

# Deakin Research Online

**This is the published version:**

Hickey, Christopher 2006, Bringing shared values out of the shadows, *ACHPER Australia healthy lifestyles journal*, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 17-21.

**Available from Deakin Research Online:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30003493>

Reproduced with the kind permissions of the copyright owner.

**Copyright** : 2006, Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation

# Bringing shared values out of the shadows

Christopher Hickey - Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia

*As part of its wider promotion of a world that is peaceful and tolerant, the United Nations declared 2005 the International Year of Sport and Physical Education. At the fore of the UN's proclamation was recognition of the important role sport and PE play in nurturing the health and harmony of society. Sport and PE, the UN declared, provide important nodes for social connection around which shared values and understandings can be formed. In the wake of the UN's endorsement of the role that sport and PE can play in fostering social and emotional development, it is more important than ever that we reflect on and refine our practices towards this end. In this paper I draw on two research narratives to illustrate how easily this potential can be undermined. Indeed, behind some of the wonderful opportunities for connection that exist through a participation in PE and sport exists a dark shadow of alienation and oppression. The challenge raised through this paper centres on the need for PE teachers and coaches to work deliberately and strategically towards the cultivation of inclusive, tolerant and responsible forms of participation, and not leave their development to chance.*

## Introduction

It is somewhat of a paradox that at the same time physical education (PE) fights for recognition and status within the curriculum the United Nations has been celebrating its contribution to the greater good of humanity. In proclaiming 2005 as *The International Year of Sport and Physical Education*, the United Nations endorsed PE's capacity to contribute to the social/emotional well-being of society at local and global levels. Through Resolution 58/5, entitled, "Sport as a means to promote Education, Health, Development and Peace", the United Nations (UN) Assembly acknowledged the contribution of sport and PE to the promotion of a more balanced and just world. Specifically, the UN identified the collective capacity of sport and PE to raise community awareness and understanding of the social virtues associated with increased levels of connection, cooperation and tolerance. In announcing the UN's recognition of PE and sport Secretary-General Kofi Annan proclaimed that:

*...when young people participate in sports or have access to physical education, they can experience real exhilaration even as they learn the ideals of teamwork and tolerance. That is why the United Nations is turning more and more to the world of sport for help in our work for peace and our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.*

(United Nations Resolution 58/5, 2004)

In this paper I set out to present a much more problematic account of the coupling of sport and PE with the social aspirations of cooperation and tolerance, than that presented by the UN. The focus of my concern is with the ways in which many of the practices and discourses PE and

sport can be corrupted to do precisely the opposite to what the UN espouses, that is, to separate and divide. To illustrate this problem I draw on recent social science research projects that I have been involved in. In my explorations of the place of sport and PE in shaping and defining individual and collective identities, I have become increasingly aware of a shadow that exists around the cultural and curriculum practices of sport and PE. Of particular prominence here is a culture of abuse and entitlement that groups of sporting males seem to readily build up around themselves. When groups of males connect around the discourses and practices associated with hyper-masculine sports (namely the various codes of football) it is not uncommon for oppressive and exclusionary codes of behaviour to emerge. Within a dominant culture that endorses and celebrates character attributes associated with strength, aggression and solidarity, the social practices around identity can be very problematic. As I illustrate below, this can happen despite the best intentions of teachers and coaches.

To give life to the depth of some of the problems that I believe undermine the rhetorical claims that are made about the social contribution of sport and PE, I will present two research-based narratives. I use the events in these narratives, not as generalisations, but as heuristic devices to represent particular themes and issues. Importantly, I position my description and analysis of these events as a part of a wider process of critiquing and endeavouring to improve current practice. By bringing these issues to a level of consciousness I want to impress upon teachers, parents and coaches a need to be vigilant against the formation of

(sub)cultures of abuse and entitlement that seem particularly prevalent around the dominant codes of football. While it is males that are overwhelmingly represented in the enactment of these cultures, their impact is felt across all aspects of society. When young males distort their sporting identities to deride, abuse, violate or suppress it is by no means 'secret men's business. In concluding the paper I discuss some of the shifts that I believe need to take place if PE and sport are to give clearer focus to the shared community values they espouse, and recognise and confront the ones that hover in their shadow.

### Behind the Rhetoric exists a dark shadow

There has been a great deal of research and social commentary taken place around the various ways in which the dominant discourses of sport and PE are mobilised to define insiders and outsiders (see for example, Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Mills, 2001; Pringle, 2005; Skelton, 2001; Walker, 1988). Behind rhetorical claims about the potential for PE and sport to nurture social inclusion and connection, are the vastly different experiences of those who are positioned as insiders and those positioned as outsiders. My work in and around the construction and performances of masculinities has provided me with deep insights into the codes and practices that are frequently mobilised to establish and monitor these distinctions, and the consequences of their enforcement. I am left with no doubt that being excluded or rejected by one's peers presents as potentially one of the most damaging experiences a young person can have. The following narratives provide stark insights into some of the ways in which groups of males can corrupt sporting values to build up a culture of privilege and exclusion around them. The events in both narratives take place in and around schools and, therefore, in and around teachers. While I am not suggesting that the teachers and their programs are directly responsible for these events, I firmly believe that they both need to be part of the solution.

### Becoming a 'sporty' boy

In 2000, I was involved in an ethnographic project in which the interactions between a group of five 7 and 8 year old boys were monitored over a six-month period (see Keddie, 2001). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of the ethical and methodological practices of this research, it is fair to say that at the point of recruitment to the project Adam, Jack, Matthew, Justin and Ravi (pseudonyms) were viewed as a fairly 'typical' group of young boys. Underpinning their involvement in the research was their placement in the same grade and their self-identification as 'friends'. While the research recognised friendship to be a fluid construct, particularly with children of this age, at the point of entry the five boys identified each other as friends. Methodologically we were fully prepared for ebbs and flows in their status as friends during the data collection phase of the project, yet this status remained remarkably consistent. As part of the research schedule, weekly meetings/sessions were held with the boys whereon the discussions and activities that took place were captured on audio-tape, and later transcribed. The following transcript captures a discussion the boys had one day following a lunch-time game of football. Whereas most of their classroom activities were undertaken in mixed gender settings, the activities that the boys participated in at playtimes and lunchtimes were comprised almost

exclusively with other boys. The conversation began with the boys arguing over who deserved the mantle of "best footballer". Following extended banter around who was faster, stronger, tougher or more skilful, Ravi, who had remained relatively quiet, was asked what he thought about football.

"I don't actually like football", said Ravi, "I like soccer".

"Soccer's a girls game! Don't talk about soccer", interrupted Adam.

"Soccer is silly", Jack agreed.

"No it's not", said Ravi.

"Yes it is. When someone kicks 'em in the leg they go 'ah ha, my leg'", said Adam getting out of his chair and jumping around the room to parody an injured soccer player; much to the amusement of Jack and Justin.

"I like it", maintained Ravi.

"You're a girl then!" said Justin.

"No I'm not", replied Ravi.

"Hey Lucy, what's your name again", interrupted Adam.

"Oh yeah, that's right, Stephanie!" he enthused as Justin and Jack joined his laughter.

Adam explained that football was the best because the players were tougher and that he liked it "because you get to beat the shit out of people".

"Oh, you said the 'S' word again", alerted Jack.

Adam's capacity to dominate the conversation gathered momentum as the discussion went on.

"Okay, well I like football 'cause you can get really good chicks 'cause they think your butt's cute", he said.

"Yeah", agreed Matthew, "you get sexy girls".

"You're rude", replied Jack.

Ignoring Jack's comment Adam went on, "You get sexy girls ...they come and watch you play and then you can show off"

The conversation went on to whether the boys liked girls. There was a general denouncement of the girls in their grade and more particularly a broad admonishment of their respective sisters.

"Britney Spears isn't too bad. She's okay", said Adam.

"Yeah" agreed Justin.

"But not chubba-chubs", said Adam, "chubba-chubs. cross out", he said drawing an imaginary cross in the air.

"And stupid gutses" said Justin.

Adam was asked what chubba-chubs were. He responded by folding his arms across his stomach and puffing out his cheeks.

"Ooga-chuka, ooga-chuka", he sang while the other boys laughed.

"Yeah, the fat ones!" exclaimed Justin.

Throughout the study the boys regularly drew on hyper-masculine sporting discourses to define themselves as 'tough and manly' and others as 'weak and feminine'. Within their banter they frequently deployed this distinction to differentiate insiders and outsiders and to cajole and tease each other. Throughout their interactions there is very little indication that the boys use their engagements with sport and/or PE to describe tolerance or equality. Rather, the insights gleaned from this research depict the prevalence of sporting discourses within a school culture as being a significant vehicle for exclusion and discrimination.

## When abuse becomes sport!

In 2002-03 I was involved in another project that explored defining moments in men's lives (Boyer, 2004). Within a methodology that recognised reality as multiple and fluid, and a research design rooted in a narrative epistemology, the project sought to capture the life stories of sixteen men. The primary source of data in the project was a series of (3 or 4) 90 minute interviews with each participant. During the interviews the participants were invited, and enticed, to describe incidents or events that had shaped their lives. While each participant's story was intensely individual the analysis of the data revealed a number of recurring themes. One of these themes was the prominent existence of PE and sport in the practices and processes associated with performing masculinity. Indeed, all sixteen men described school incidents where groups of sporting males had banded together to administer abuse of one form or another. For some these stories conveyed very deep and distressing personal reflections while for others their experiences were formed vicariously through observations of the oppression of others. It comes as no surprise that the most frequent victims in their stories were boys that were not resourceful enough to establish an identity that was acceptable with the dominant masculine codes that ruled the schoolyards. It should also be of no great surprise that these codes had their most potent penetration within the culture and practice of sport and PE.

One of the men, Mark (pseudonym) was 12 years old when his life took a dramatic change. Though he was always considered outside of the 'cool or sporty group', he had been able to successfully exist alongside them throughout primary school. Mark drew no particular animosity from his peers and though he was generally considered to be one of the more uncoordinated boys, his academic performance was strong and he had his small group of friends. Mark remembers actually liking his time at primary school. Things changed very dramatically during his second week at secondary school. On the day they took their first PE class Mark remembers feeling particularly alone. In an all-boy setting Mark was allocated to one of four teams for a round-robin basketball competition. While the teacher downplayed the importance of winning, the teams were to play each other once during the session. Over the hour or so that the games took place, Mark recalls having a dreadful time.

*"They pretty quickly realised I was hopeless and one kid, who was really good at it, seemed to get a kick out of watching me fumble, drop and miss most of what came my way. He started to deliberately give me difficult passes and then bag me when I stuffed it up. His mates joined in with him... I remember just wanting to get the hell out of there but I couldn't".*

When the end of the class came, Mark remembers feeling a huge sense of relief. "I just thought, thank god its over". But unfortunately for Mark, the game had only just begun. While the boys got changed and moved to their next class Mark recalls being punched and abused several times by the same group of boys. "I can't remember if I cried but I would have been close, I remember being really sad". From that day on a pattern was set whereby Mark would be physically and emotionally violated at school on a daily basis for the next six years. While acts of physical abuse were initially performed outside of the classroom they soon entered classroom settings as well. Mark remembers how a particular group of "the footballers" would regularly poke him, punch

him and taunt him with names and threats whenever they saw him at school. What tormented Mark most was the fact that his assailants were very popular among both peers and teachers, particularly the PE teachers. Ironically, Mark recalls his early attempts to call out for help resulting in an intensification of his abuse, rather than its retreat. He quickly learnt that when you're a "poofta, girl, faggot or whatever", there's no place to hide at school.

PE was a particular node of tension for Mark. During his interview, he recounted how he felt "very exposed" during PE and sport sessions. "I hated PE, it was time when the group of boys that bullied me would be given centre stage and sort of be encouraged to behave the way they did." Mark concedes that while he may not have, "dubbed them in", he did not actively try to conceal the abuse that took place. "I was hoping they would get caught, but they didn't". As time went on Mark developed a formidable ability to get out of PE and sport classes. From counterfeit notes, fake injuries, hiding in the library and so on and so on, Mark used every resource available to him not to spend time near his assailants while *on their own turf*. "I wasn't the only one to get picked on but I probably copped it the worst, because I didn't stand up for myself. I was completely overpowered by them at the start and I couldn't ever redeem it from there. They just saw me as a punching bag to show off to each other".

Now in his early 30s, Mark draws a direct correlation between his experiences as a victim of bullying at school and particular attributes that he carries with him some 15 years later on. Listening to Mark describe the litany of drug treatments he has been prescribed and the array of therapists he has been referred to since school one can't help but question the negative impact sport and PE had on his social and emotional development.

*"Being bullied gave me a distrust and dislike for most people. I am wary of being approached by people. If someone is walking toward me I sort of step to the side because I think they are coming for me. I didn't have a distrust for people when I started school. I wasn't jumpy around people, or nervous. I think that developed very quickly as I started to have negative social interactions, as in being bullied and disliked for no reason that I could see".*

## Interpretations

Read as exemplars of more widely recognised themes, the two narratives project the uptake of discourses associated with sport and PE in schools as harbouring behaviours that contra-indicate the aspirations of the UN. In particular, the narratives capture the collective force that groups of young males can harness around sport and PE. These stories, and countless stories like them, are reminders that the cultures and practices readily built up around PE and sport can be far from tolerant and inclusive. Viewed as a conduit for exploring the intersection of sport, schooling and masculinity the narratives illustrate a number of issues and concerns. Foremost, they convey the potency with which the discourses and practices associated with sport and PE can be garnered to violate and exclude. Regardless of whether they are inclined or disinclined towards sport, young males, it seems, can readily expect to have their identity measured off against the culturally dominant sporting masculinity. Those that fail this scrutiny can be rendered very vulnerable in the context of their peers. Further to this, the narratives reinforce that an active

connection with sport and PE is by no means an endorsement of the social aspirations of tolerance, justice and equality. Indeed, there is a very thin line between many of the attributes promoted within the sporting arena being used in productive and destructive ways (Fitzclarence, Hickey & Nyland, 2005).

While the events that are described in the narratives are by no means the exclusive responsibility of sport and PE, their enactment is clearly compounded, or at least validated, by value-sets constructed in their shadows. Here, the two narratives convey the very contradictory and volatile status of value sets that are frequently promoted through one's participation in sport and PE. In the hands of some groups of boys the values that unite can simultaneously exclude, just as the value of healthy competition can be distorted toward domination and oppression. While there have been some notable attempts to promote PE and sport programs that are tolerant and inclusive, their presence in the school curriculum can be readily deployed to expose and marginalise, albeit unwittingly, the overweight, non-athletic and effeminate. Behind a rhetoric of inclusion, the policies and practices built up around sport and PE are overwhelmingly geared toward endorsing the skilful and athletic. As a result school playing fields and gymnasiums exist as sites where hegemonic forms of masculinity are readily practiced and legitimised. It is here that most boys learn (albeit subconsciously) what is and isn't expected of them and what they can and can't do if they want to be part of be part of the 'sporty-group'.

Contrary to popular mythology that peer group identity becomes all-pervasive during adolescence, the desire to fit-in is clearly a powerful force in the primary school years as well. In discussing the consequences of peer rejection Harris (ibid) points out, "(s)chool age children, in particular, are merciless in the persecution of the one who is different: the nail that sticks up gets hammered down" (p.169). Although only 7 and 8 years old, the boys in the first narrative clearly identify a number of entitlements that they associate with a masculine sporting identity. Though immature in their prosecution of these concepts, they understand footballers to be tough, aggressive, reckless, womanisers! Here, football becomes a powerful vector in nurturing elements of 'group think', wherein insiders are treated differently to outsiders. In the language of contemporary sociology these are the institutional codes and norms upon which the 'conditions of participation' are established. By not liking football Ravi is placed 'at risk'. He transgresses the team rules when he declares that he likes soccer more than football. Afterall, "soccer is a girl's game". By not lining-up with the consensus of the group Ravi is positioned as 'girl-like'.

Built up around the performances associated with hyper-masculine sports, the common attributes that underpin one's credibility include stoicism, hardness and solidarity. In the context of wider Australian culture these qualities map neatly on to those of the ANZAC legend. Relationships are forged between the acts of bravery and sacrifice on the battlefields and the deeds of the combative sportsman. The mythology of bravery, sacrifice and mateship now inform our common sense understandings of sporting triumph. However, in the daily media frenzy that surrounds high profile male contact sports we are frequently reminded that all that glitters is not necessarily gold. In an increasingly media saturated world the grand myths of military campaigns and sporting achievement are undone by

accounts of abusive and damaging behaviours that can readily stem from culture of abuse and entitlement that can be built up around a hyper-masculine identity. This tension is, I believe, integral to the problems PE has in endeavouring to consolidate its place in the curriculum. While physical educators have been reasonably successful in mobilising *health* and *scientific* discourses to advocate the value of sport and PE, they have been less effective at projecting these domains as *tolerant and inclusive*. Indeed, the ongoing presentation of PE and sport as sites of male privilege and entitlement serves to restrict their wider appeal (Kenway, 2000; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Mezireidin, 1992; Mills, 2001; Wright, 2000).

Not surprisingly, women are among those questioning and potentially seen as lacking commitment to the contribution that sport makes to society and schools. Underpinning this, of course, is the harsh reality that, as institutional practices, sport and PE harbour some of the most powerful contemporary sources of gender segregation - within which females are subordinated and exploited (Kenway, 2000). So rooted in maleness are the discourses and practices of competitive team sports that regardless of their achievements in many aspects of physical endeavour, women seldom experience the rhetoric of sport equality. Rather, women who submit to a sporting doctrine of *stronger, harder and faster* run a high risk of having their identity masculinised and criticised. Girls that measure up to boys are seen to 'have ball's' and are readily to be labelled 'tomboys', 'lesbians', 'dikes' and so on. As Adam reminds us in the first narrative, some girls - but not the fat ones - are accepted in the contemporary dominant discourses of sport.