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The Importance of HPE in Catholic Schools

by Tim Lynch*

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.

Within Catholic education, the health and physical education (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, the learning area's importance within the Catholic school context and connection to religious education can be further recognised.

The role sport plays in religious revelation can be experienced by famous, elite or professional sportspersons. It can also be experienced by any participant involved in physical activities, 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, a vehicle for learning the HPE curriculum, amongst the young physically active students, particularly within HPE classes in Catholic primary schools.

Thomas Groome, one of the most influential contemporary Catholic religious educators, professor of theology and education at Boston College, identifies eight distinctive Catholic qualities that are shared amongst Catholics:

- 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 recognised within the Catholic school context.

"Physical activity through means of HPE and sport enables the development for both personal and group fulfillment within the community."

The first Catholic quality, 'sense of sacramentality' can be achieved through all life experiences which fundamentally have the capacity to lead us to God (NSW Catholic Education Commission, 1993). This quality relates directly to the spiritual dimension which can be experienced through the engagement of the HPE curriculum. It is 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, 1999).

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 (NSW Catholic Education Commission, 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 enables provision of social and citizenship skill development, both of which are embedded within the social dimension of the curriculum documents (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999). The social dimension of HPE includes the "relationships with others, ethnic customs, interpersonal and communication skills and sense of belonging" (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999).

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 that these values be developed within the growing student (NSW Catholic Education Commission, 1993). Physical activity through means of HPE and sport enables the development for both personal and group fulfillment within the community.

The fostering of community through sports is supported by 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).

The third and fourth qualities shared amongst Catholics according to Groome (2002), 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). The achievement and failure of goals and the overcoming or shortfall of obstacles, consummated through HPE and sport, enables the appreciative construction of human potential and fallibility.

The fifth and sixth qualities that Catholics share are a *'concern for justice and the unfortunate'* (Groome, 2002). This 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, 1999). 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 have another shot at life (Ferris, 2001). This is one example of how sport can provide the development of this

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Catholic quality and exemplifies the possibilities for the HPE learning area to do the same.

The seventh quality shared amongst Catholics (Groome, 2002) is a *'reverence for tradition.'* The Catholic Christian tradition requires constant referral to and calls us into new ways of growing and renewing through everyday living experiences (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2003). The HPE key learning area enables the revelation of the gospel messages, which is to live as Jesus did, through practical scenarios. Hence, sports/ HPE and the Gospel message enhance and complete one another (Hoffman, 1992).

The eighth and final quality that makes Catholics Catholic is the conviction that *'care should have no borders'* (Groome, 2002). Caring exists within the 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. The values of loyalty, fair play, generosity, friendship and a spirit of cooperation are all aspects of care (Hoffman, 1992). Care is essential as "to realise our potential demands a commitment to the people, events and things of our world, in them, we believe, God may be found" (NSW Catholic Education Commission, 1993).

Physical activities in Catholic primary 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's natural play

structure. For many students today, the Catholic school is often their only experience of Church (Puttock, 2002). Therefore, the role religious education and HPE play and their relationship within the Catholic school has taken on greater importance. HPE and the way in which it is delivered is vital within a Catholic primary school as it allows for the development of the whole person, permeating authentic human and Catholic Christian development.

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