

A sporting chance

IF SPORT CONTRIBUTES SO MUCH TO OUR STUDENTS AND SOCIETY, MAYBE WE SHOULD BE GIVING IT MORE TIME IN THE CURRICULUM, SAYS **DAVID LOADER**.

Sport is a serious business – just look at its media coverage and the amounts we pay our top sports people – but is sport a critical element in the education of our young? According to the playing-fields-of-Eton argument, the answer is yes. That argument, as the historian Sir Edward Creasy told the story, originated when the Duke of Wellington, an Eton College old boy, was watching Eton in a cricket match. ‘There grows the stuff that won (the Battle of) Waterloo,’ Wellington said. Creasy didn’t say who won that match: the point, you see, was that the Duke was referring to the importance of sport in the development of character and leadership.

Eton College itself is quite clear that sport is important in developing positive qualities. As the website explains, referring to ‘games,’ of course, not ‘sport,’ ‘Learning to win and lose, to lead and be led, to push oneself to and perhaps beyond one’s limits, to think as part of a team, to know when to strive for more and when to acknowledge defeat; these are all part of learning to be human.’ Equally, of course, sport can do the opposite when children’s self-esteem is damaged by forced participation or poor choice of sport.

When we use the word sport, are we all talking about the same thing? Does sport have to be competitive, team oriented and physical? Scrabble, say, or chess can teach strategy, planning, learning to win or lose, in fact most of the qualities mentioned on the Eton website.

We also have to consider how sport compares in importance to literacy and numeracy, or geography and history, or technology. Will testing in sport appear in the results published in the next iteration of the My School website?

There’s an argument that sport contributes to society in general. According to Sport England, an organisation that

aims to develop and sustain participation in grassroots sport, research indicates that sport in the community leads to: crime reduction; the economic regeneration of local communities; education and lifelong learning; increased participation in communities; improved physical fitness and health; improved psychological health and wellbeing; and increased social capacity and cohesion. That’s an impressive list. If sport delivers all this, perhaps we should be giving it much more time in the curriculum.

Another argument is that sport contributes to improved school performance. A healthy body leads to better cognitive functioning and can provide valuable developmental experiences although, as Sport England’s ‘Value of Sport Monitor’ warns, ‘current research into the nature of the relationship between participation in physical activity/sport and educational performance has produced mixed, inconsistent and often non-comparable results.’

According to the Western Australian Department of Sport and Recreation (DSR), participation in sport and recreation provides clear benefits in the five Australian national health priorities, namely: promoting better mental health; cardiovascular disease prevention; diabetes prevention and control; the primary prevention of some cancers; and injury prevention.

The DSR also believes that active sport participation has another benefit: diverting young people from crime and antisocial behaviours. According to a statement on the DSR website, ‘It can also target those young people most at risk of committing crime and help their rehabilitation and development.’

If we assume that sport is critically important, could we then think about schools as being locations primarily for sport? After all, sport needs specialist facilities and physical

communities whereas academic learning can potentially occur anywhere and at any time, supported by physical and virtual learning communities. We already have some specialist sport schools, but so far they haven’t replaced the primary or high school.

The recent movie, *Invictus*, which tells the story of the work by South Africa’s new President Nelson Mandela and rugby Springbok captain Francois Pienaar to unite a divided nation, illustrates the power of sport. ‘Sport,’ Mandela said in 1996, ‘has the power to unite people in a way little else can. Sport can create hope where there was once only despair. It breaks down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of discrimination.... Sport is probably the most effective means of communication in the modern world.’

The soccer World Cup next month may well prove him right. In schools, meanwhile, we need to question our assumptions, but we also need to be putting sport to the test and, as researchers like to say, more research is needed. **T**

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