

Teaching Children to Become Go Players

An Afterschool Program

Overview: *This paper will review the elements of a successful program teaching children to play Go in an afterschool program. While the presence of any, or any combination, of these elements can make a good program, the presence of all of them makes success highly likely. Success is defined not by children learning to play Go, but by children becoming Go players, people who independently seek opportunities to play Go and improve their games.*

Background.

This paper presents lessons learned at a program that was begun years ago as an after-school chess club in an elementary school. The parent volunteer learned Go, loved the game, and morphed it into a chess and Go club several years ago. About 35 children participate. Originally the group was divided in half, using a classroom for chess and the computer lab for Go, switching each group between Go and chess each week. Later, the switch occurred after four weeks of play. This is my third year teaching in the program, and I now run it. On a typical day there are two volunteers in each classroom. The original parent volunteer returned to school this year and is no longer associated with the program.

The System.

It is not that difficult to get into a school to demonstrate the game of Go, or even to start an afterschool club. But without significant systemic support success is likely to be limited. That is, children will be exposed to Go, but won't become Go players. During the past four years I've been in a number of schools to demonstrate and/or teach elementary school children to play Go, but in only one school do I believe I am creating Go players. In the others I've had some systemic support, e.g., demonstrating Go to the 5th-7th grade classrooms, advertising in the school newsletter, but I found this level insufficient to develop the momentum and intensity to create Go players.

In the successful program, the Chess and Go Club announcement goes out to all parents at the beginning of the year with the list of all after school activities. Parents register their children for the program. Up until this year the program ran free of charge, but now parents pay the same as for other after school activities (Free lunch children get the program free.)

Parents are an extremely critical element of a successful program. They have to cart the kids; they have to respect the activity. They have to support their children learning to play, and playing, Go. Since most parents have never heard of the game, this is a challenge.

In the successful program, one parent (who did not know how to play Go when she started) is a program organizer and volunteers in the Go room when we play. She not only prepares the registration form, but collects them and generates a list of all the parents, their kids, grade in school, addresses, phone numbers and email contact information. She also takes care of snacks. 2-4 other parents help on an as needed or occasional basis. More on parents later.

Having the parents' email addresses, I've been able to communicate with them as often as I want about what I want. Sample parent communication follows.

The key point here is that Go is an integral part of the school program, not an add-on or an afterthought. Starting a program with this concept in mind gives the program a better chance to take hold and grow. It means, when approaching a school to teach Go, you are not just looking for access to the children or to demonstrate Go; it means you are looking to establish a new, on-going program that is a routine part of school activities.

The Classroom:

Teaching methodology.

Once they learn the rules they are ready to go. The teacher has very little air time – i.e., even with bright, engaged children, meeting once a week, you will quickly find you are talking to yourself if you teach too much.

I teach them how to play, usually starting with the capture game, and then let them go. I will take a few, and I do mean a few, minutes at the beginning of most sessions to teach life and death; cut and connect; liberties and capturing races, opening strategy, etc.

Sometimes I will review a child's game right after it's been played. We are in a computer lab playing on KGS – which has plusses and minuses, but a plus is every game is recorded. I find this an effective technique...for the children interested in learning, which is not all of them.

Children love to win. (Don't we all?) Winning is positive reinforcement. When I play them individually I often ask, 'Do you want to win?' If so, I arrange it, i.e., talk them through to a win. 'Do you want to capture this group of stones?' If they say yes, I'll tenuki so they can capture them. But the moves I play elsewhere will be good moves. I think it's important they always see real moves. I often begin by asking, 'Talking game or non-talking game?' If it's a talking game we will try different variations during the game and take moves back; I'll comment on the purpose of the moves. I'll ask, 'How many handicap stones do you want?' Whatever they suggest is fine. I ask, 'What size board do you want to play on?' Sometimes a child will say, 'Play your hardest.' This child wants to test him/herself. I want them to feel, and be, in charge of their own learning. My only investment in playing the children is in their learning. This required my overcoming a psychological aversion to losing.

I occasionally try to capture their attention by, e.g., telling the story of Michael Redmond becoming a pro and showing them one of his games; remarking on the prize money for the winner of a game; or, some story about Go history. But mostly they are playing Go with a little instruction.

Classroom Management.

I have 2nd to 4th graders. Not everyone can teach children at this age. Teaching children to play after school is extremely challenging. They've been in school all day and are bursting with energy. They have active minds and are easily distracted by friends. We're in the computer lab and they know how to use these machines, change the background colors (a school no-no), change settings, and find all kinds of games and programs on the computer. And, they love showing each other their new tricks. So, it's a constant challenge keeping them all on KGS and focused on Go, particularly right after they finish a game and are waiting for their next opponent. They learn to chat on KGS almost immediately and we've been shut down because of misuse of this function. I am working hard! If only one person is in the session, doing an opening lesson and then managing the room is a full-time job. If there are two, one can manage and the other teach one or two children at a time (review a game, teach a joseki, etc.)

On board or on line.

Sometimes I wish we were playing with Go equipment. That way they learn to count, do *nigiri*, better learn etiquette, learn to place stones on the board, and get a real feel for the game. (Some students have never seen a Go board and think Go is a computer game.) And of course the computer itself is a distraction. But for teaching and game review an overhead projector and all games being recorded is a great advantage. And you don't need any Go equipment no matter how many kids are in your program...and kids know how to play on KGS and can do so independently...and can access Tiger's Mouth and the American Go Honor Society (AGHS). We have our own social room on KGS and the names of all the children start with 'ISCG' (Irvington School Chess and Go) so we can identify our own. During our meeting I insist that they only play each other.

Incentives:

There are three incentives I use besides the game itself:

1. Record all results and post next week.

This is my second year using running a 4 week competition. They can set the board size wherever they want, but a counting game must be 9*9, 13*13, or 19*19. (Another advantage of KGS: the kids can explore any size board from 2*2 to 38*38). During the 4 weeks they cannot play the same player twice. Naturally they figure out who the best players are and, unlike real Go players, don't want to play them. They are way more invested in winning than learning!!! So, the rule is, if I pair you with someone you

haven't played and you refuse to play him/her, you must forfeit that match. Most kids will play the match under these conditions...and I often give handicap stones to facilitate such a match. Keeping a count of wins and losses, and declaring winners at the end of 4 weeks, has added a level of competition that kids seem to want, and has increased their level of involvement. Needless to say, the kids who are winning are happier than the kids who are losing, but this is the society we live in...what can you do? When children lose I may offer to review their games to help them improve; some children appreciate this, some don't. Very quickly, some of their moves will be good, so a game review will always include, 'That's a good move.'

2. Prizes.

At the end of four weeks I award 1st-4th place prizes. (There are 15-20 kids in each group.) I'm using stuff left over from the Go Congress in Portland – medals for first place as long as they last, mugs, tote bags, two-color pens, fans – but I don't think it matters too much what the prizes are. They just like getting something. Little trophies would be good, certificates, healthy snack bars...anything...It's that they get a prize that counts. All the kids think it's cool and the best players get recognized.

3. Competition.

This is the first year I've started a Go team, and I think it is the coup de gras. When I asked if people were interested in being on a Go team I got wildly enthusiastic responses. To be on the team you must come to practice – it's from 2-3 on Sunday afternoon during a regular 1-4 Go meeting. I have 8-9 team members, not all of whom come each time. Since I formed the team we've had four matches: one with a school in Mexico City, on-line; a team of 3 played in the AGHS on line tournament in March, 2012; a three team match between Portland schools with 6 player teams; and a match against another Portland school with each team fielding 8 players, the latter two with real sets.

Practice has been huge. In addition to extra time to teach and play with the children, I've taught their parents how to play with them. The parents bring the kids to practice, and sometimes I'm teaching the kids, sometimes the parents. This gives the parents an appreciation for Go and answers other questions about the game's history and cultural significance. They get it that this is not Tetris: it's a significant cultural and intellectual experience. Our on-line tournaments were held in a parent's home using their wireless network, so it was also a chance for the team to play as a team – not just using the internet from their home. It was also a chance to download the KGS client onto all their computers. Parents supporting their children playing Go, and learning to play themselves, is a key component of a successful program.

Challenges.

In this program the major outstanding challenge is improving the level of Go these children play. For almost all of them, having learned to play, they are far more interested in playing than being taught.

The Teacher.

A successful teacher must have, or develop, classroom management skills, love children, be able to connect with them, and gain their respect. What Go strength should a teacher have? Simply introducing the game does not require much strength, but teaching in an on-going program would seem to. I am an AGA 2 dan and feel my strength is adequate to the task. My moves generally will be reasonable, reading skills adequate, and my thinking deep enough to cover the basics. I think it's important that children see their teacher playing 'real moves'. Perhaps being a low to middle kyu player is sufficient.

Results:

Some of these children now play independently on KGS, and, in the library where there are boards, stones, Go problems, and Hikaru No Go *anime*.

Go is an integral part of the school program

Parents understand the importance of Go, its educational features, some know how to play, and they support their children's' interest in the game.