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Sports Days, Competition and Self-esteem in Primary Schools

There has been a strong debate in education concerning the role of competitiveness in school sports and physical education. On the one hand, competitiveness is seen as problematic for those children that are not competent at physical and sporting activities (e.g. Lake, 2001; Ward, Cale & Webb, 2008). Conversely, there are those that argue that competition and the experience of winning and losing are important life skills that should be included in schools (e.g. Ofsted, 2005; Summers, 2008).

One of the casualties of this debate has been the move away from a traditional sports day in primary schools. In the traditional type of event, to which parents are often invited, children participate in a variety of individual races against each other. Children will usually have at least some choice in which races they will participate in and not all children are involved in all races.

More recently, some schools have opted for less traditional sports days where all children participate in all (or at least most events) in mixed age teams. Crucially, the activities that they engage in are what might be described as 'games' such as goal shooting, shooting basketball hoops, wellie throwing and so on. The idea is usually to emphasise the fun element of the event and there is often an assumption that competition is reduced and hence the danger to children who 'lose' is reduced.

However, it seems that the debate between traditional and modern is missing

some important elements and it is our intention to summarise the academic research in this area and explore some of these issues. Whilst there appears to be very little academic research specifically covering sports days, there is some relating to primary school physical education and sport which may be relevant.

Competition and Self-Esteem

It could be argued that the greatest criticism of sporting competition in schools is the issue of its impact on self-esteem. Academic research has generally shown that those who participate in sport have higher self-esteem than those who do not (e.g. Fletcher, Nickerson & Wright, 2003; McHale et al., 2005; Simpkins et al., 2006). However, the exact mechanism of how sport and self-esteem are related is not fully understood. One idea is that participation in sport increases children's positive sport self-concept which in turn increases self-esteem (see Donaldson & Ronan, 2006; Harter, 1993, 2006; Roberts, Kleiber & Duda, 1981; Simpkins et al., 2006).

The negative impact on those who do not participate in sport should not necessarily be inferred, although some researchers have suggested that self-esteem in sporting situations is influenced by how children perceive their own competence in physical activity (Harter, 1987). The possible implication is that children who do not feel very competent in sporting situations will have reduced self-esteem in these areas even if they do participate in sport. In other

words, participation in sports alone is unlikely to be solely responsible for raising self-esteem.

Implications for Sports Days

There are a number of possible issues relating to the abandonment of the traditional sports day format.

Firstly, there is the assumption that competition is removed or reduced when more frivolous activities are introduced in mixed age teams. There is no reason to believe that these games are any less competitive than traditional sports. Established social psychological theory and research suggests that when people are placed in groups they may experience in-group cohesiveness which in turn causes an increase in competition between such groups (e.g. see Sherif et al. 1961).

Furthermore, it can be argued that for those who do not feel very competent in physical activities, the negative impact on their self-esteem (or indeed their sport self-concept) could be increased if they are compelled to participate in team physical activities whereby they are able to compare their performance to older or more competent children in mixed aged groups.

Other reasons for changing to the modern version of a sports day include practical elements such as less waiting time for children (and hence fewer behavioural problems) and being more inclusive for all. Taking the former element first, it could be argued that waiting time is simply distributed over a longer time period (since all children take turns to participate in the game activities) and that small groups of mixed age children creates less support from same aged peers and could even lead to unsupportive comments from some children. Thus the overall aim of keeping children busy to avoid behavioural problems may not be achieved.

The issue of inclusivity is laudable but, as some authors have pointed out, successful participation in sport is influenced by a

child's ability to self select the sporting activity (Eppbriought et al. 1997; Malina, 1988). If children do not have the option to choose to participate in those activities they feel most competent at (or to avoid those they feel less competent at) this may affect a child's success in sport (Danish, Petipas & Hale, 1993; Eppbriought et al., 1997). Most modern games versions of sports day do not, by definition, allow much choice.

While the debate will undoubtedly continue on whether the traditional races or the modern games are more appropriate for sports days, it is likely that the actual activities carried out are less important than the attitude of the teachers (and those parents present). If competition of any sort is handled in a safe and sensitive manner with appropriate cognitive input then this can be a positive learning experience for children. It is likely that a safe and supportive environment will at the very least reduce the number of problems involved in exposing children to competitive sporting environments. We have argued elsewhere (Aleixo & Norris, 2009) that cognitive input is important in behaviour control methods in schools and are advocating similar input to competition in sports days. As Bailey (2006) pointed out:

'It also seems that the most promising contexts for developing social skills and values are those mediated by suitably trained teachers and coaches who focus on situations that arise naturally through activities, by asking questions of students and by modelling appropriate responses through their own behaviour' (p.399).

Ultimately, it is likely that schools need to make a decision about the role of competition in their sports days. Those that wish to eliminate competition need to provide alternatives to races and 'games'. One suggestion might be to include physical education demonstrations of gymnastics or dance for example. This would be in line with the 1992 addition of 'Health Related Exercise' to the primary P.E. curriculum. In

this case excellence in sporting arenas by competent children would be experienced in inter-school competitions. If, however, competition is still to be part of sports days, then the decision between traditional or games seems academic given that the team based games version of the sports day may not be considered better in competition terms. It seems more likely that it is the quality of the cognitive input by teachers that is important in mediating any negative effects of competitive sports days.

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