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TEACHING CATHOLICISM, AS EASY AS PLAY

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

BY TIM LYNCH

In society, sport often connotes a religious reference. Sport as a medium for learning is directly related to the curriculum key learning area of Health and Physical Education (HPE), as it can be used as a vehicle for teaching the HPE concepts. The unique 'learning through movement' nature of HPE enables a focus on the physical dimension. Hence, sport interacts intimately with the strand 'developing concepts and skills for physical activity', which is embedded in the Queensland HPE syllabus. In the physical dimension students can be presented with many practical and social experiences that require acknowledgement and reflection upon Catholic religious traditions and Gospel values. Therefore, within Catholic education, the HPE learning area is strongly connected to the Religious Education curriculum. By investigating how HPE can be a medium to promote the eight distinctive Catholic qualities identified by renowned Catholic educator, Thomas Groome (2002), the learning area's importance and potential within the Catholic school context and connection to Religious Education can be further recognized. It is argued that connecting these two Catholic education key learning areas is a role that both the HPE learning area and teacher have willingly assumed and one that has become more significant in recent times.

Introduction

Sport is often related to religion. Although contemporary Australian society has been influenced by a secular shift (Hughes, 1999), most members of the public acknowledge religious reference through sport. Many even find it a comforting reminder of their faith. The 'Sign of the Cross' regularly made by Australian cricketer, Matthew Hayden, is one such public manifestation. The role sport plays in religious revelation is not only experienced

This article demonstrates how the teaching of Catholic values can be inherently delivered through the H&PE curriculum.

by famous, elite or professional sportspersons, but includes all participants of physical activities who are prepared to extend their faith into all aspects of life. Therefore, it is argued that religious permeation can be experienced at the 'grassroots' of sport, which can be used as a vehicle for learning the HPE curriculum, amongst the young physically active students, particularly within HPE classes in Catholic schools.

HPE: playing by the rules

To investigate the degree of importance of the HPE learning area within the Catholic education context, the context needs to be firstly examined. By probing the essential common features that identify Catholics or ultimately

make Catholics Catholic, the HPE learning area's suitability and necessity within the education system can be recognized. This investigation is designed to answer the analogy of whether or not the HPE learning area plays by the rules within the Catholic education context.

One of the most influential contemporary Catholic religious educators, Professor of Theology and Religious Education at Boston College, Thomas Groome (2002), identifies eight distinctive Catholic qualities that make Catholics Catholic. The eight qualities have been chosen to provide the framework for analysis. They are:

- the sense of sacramentality (finding the infinite in the finite)
- feeling of community
- appreciation of human potential
- appreciation of fallibility
- concern for justice
- concern for the unfortunate
- reverence for tradition
- conviction that care should have no borders.

By identifying how physical activities in Catholic schools, through the mediums of sport and HPE, can promote these different Catholic qualities, correspondingly the HPE learning area's importance can be further recognized within the Catholic school context.

The first Catholic quality, 'sense

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of sacramentality' (Groome, 2002) can be achieved through all life experiences which fundamentally have the capacity to lead us to God (Catholic Education Commission-NSW, 1993). This quality relates directly to the spiritual dimension which can be experienced through the engagement of the HPE curriculum. This dimension is described in the Queensland syllabus documents as the "sense of connection to phenomena and unusual events beyond self and usual sensory and rational existence; a sense of place within the universe" (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999a, p.26). The nature of HPE offers opportunities that increase the sense of sacramentality through movement, skill and physical fitness where God's influence and design are apparent (Catholic Education Commission-NSW, 1993). This phenomenon has the potential to be experienced through sport, as reminisced by Australian swimmer Rebecca Creedy during her national swimming trials for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, "I was asking for a lot of help and I really needed it and I did have a strong sense that someone was helping me" (McGirr, 1999). Also, Australian Ballet identity Steven Heathcote shares his support, describing dance as deeply religious and spiritual (Hughes, 2002). Hence, it can be argued that if the 'sense of sacramentality' can be experienced by some of Australia's elite athletes then why not also by children within Catholic schools, where similar yet modified physical activity encounters can be provided?

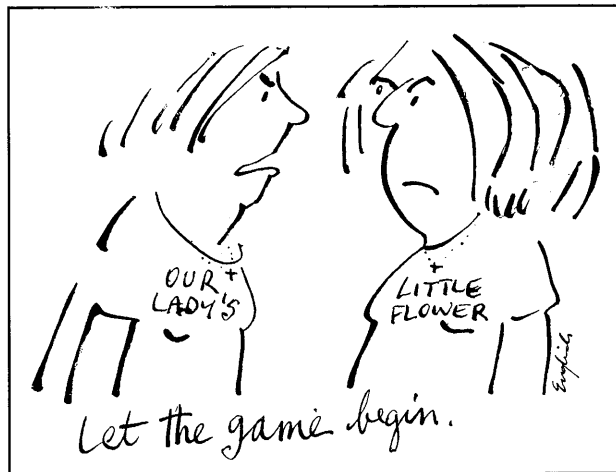
A 'feeling of community' is developed through 'lifeskills', more specifically the 'Enhancing Personal Development' strand incorporated in the HPE syllabus. This strand enables provision of social and citizenship skill development, both of which are embedded within the social dimension of the curriculum documents. The social dimension according to the syllabus material

for HPE includes the

- "relationships with others
 - ethnic customs
 - interpersonal
 - communication skills
 - sense of belonging"
- (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999a, p.26).

It can be suggested that through community the self can be further developed.

Community is vital if we are to have active and fulfilling lives as Christians, valuing ourselves, each other and all of creation. It is essential within Catholic philosophy that these values be



developed within the growing student (Catholic Education Commission-NSW, 1993). Physical activity through means of HPE and sport enables the development for both personal and group fulfillment within the community. Furthermore, the fostering of community through sports is supported by the head of the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II. He has stated that physical activities develop a lively and mutual appreciation and sincere respect between people and the abilities and gifts that they possess, which ultimately enhances friendship (1982).

Tim Lane, a popular Australian sports personality, endorses the notion of community in sport. "When we went to the footy, I experienced a sense of family unity" (McGirr, 2001, p.17).

Therefore, if community can be promoted through the physical activity medium of sport then promotion is possible through HPE.

The third and fourth qualities shared amongst Catholics are an 'appreciation of human potential and fallibility.' The nature of physical activities through the medium of HPE and sport continuously provide opportunities that can remind students of challenges that are set as goals or are confronted as obstacles. Australian athlete Nova Peris-Kneebone shares, "I believe our prayers are answered but in a number of ways.

You win for a reason, you lose for a reason, you get injured for a reason" (McGirr, 2000, p.15). **The achievement and failure of goals and the overcoming or shortfall of obstacles, consummated through HPE and sport, enables**

better than other curriculum areas, the appreciative construction of human potential and fallibility.

Physical activity allows students many opportunities to test their physical and mental limits, to explore their understanding of self. HPE within schools ideally commence a lifetime of well-being, maintained through physical activities of various levels. Consequently, this introduces students to the notion of commitment, dedication and confrontation of challenges. Pope John Paul II addresses this theory of challenges met through the nature of HPE:

One must develop through long hours of exercise and effort the power of concentration and the habit

of discipline, learning how to hold one's strength in reserve and to conserve energy for that final moment when the victory depends on a great burst of speed or one last surge of strength (John Paul II, 1982, p.8).

Sport and physical activities can help us realise our strengths and weaknesses. It does this through cooperating and competing not only amongst individuals or teams, but within oneself. **The cooperation and competition within oneself is fundamentally based on self-improvement.**

The fifth and sixth qualities that Catholics share are a *'concern for justice and the unfortunate'* (Groome, 2002). A 'concern for justice and the unfortunate' is evident in the HPE curriculum documents' commitment to social justice. Within the curriculum material "the principles of diversity, equity and supportive environments are highlighted" (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999b, p.3). The Reclink Football League in Melbourne manifests social justice through sport. This is a competition for those who are homeless and unemployed. This league offers the players something to live for and motivates them to overcome life's hardships (Ferris, 2001). This is one example of how sport can provide the development of this Catholic quality and exemplifies the possibilities for the HPE learning area to do the same.

The seventh quality shared amongst Catholics is a *'reverence for tradition'* (Groome, 2002). The Catholic Christian tradition according to Brisbane Catholic Education requires constant referral to and calls us into new ways of growing and renewing through everyday living experiences (2003). **In the physical dimension**

students are presented with many practical and social experiences that require living and reflecting upon Catholic religious traditions and Gospel values. The HPE key learning area enables the revelation of the Gospel message, which is to live as Jesus did, through practical scenarios. Hence, sports/HPE and the Gospel message are closely associated and complement one another.

The eighth and final quality that makes Catholics Catholic is the conviction that *'care should have no borders'* (Groome, 2002). Caring exists within the obvious first-aid, emergency safety procedures and personal development aspects of the learning area. However, physical activities also promote respect and care for others through teamwork and competition, for both teammates and opponents. Care is essential as **"to realize our potential demands a commitment to the people, in them, we believe, God may be found"** (Catholic Education Commission-NSW, 1993, p. 75).

Teamwork: religious, health and physical education

The relationship between HPE and Religious education in Catholic schools has in recent times become more significant due to the increasing role Catholic schools have adopted in providing students with an experience of Church. In Australian society an increasing proportion of Catholics are becoming nominal members of their Church (Hughes, 1999). The numbers have fallen and continue to do so (Hughes, 1999). Physical activities in Catholic schools, through the mediums of the HPE learning area and sport, have outstanding potential to develop the eight distinctive Catholic qualities identified by Groome. Furthermore, they have the advantage that is affiliated with the child/ students' natural play structure.

For many students today, the Catholic school is often their only experience of Church. Therefore, the role religious education and HPE play and their relationship within the Catholic school has taken on greater importance. Subsequently, the HPE specialist teacher has assumed the responsibility of contributing 'hands on' learning experiences that connect the HPE and religious education curriculum, through presenting practical and social experiences that require acknowledgement and reflection upon Catholic religious traditions and Gospel values. HPE and the way in which it is delivered is vital within a Catholic school as it allows for the development of the whole person, permeating authentic human and Catholic Christian development.

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