up to grade 4, children cannot be exposed to active, competitive and reasonable sport activities. This has been refuted by this study as it delays sport talent identification and development.

Children exposed to sport at tender ages displayed these characteristics at their Centers:

- Became free to interact with peers and teachers than before.
- Always eager to demonstrate abilities for visibility
- Were much more confident in doing set tasks
- Co-operated much more
- Always wanted to be first to finish tasks
- Had developed agility, stability and alertness when walking or running
- Loved beauty and perfection
- Abode to rules and regulation at school
- Hated failure when doing set tasks
- Seldom attacked by epidemic diseases
- Frequently get injuries

These and other pros and cons were witnessed practically in this study, however, the participants agreed that the value of involving kids in sport activities were skewed to advantages than disadvantages.

In the same vein, parents prefer those Centers at which their children make them invited to witness their children show-casing skills that predict their children to be future leaders in sport prowess. Parents prophesied lack of knowledge of the requirements of the ECD curriculum, as they blamed ECD teachers of not taking advantage of parental efforts evidenced by the purchasing of sport toys like tennis balls, plastic racquets, small bicycles etc. by parents at home for their kids.

5.2 Kids Games and strategies to identify talent

All the games introduced to young children motivated them to compete against their peers, young children want to venture in new games and are always eager to show-case their creativity. However, young children hate to compete with those not of their age groups.
It also emerged that it is easier for talent identifiers to pick talent as children play unaware of being observed as children are at liberty to demonstrate their hidden skills. Traditional games found in children’s societies are a fertile ground for talent identification since those traditional games are rich in skills exposition. It was found that 100% of the ECD teachers had no qualifications related to Physical Education and Sport, which is thought by the researcher to be a relevant prerequisite for every ECD teacher. Therefore, the first strategy is to have all the ECD teachers undergo sport related orientation.

Coaches and trainers should visit ECD Centers with aim to assist ECD teachers to develop talent among the young children in their custody.

It has been noted from coaches and trainers that parents play an important role in developing sport talents in their children, (examples cited were Kirsty Coventry’s parents, Cara Black sisters, Pele’s sons). Children whose parents were supportive in terms of enriching their children’s sporting environments proved to have several talents in sport. That concurs with Bourdieu (1993)’s theory of cultural capital, whereby the rich parents provide adequate and conducive learning environments for their children unlike poor families.

Above all, the researcher has been led to come up with a theory known as ‘Capture them Green’. This theory has two spheres, the outside sphere’s upper part shows athletes in their adulthood and that is the stage they will be concentrating on one sport game, that is to say, they would be specializing on a particular sport rather than many sport games. It is rare for an athlete to specialize in two or more games, for instance, being proficient in football as well as being a tennis player. That means one cannot start to be taught new skills when old. The lower part of the outside sphere can
be vacant, without any adult athlete specialized or able to learn new skills because of ageing or if trained in any game cannot reach sport elitism or one can reach elitism, but quickly retires because of ageing.

The inner sphere is a reservoir of skills in which a young child can choose or be motivated to engage in. This sphere represents various socializing agents, like the ECD centers, the home or the community learning and encouraging environments for children to do sport activities from which talent identifiers can utilize when they want to identify talents.

This theory, ‘Capture them Green’, encourages those in sport fraternity not to delay training young children sport skills, because they would not be trainable when the children are older as it would be difficult for the older players to acquire the needed skills. Furthermore, even if the player is trained at older age, he or she would not be useful in that trade for a long time before retiring.

6. Conclusion

The following conclusions have been made owing to the results emerged from the study:

- It is lack of sport knowledge among the ECD teachers that contributes to them not exposing young children in their Centers to active sport participation.
- The misinterpretation of the theory of maturation also delays sport coaches and trainers to hunt talent among children at tender ages, yet that emerged as delaying the usefulness of ‘the to be identified’ sport persons.
- Parents play a motivational role in turning home environments to be conducive incubators of sport talents for their children.
- Traditional games are important activities in ECD centers as they are rich in sport skills, but current ECD teachers do not link societal games with school learning process.
- Children actively participating in sport activities were an already existing reservoir of skillful talents needed in sport development.
- Children actively participating in sports are law abiding and are free from diseases at school and at home.
- Therefore, this study finally rejects the school of thought that advocates for ‘maturation’ in sport, but supports the initiative of exposing young children to any sport skills in the most appropriate ways, so as to capture these young athletes ‘green’.
7. Recommendations

- Cogniscent of the fact that young children are a bunch of ‘bubbling energy’, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should spearhead and makes it mandatory for tertiary colleges to include sport skill development and identification in ECD curriculum.
- Coaches and sport trainers should ply talents from ECD Centers rather than hunting talent from secondary schools and out of school boys and girls athletes only, it will be too late.
- ECD teachers should embrace traditional games in their pedagogical process since these are vital and rich in sport skills development.
- Schools must encourage parents by holding training workshops on nurturing sport talents among their children.
- Parents with children at ECD centers should be invited for sport competition days for their children to be motivated.
- ‘Capture them Green Theory’ should be put into practice by all sport trainers and coaches in order to develop sport talented competitors.

References

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