Competition, fair play, and morality in secondary school physical education: New meaning for old games.*

by

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Introduction and Purpose

In this paper I intend to explore how competition as it is currently associated with team games such as basketball, soccer, hockey, rugby, and so on, affects the morally educative opportunities claimed to be had for students through participation in team games offered in physical education class. The ethical composition and ramifications of 'fair play' in class based competitive sport situations are rarely examined by sport philosophers, even though 'fair play' is often mentioned as a desirable component of successful physical education classes. It is my contention that when the moral underpinnings of fair play are discussed, regardless of whether the sport in question is in class or out, it is almost always in terms of the rules and regulations that guide the game. I contend that when fair play is introduced through an ethic of care and responsibility, rather than an ethic of justice and rules, competitive games become opportunities for inclusion rather than alienation.

In this paper I propose to examine three philosophical approaches to the notion of 'fair play' as it is related to competitive sport, and apply these theories to those current pedagogical practices in school physical education that pertain to competitive team sport instruction. Finally, I will offer an alternative perspective to current conceptions of 'fair play', one that disrupts current commonly held assumptions about the nature of competition.

Distinguishing between Teaching and Coaching

At this juncture it may be helpful to distinguish between two different aspects of the school physical education program - teaching and coaching. Although they may appear, at first glance, to be similar, from the experiential standpoint of the student they are (or should be!) quite different. Both utilize and encourage competition, but with different outcomes in mind. In class, many sports are taught to emphasize particular skills, strategies, and tactics designed to help children reach a deeper understanding of movement, and the nature of games in general. Competition as it appears in class is commonly regarded as a motivational tool, used to incite students to participate, to try harder, or to play the best they can. The (often modified) games of basketball, volleyball, soccer, and so on that are taught in physical education have quite different purposes, structures, and intents from the volleyball, basketball, and soccer teams that are developed and produced for competitive interschool events.

Sometimes, because team games like basketball are commonly included as class activities, or even because the person who teaches basketball may also coach the school basketball team, it is easy for students to conclude that the games are the same. However, when the game is an interschool sport, the emphasis is on developing the athletic skills of a small group of select students to utilize strategies and tactics focused on defeating an opposing team. Basketball in this instance is an activity that is purposely competitive, conducted with small groups of elite level players who are expected to 'represent the school' as they strive to overcome their opponents. Thus basketball may appear in both class and interschool aspects of the physical education program, but the nature of the game that is played in each situation may be quite different. Where problems arise is when students and/or teachers collapse both situations into one, and think of basketball (or volleyball, or soccer) not only as inescapably competitive, but unalterably competitive in very narrow and specific terms.

Competition and Fair Play in School Physical Education - a problem (?)

Competition as it appears now in school, both in interschool athletics and in class based PE is usually considered only in terms of winning and losing. There is a common supposition that competition must consist of winning and losing, and of displays of power, dominance, and control, for better or for worse. However, contemporary theorists continue to promote
physical education class as the "logical" place to make connections between competitive activities and the development of good moral behaviour (Bergmann Drewe, 2000). For many, the nature of the competition associated with sport is inevitable, as Anthony Skilling makes clear in this quote,

Sports are competitive. In sport we do not set out to simply exercise our capacities and to develop our skills, we set out, by showing more capacities and skills than they do, to beat our opponents. The spirit of competition and conquest is inextricable from sport. As we shall see, this fact could mislead us into regarding sport as a bad thing and hence to condemn the place of sport in education. To others, the centrality to sport of contest, aggression and victory might be seen as an inevitable reflection of the central place of those motives in human, especially male, nature. (p. 71)

I would like to argue however the possibility that teacher efforts to implement ethical strategies of 'fair play' in situations where competition is narrowly defined as "contest, aggression and victory" may lead not to desired moral educative opportunities, or even to increased participation, but to increased student alienation and avoidance of physical education.

**Competition and Fair Play in Physical Education - three philosophical views**

Various sport philosophers have described the morally educative possibilities of the relationship between competition and fair play in school physical education in, to put it mildly, disparate ways. For example, David Carr (1998) considerably plays down the presence of competition when he argues that there are only tenuous connections between various aspects of moral education and physical education. Carr concedes that regular play may have significant implications for the development of moral character because sports and games, being continuous with the wider concerns of life, cannot avoid moral complexity. But he dismisses the notion that that any "purported morally significant property of sport-such as competition" (p.128) may provide special moral consequences for participants. As well, he briefly touches on the question of whether the rule-bound nature of games and sports must of necessity be regarded as morally noteworthy for education. He concludes that the connection is tenuous at best, and aside from a possible continuity of sporting experience with further life experiences, it is not possible to claim that sport has any inherently moral significance simply because a game may be viewed as "a set of formally prescribed rules and procedures" (p.130).

Sheryl Bergmann Drewe (2000), on the other hand, claims that there is a logical connection between moral education and physical education that is based on the acknowledgement of the importance of the place of competitive activities for students to recognize success. Bergmann Drewe maintains that there is more than merely an opportunistic connection between physical education and moral education. There is also a logical connection. She bases this claim squarely on the notion that not only is competition (naturally) present in physical education, there must be competition present, in order to make physical activity meaningful. Part of this logical connection is built upon a philosophical understanding of 'fair play' that is focused on an exploration of the principle of justice.

Competition has traditionally been described in terms of winning and losing, and of a person or a team striving to attain supremacy over an(other). Bergmann Drewe looks closely at this notion of striving to win, and suggests that the morally educative properties of physical education would be enhanced if competition was more commonly understood by its root word *com-petitio*. In this perspective, competition is understood to mean not aspiring to overcome the opposition, but that all players strive "together in pursuit of excellence"
She observes that, "[T]his striving together necessitates a respect for one's opponents" (p.567). Thus competitive activities should not be avoided in physical education because there is potential for disrepecting through cheating, lying, 'trash talking', intentional injury and so on. Rather, the always present possibility these situations may occur in sport provide ample opportunity for physical educators to become moral educators and help students develop such virtuous traits of character as benevolence, compassion, courteousness, and so on.

Robert Butcher and Angela Schneider (1998) develop what they refer to as the "applied concept" of fair play by arguing that it is "a subset of general moral or social values applied to, or taught through, sport and physical activity" (p.1). Their central argument revolves around the idea of "fair play as respect for the game" (p.8), where 'respect' is understood in the sense of honouring, esteeming, or valuing. In this sense, fair play assumes a moral aspect because the participant ought to value the interests and rights of others as they value their own. Further, if the student or player honours or esteems their sport, they will be intrinsically motivated to exhibit fair play. They state,

"... intrinsic motivation... reinforce(s) a commitment to the process of playing the game. A commitment to the process of playing the game is a commitment to, and respect for, the game itself, with all that implies. Because respect for the game requires respect for its rules and traditions, intrinsic motivation is its natural practical ally and support" (p. 14).

**Fair play and the rules of the game**

Sport philosophers base their arguments for whether physical education can be a place for moral education on the rule-bound nature of most competitive games (Carr, Bergmann Drewe, Butcher & Schneider, McIntosh, Skillings). Rules are a guiding factor in every sporting contest, and provide clear delineations of right and wrong behaviour for teachers and students. It is generally accepted that when rules are not observed, either purposely or inadvertently, individual acts of dishonesty, unfairness, and even bodily harm can result. Notwithstanding contentious elements of equity and care which may also be present in sporting contests, the observance of "fair play" then, seems to be most often equated with how students observe the rules of the game. In this perspective, it is the principle of justice, with its emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities, that guides the underlying assumptions philosophers make about the possibility of teaching appropriate moral behaviour in physical education class.

It seems to me however, that fair play focused primarily on an adherence to rules results in a very narrow conception of what moral behaviour can or should be in physical education. Bergmann Drewe suggests that a player's decision to follow regulative rules, as well as the 'spirit of the rules', is a moral choice, and it is here that physical education becomes "an arena for practicing moral behaviour" (p.571). Students learn to make moral choices through the practical application of rules and regulations in game experiences in physical education. She comments that since moral educators are interested in developing within their students a sense of intrinsic morality, the strong connection between the development of intrinsic motivation to play games and game playing, as well as the possibility of making moral choices while game playing, may lend itself to the development of students who ought to be able to act in intrinsically moral ways.
Butcher & Schneider (1998) also closely tie fair play to the notion of rules and regulations, and comment that viewing 'fair play' as respect for the game, when understood on the personal level, may influence the player's actions on the field, their attitudes to opponents, and their commitment to the game. This conception of fair play (as respect for the game) may be even narrower than that of Bergmann Drewes', at least when it is applied to school physical education classes. Although the authors argue that, "Respect for the game... creates important behavioral consequences in competition" (p. 15). Their description of the interests and motivations of athletes that follow are, I believe, particularly difficult to relate to the school experience,

"If winning comes as a result of a well-played, evenly -matched game, both the victor and the vanquished can view the win as providing important performance feedback, an essential part of intrinsic motivation. Because respect for the game entails an understanding of the relationship between a game and its rules...[I]f one cheats one ceases to play..." (p. 15/16)

In this scenario, well matched groups of students play fair because they have come to realize that the only game worth playing is that which adheres to the rules and provides equal opportunity for all participants, an unlikely occurrence in compulsory physical education classes composed of randomly selected students bringing a variety of skills and attitudes to sport and physical activity participation.

If an adherence to rules and regulations is an unlikely path to moral learning in physical education, is there another, alternative approach that may be taken by physical educators who wish to encourage, through sport participation, the development of intrinsically moral behaviours in their students?

**Fair play, sport as a social practice, and the ethic of care**

It has been the work of feminist sport theorists to consider how sport, as a social practice, may have authentic meaning in women's lives. This perspective has led women to consider the various ways in which sport is legitimized in a patriarchal society, and the effect this may have on how girls and women enter, participate in, and relate to various sporting situations to which they may be exposed. Sport has long been closely associated with masculinity. Competition, as a [closely bound] element of sport, has traditionally been associated with such particular defining characteristics as dominance over others, displays of power, and control of an opponent, activities which, if not entirely unfamiliar to women, are not necessarily experiences for which they are socially prepared. The work of such feminist sport theorists as Bennett, Whitaker, Wooley Smith and Sablove (1987) and Birrell & Richter (1987) as well as feminist philosophers who have explored Carol Gilligan's ethic of care may provide a basis for constructing an alternative approach for physical educators to understand and deal with issues of competition and moral education affecting female and male students in their classes.

Feminist sport theorists, researchers, and participants have begun to examine the competitive sport experiences from a woman-centred perspective. They have focused on the traditional modernist body-mind split and begun to draw comparisons between, "those activities which most strongly symbolize masculine thought and action" (Bennett et al, 1987, p.374), that is, sport, and the response by women who desire to participate in it. Women are challenging the traditional masculine approaches to competitive sport, with team activity that is "...process-oriented, collective, inclusive, supportive, and infused with an ethic of care." (Birrell & Richter, 1987, p.395).
At this point, fair play as it is utilized in school physical education is usually predicated on what we commonly understand to be an ethic of justice. That is, fair play is concerned with the observance of rules, and the associated moral difficulties contained in a conscious (or, perhaps, even unconscious) decision to ignore or break them. Is it possible to think of fair play that is promoted in school physical education in terms of those characteristics commonly associated with an ethic of care? What would be the effect on the way in which physical educators deal with such competition issues in their classes as winning and losing, dishonesty, cheating, skill elitism, personal safety, and so on if fair play was understood to mean something other than a careful observance of the rules?

Joan Tronto (1993) identifies three fundamental characteristics used by Gilligan to differentiate an ethic of care from an ethic of justice. First, an ethic of care revolves around different moral concepts than an ethic of justice. That is, an ethic of care is concerned with responsibilities and relationships rather than rights and rules. When competition is infused with an ethic of care, the reliance on rules to enable displays of power, dominance and control (at either the personal, or the collective level) is diminished. It is less likely that rules will be the focal point for arguments and fights if students learn to understand them in terms of relationships and responsibilities rather than as a means of exerting power over others. When rules become guidelines intended to support the efforts of all participants rather than enforce the actions of some over others, students may find they have more opportunities to develop personal competencies. Further, moral behaviour that focuses on relationships in physical education provides students with the impetus to support and encourage their peers (team mate or opposition) to experience success, rather than to criticize and dispute with them for 'errors' they may make in rules observance. There would be increased opportunities for students to understand that each player's success contributes to the enjoyment of the game as a whole.

Second, Tronto observes that the morality of an ethic of care is tied to concrete circumstances, rather than being formal and abstract. It has been my experience that students, especially male students, seem to want to play the full game of any given sport, right from the moment it is introduced in class, even if they have very little experience or skill in the area. In part, this may be because they have seen many games played at high levels of skill on television, and they wish to emulate the actions of various sports heroes. Students invoke (perhaps unwittingly) an ethic of rights and rules as a means of justifying their desire to leap right into the full game by placing the game and its rules in the realm of the universal and the abstract. That is, they argue that games are 'supposed' to be played by the rules. Any modification of the rules makes 'the game' something other than the universally recognized activity it ought to be. Even if skills are lacking, some students reason that 'the game' can be authentically played only if all rules are observed. Moral concepts that are tied to concrete circumstances however, enable students to recognize that modified games, and lead-up games provide increased practice and playing opportunities for all students, regardless of skill level and experience. The result may be more enjoyable game participation for all students, instead of just the skilled minority.

Finally, Tronto observes that this morality is "best expressed not as a set of principles but as an activity, the 'activity of care.' ...morality is not grounded in universal, abstract principles but in the daily experiences and moral problems of real people in their everyday lives." (p. 242). Would students be more inclined to develop an intrinsic motivation to participate in activity if their experiences in class were guided by fair play that defined moral situations not in terms of rights and responsibilities but in terms of relationships of care? Where,

The perspective of care requires that conflicts be worked out without damage to the continuing relationships. Moral problems can be expressed
in terms of accommodating the needs of the self and of others, of balancing competition and cooperation, and of maintaining the social web of relations in which one finds oneself (Tronto, 1993, p. 249).

It has been the purpose of this paper, through an examination of the commonly accepted moral structure of fair play, to interrupt the assumptions of immutability and inevitability surrounding the presence of competition in the physical education class experience. In doing so I have attempted to call into question the masculinist assumptions of dominance, power, and control often associated with competitive team sport that have been unquestioningly attached to even the most innocuous team activity at the physical education class level. I argue that it is possible that these practices, when supported by notions of fair play that exclusively emphasize strict adherence to game rules, are largely responsible for unethical student/participant behaviour. Further, they provide little opportunity for students to develop an intrinsic motivation to participate in or continue with physical activity. Finally I suggest it may be useful to think about the applied concept of fair play in a different way. Rather than connecting fair play exclusively with an ethic of justice focused on rights and rules, it may be useful and productive to think of fair play in terms of an ethic of care, one that highlights relationships and responsibilities, and encourages students to develop moral behaviour that fosters the production of a "social web of relations" for one another as they play.
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