

Olympic/ism Education: Does it have a place in Physical Education?

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Abstract

Founder of the modern Olympic Movement Pierre de Coubertin espoused the educational value of sport and the centrality of pedagogy in “building a peaceful and better world” (International Olympic Committee, 2015, p. 17). How this is translated into educational programmes and practices has been interpreted differently, with some variation between Olympic Education and Olympism education. Understanding the points of difference is an important part of considering how Olympism as a philosophy can inform educational endeavours, and as Culpan and McBain (2012) argue, influence the role Olympism can play in helping to legitimise physical education (PE) in schools. Drawing on the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, I explore how Olympism education has been used to frame curriculum policy in PE and to what extent this has and has not impacted on practice. This analysis is then used to argue against positioning Olympism education as the key to raising the quality and relevance of PE in schools, as it has the potential to add to the layers of confusion that already exist for teachers grappling with PE curriculum. In conclusion, I argue instead that as a community of educators we should turn our attention to the role Olympism education has in ensuring sport, particularly for youth, is practised in line with the Olympic ideals and the aims of Olympism espoused by de Coubertin.

Keywords

Olympism Education, Olympic Education, Physical Education, Curriculum.

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Introduction

Founder of the modern Olympic Movement Pierre de Coubertin espoused the educational value of sport and the centrality of pedagogy in “building a peaceful and better world” (International Olympic Committee, 2016, p. 15). Reflecting on the work of Parry (2007) and Culpan and Moon (2009), Culpan & McBain (2012) argue that “PE’s future legitimacy may necessitate drawing on the philosophy of Olympism and at the same time exploring what Freire (1974) termed ‘pedagogical possibilities’ in order for it to become educationally relevant, enduring and legitimate. To assist the quest for greater legitimacy, we believe Olympism education needs to be located within a contextualised PE curriculum” (p. 97). What this means and looks like as practice, and the realities of Olympism as a basis of enhancing PE, is the central to the focus of this paper.

The Olympics, Olympism, Olympic Education and Olympism education

Before proceeding to explore how Olympism education can be presented as PE curriculum, I am obliged to firstly attempt to unravel some of the complexity of how de Coubertin’s work has been taken up as an educative project, and articulated differently by scholars and in practice. This of course is more thoroughly argued in the recently published *Olympic Education: An International Review* (Naul, Binder, Rychtecky, & Culpan, 2017); however, it is important to acknowledge the complexity associated with Olympism as an educative project before considering how this may, or may not, shape PE policy, programmes and practices.

As Culpan & Wigmore (2010) argue, Olympic Education has frequently been presented as an ‘apedagogical’ opportunity, or as Naul (2008) calls it, a ‘knowledge-based’ orientation focus on learning about the history and facts associated with the Olympics Games, ancient and modern although rarely including the Paralympics, every four years in line with the Summer Olympic cycle. For teachers in primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand this is reflected in practices associated with the re-enactments of The Olympics Games, with children adopting countries and competing in a range of events and classroom-based activities framed around countries, participants, and medal tables. Readers may recall their own childhood experiences associated with school

Olympics days: marching with flags made in class, writing stories about a favourite Olympic hero, or maybe more recently using the Olympics to explore numeracy as students look at measuring distances for the long jump, etc. Such an approach appears to have little to do with the learning posited by de Coubertin and the philosophies of Olympism.

In contrast to this dominant model of Olympic Education as history, facts, figures and re-enactments, scholars including Arnold (1996), Kidd (1996), and Parry (1998) advocated for a broader and possibly more 'accurate' educative approach that aligns with de Coubertin's original writings. Although still under the umbrella term Olympic Education they advocate for what might now be termed a more socio-cultural version of Olympic Education that has learning outcomes associated with moral and ethical education, an emphasis on acting virtuously with honesty and courage, and a significant focus on the values of equality, justice, and fairness to all (respect, excellence, friendship and courage, determination, inspiration). This approach reflects a stronger alignment with the three underpinning ideas of an Olympism philosophy, summarised in a thematic analysis of Olympic education research completed by Teetzel (2012) as:

- a notion of **fairness**, which encompasses fair play, justice, and respect for the rules, traditions, opponents, and one's self;
- a call for **equality**, which includes ideas related to non-discrimination and respecting autonomy; and,
- a focus on **ethical behaviour** that respects human rights (p. 321).

These three ideas sit comfortably alongside the stated, if not necessarily the enacted, ideals of Olympism, where a way of life is promoted through: "the balanced development of body, will, and mind; the joy found in effort; the educational value of being a good role model; and the universal ethics" (International Olympic Committee, 2016, p.11): tolerance, generosity, unity, friendship, non-discrimination, respect for others.

Notions of fairness, equality, and ethical behaviour can be seen to make a contribution to the Olympic goal of developing a peaceful and better world by the educating of young people through sport free of discrimination, and in the Olympic spirit (International Olympic Committee, 2016). Scholars such as Binder (2012),

Chatziefsahiou (2012), and Mueller (2004) have continued to advocate for Olympic Education to be underpinned by the concepts of Olympism and not simply a narrow focus framed by the Olympic games. Internationally developed education resources have reflected this shift in focus. For example, the international handbook *Be a Champion for Life* (Binder, 2000) produced by the Foundation for Olympic and Sport Education articulates five values that appear to be foundational to a more Olympism-focused teaching resource. These values are as follows:

- Body, Mind and Spirit: Inspiring Children to Participate in Physical Activity
- Fair Play: The Spirit of Sport in Life and Community
- Multiculturalism: Learning to Live with Diversity
- In Pursuit of Excellence: Identity, Self-confidence and Self-respect
- The Olympics Present and Past: Celebrating the Olympic Spirit.

While the first four appear to be uncontested, Lenskyj (2012) argues that the last value cannot be seen as an optimal starting point for any morally focused education endeavour given the history of the modern Olympics. Her point reflects the scholarly abhorrence of researchers (Brown, 2012; Pringle, 2012) who suggest that the Olympics are so corrupt and beyond repair that they do little to support a philosophy for learning that is linked to morals, values and ethical practices. It is also important to note that Gessman (1992, cited in Binder, 2001) and more recently Muller (2004) have also advocated for a focus on excellence and striving for human perfection through high performance (scientific, sporting, artistic), and individual development through effort, with training being viewed as an excellent platform for holistic development. How this gets translated into practice alongside a more socio-cultural humanistic learning focus is not so clear but may indeed contribute to further confusion about what the educative focus for learning is for the Olympic Movement.

In further extending the argument for a more nuanced approach to Olympic education, Binder (2005), Culpan and Wigmore (2010), Teetzel (2012), and Culpan and McBain (2012) argued for the adoption of a critical perspective that allows for a richer educational understanding of Olympism and the opportunity for student learning to focus on emancipatory engagement and social

transformation, with the broader Olympic ideals underpinning this endeavour. As Teetzel (2012) expresses, this provides an opportunity for a “more nuanced and complex version of Olympism, which acknowledges both the positive and negative attributes of the modern Olympic movement” (p.318). As such, this allows for the focus on issues of social justice and critical perspectives to be explicitly addressed in the name of the Olympic Movement.

Culpan and Wigmore (2010) go a step further and argue for an alternative to Olympic Education in what they term ‘Olympism education’, through which the focus of learning

places less emphasis on the technical aspects (functional facts and figures) of the Games; while placing more emphasis on the philosophy practice of Olympism, and a pedagogical coherence which encourages and fosters critique and debate. As part of this they argue for learning experiences manifested through experiential PE and sport that are designed to foster the practise of critical consumerism and social transformation, with the intended outcome being the development of an active citizen who can contribute to building a more peaceful and better world (p. 70).

Hence Olympism education as opposed to Olympic Education, with the use of critical pedagogies, provides the scope to move beyond facts, names, etc. to question the accepted idea of the Olympic Games as a festival of equality. Instead merit is placed on the ability to determine the inequalities, unfairness, and unethical practices. And hence, Olympism education acknowledges the goals and aspirations of Olympism while recognising that these are not always enacted in the practice of sport or the Olympic games.

To summarise, regardless of what title is used, it is clear that there are some commonalities amongst Olympic scholars on what learning matters most, as the academic voices advocating for learning about ‘the Games’ (typically referring only to Olympic Games) appears to be waning, even if this is still evident in some school programmes. There is a stronger argument for a focus on learning that is emancipatory and socially transformative, underpinned by notions of equality, justice, and fairness to all, and aligned with the development of attitudes and values associated with being a citizen who can contribute positively to

the development of their communities and the world. Presented in this way Olympism education offers a broad educative project that presents an opportunity for morally informed educational practices.

Olympism education and Physical Education

In line with a focus on a socio-educative agenda, Culpan and Wigmore (2010) argue for Olympism education to be have “more acknowledgement and alignment with the country’s physical education curriculum requirements” (p. 70) as this offers an opportunity to help legitimise PE whilst also promoting the agenda of the Olympic Movement. The introduction of *Health and PE in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) and more recently updated in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC - Ministry of Education, 2007)¹ went a long way towards achieving this, and as Culpan and McBain (2012) acknowledge, the New Zealand government provided a “mandate for teachers of physical education to draw on the educative and social value of Olympism and develop meaningful and relevant pedagogical programmes from it” (p. 98). It could be argued that as one of two lead writers of the 1999 curriculum, Culpan was uniquely positioned to ensure that Olympism was front and centre, and that PE was to become underpinned by socio-cultural and more recently a socio-critical perspective.

The parallels between educative perspective of Olympism and PE as represented in the NZC (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 22-23) are evidenced throughout the curriculum statement. As Culpan, Bruce and Galvan (2008) and Culpan (2017) highlight, the underlying concept, Attitudes and Values, is an explicit representation of the philosophy promoted through Olympism. Other examples are evidenced in the following phrase: “movement is integral to human expression and that it can contribute to people’s pleasure and enhance their lives” (p.23), which could be seen as aligning with the Olympic ideal of the joy found in effort. Similarly, the phrase learning “to understand, appreciate, and move their bodies, relate positively to others, and demonstrate constructive attitudes and values” (p.23) could be viewed as corresponding to the balanced development of body, mind and will, along with a nod toward the universal ethics, both of which are more fully unpacked in underlying concepts of Hauora, and Attitudes and Values (especially when read more fully in the 1999

1. For more on the developments of PE curriculum in Aotearoa NZ, and the current context please refer to Culpan, 1996/97, 2005; Culpan & Bruce, 2007; Gillespie, Ross, & Burrows, 2003; Pope, 2013; and Tinning, 2000.

curriculum statement). Finally, physical education “fosters critical thinking and action and enables students to understand the role and significance of physical activity for individuals and society” (p.23) signals the need for the adoption of critical pedagogies and promotion of social action in a similar way to Olympic scholars such as Binder (2005) and Teetzel (2012) advocate for a learning that explore the inequalities and injustices of the Olympic Games.

Further evidence of Olympism is reflected in other parts of the 2007 curriculum document; for example, in the strand “Healthy Communities and Environments, in which students contribute to healthy communities and environments by taking responsible and critical action” (p.22), and achievement objectives that ask students across all levels (ages) to undertake the Olympic project, while not using this term, when they are required to do the following:

- Level 1 - Take individual and collective action to contribute to environments that can be enjoyed by all.
- Level 2 - Experience creative, regular, and enjoyable physical activities and describe the benefits to wellbeing.
- Level 4 - Describe how social messages and stereotypes, including those in the media, can affect feelings of self-worth.
- Level 6 - Demonstrate understanding and affirmation of people’s diverse social and cultural needs and practices when participating in physical activities.
- Level 7 - Appraise, adapt, and use physical activities to ensure that specific social and cultural needs are met.
- Level 8 - Critically analyse attitudes, values, and behaviours that contribute to conflict and identify and describe ways of creating more harmonious relationships.

In addition, Olympism education is made very explicit in resources such as *Attitudes and Values: Olympic Ideals in Physical Education* (Ministry of Education, 2001) and *Olympism: Attitudes and Values in Physical Education, Years 5-7* (Ministry of Education, 2004). These resources were developed to support teachers to implement the Curriculum.

The parallels between the desired learning outcomes outlined in the NZC and those detailed in the various interpretations of the goals of the Olympic Movement are intrinsically linked. Both desire outcomes for learners that are values orientated and encourage citizenship that focuses more on the greater good

than on individualistic notions. This aligns with Evan's (2014) call for socio-educative PE and health education, one that is "actively political, inherently social and always inclusive; is action-orientated and community-conscious, inviting a new common sense to replace neoliberalism and its busted ideal" (p. 323). The use of the term socio-educative stands out as a call to ensure the educative focus is not lost amongst the storm of other agendas. I would suggest the New Zealand curriculum with its underpinnings of Olympism provides a foundation for this sort of PE, and as such demonstrates how Olympism education holds real promise for providing a framework to support PE curriculum developers to broaden notions of what constitutes learning in PE. And yet, the realities of Olympism education as the rhetoric of policy and realities of such an endeavour in the practice are pronounced.

Physical Education, Olympism education, and Reality

In contrast to the promise of the NZC as a policy document that heralds Olympism education, PE in New Zealand continues to be practised in narrowly conceived ways where the learning that matters most aligns more closely with the notion of *in movement* and the physiological aspects of *about* movement (Arnold, 1997) than it does with the broader socio-critical, socio-educative and holistic intent of the either the curriculum or Olympism. In primary schools we see evidence of the traditional programmes reflective of the 1960s (Petrie, 2011), a growing focus on Fundamental Movement Skills as a dominant objective (Gordon, Cowan, McKenzie, & Dyson, 2013), interspersed with some interesting interpretations of Teaching Games for Understanding (Petrie, Jones, & McKim, 2007; Petrie, 2012), and a growing focus on fitness with the introduction of 'initiatives' such as Jump Jam and Project Energize (Powell, 2011; Powell & Fitzpatrick, 2015). As Hart's (2014) master thesis highlights, senior secondary PE is not much different, with schools in her small sample opting for the biophysical achievement standards across all levels over those associated with the socio-critical or interpersonal. The 'now not so new' articulation of PE mandated in the NZC, with the tenants of Olympism embedded within, has struggled to take hold in Aotearoa New Zealand. It could be argued that a more explicit focus on Olympism education could help move PE programmes and practices towards a more socio-educative framework, and

beyond the narrowly and somewhat traditional programmes that still dominate the PE landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand.

And yet, I would contend that if a community of educators, physical educators or proponents of Olympism education (or both), advocates for teachers to have a better understanding of Olympism, there is a real danger that they would get captured by the name and their 'lived' experience of the Olympic movement, and miss the point that this is about a socio-critical focus for learning. In line with this, Parry (1998) would argue that due to the blur that is created by the closeness of the term Olympism with Olympics, PE presented as explicitly aligned to Olympism education programme is particularly challenging to enact. In line with Chatziefsahiou (2012), citing a range of authors, I query if "the values associated with Olympism and the Olympics Games are an appropriate platform for education development" (p. 389). Pringle (2012) recognises the contradictions between the lived values evident in the practice of Olympism and the Olympic games, the most evident and worldwide 'advert' of Olympism, and the actual intent of the ideals and values. The numerous examples of the contradictions between the ideals of Olympism and the realities of the modern Olympics make it difficult to see how the Olympic project can ever again be an educative project, unless the valued learning is about global brand awareness (Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Samsung, etc.) and consumer identities (Lenskyj, 2012; Maguire, Barnard, Butler, & Golding, 2008). While presented as raceless, classless, egalitarian and unproblematic good, it just requires spectatorship of the Olympic Games or analysis of most Olympic-related resources through a critical lens to consider what its educational intent really is. In no way does the global educative message of the Olympism appear to be about equality, fairness, ethical behaviour or values education more broadly. In contrast, the educative project appears to be centred on nationalism, individualism, and corporatisation all wrapped up with elite performance (Pringle, 2012; Wamsley, 2004). This appears to be a shaky foundation on which to begin a programme of encouraging teachers to adopt a more socio-educative and critical framework.

As Cosgriff, Burrows and I have argued (2013), the name PE has had a significant effect on what teachers understand the focus to be and therefore what is 'allowed' or doable in this particular subject. We found that by using the term EBC (Every Body Counts)

we, and the teachers we worked with, were able to free “ourselves from some of the historical antecedents associated with the name HPE and more specifically PE, [which] provided an opportunity for teachers to both think more ‘freely’ and practice HPE in ways that had meaning for their learners and school communities. In short, the shift in the label fostered a shift in the focus, creating a ‘freedom’ for us to explore, think and do differently” (p.12). Asking teachers to differentiate between the intent of Olympism and the paradoxical façade that has become the Olympic Games whilst trying to make sense of a socio-educative PE curriculum would require an extensive and sustained period of professional learning, accompanied by a significant investment of time and resourcing (financial and human).

Because the NZC is already underpinned by Olympism, a move to more strongly position Olympism education in curriculum time may simply create another layer of confusion for teachers who are already struggling to make sense of what PE is and what they are supposed to be teaching. Teachers are already paralysed by policy (Petrie & Iisahunter, 2011), and the consistently changing legislative reforms associated with curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Hopmann & Kunzli, 1997). These all constrain the scope for teachers to do PE differently. The mere thought of overlaying an additional philosophical layer, to the already ‘muddled puzzle’ (Culpan, 2005) that is PE in Aotearoa New Zealand, is likely to further confuse teachers and draw their gaze away from the core responsibility of delivering the curriculum. Given the current priorities of many governments, and arguably the priorities of national Olympic committees, including those of Aotearoa New Zealand, finding support for an educative project to help teachers make sense of Olympism education alongside PE is unlikely, and a piecemeal effort is going to do little to change understandings and practices in school settings.

This does not mean, however, that we as a community of educators should not collectively be advocating to ensure teachers have a philosophical understanding that is holistic and focused on the socio-critical, socio-educative endeavours amongst the broader traditional knowledge of PE. In Aotearoa New Zealand the use of NZC as the official and mandated curriculum framework gives us more licence to argue for socio-educative forms of PE as more than physical health and sport; therefore, I believe priority should be given to supporting teachers to understand and enact the

curriculum, as opposed to distracting them with the additional philosophy and focus of Olympism education.

A place for Olympism education in Aotearoa New Zealand

If curriculum PE time cannot provide a clear opportunity to promote the Olympic ideals, or will potentially exacerbate teacher confusion, then maybe we would be better focusing on sport, and youth sport more specifically, as the educative site for the promotion of Olympism. Sport is of national significance in Aotearoa New Zealand, as it is in many countries, and while collectively we garner pride from our international achievements, sport continues to provide numerous examples of the unsavoury side of engagement. Newspaper reports across the world continue to highlight the underbelly of sport, such as racial comments, spectator violence at children's sport, and inappropriate practices by sporting 'role models', while at the same time silence messages about diversity and participation with limited coverage of individuals with different or (dis)abilities (other than in the two weeks of the Paralympics), women, and minority sport. National, regional, school and youth sport does little to reflect the ideals of Olympism, and coaches appear to be more focused on performance outcomes than the holistic development of young people than ever before. Sport as a context for learning can quickly be undermined by messages extended in school-based PE by contexts, especially when the emphasis of youth sport is on immediate and evident extrinsic rewards (medals, praise, scholarships, etc.), and where core messages and value propositions contradict the learning focus in PE.

In line with Binder (2000), Culpan and McBain (2012), and Naul (2008), I argue for Olympism education to extend "beyond school boundaries encompassing children's learning in sport wherever it may occur" (Chatziefstathiou, 2012, p. 394) with a broader agenda to promote a sporting culture underpinned by Olympism. As a community of educators, we should be ensuring that those working in the area of youth sport draw on the educative premises underscored by Olympism. Investment in improving the philosophical and pedagogical approaches employed by youth sport coaches may mean that the experiences children have in PE and sport are more closely aligned and underpinned by

consistent messages that are evident in the national PE curricular, Olympism, and socio-educative articulations of Olympism education. However, this is no easy task as it means that national and regional sporting organisations and coach education will need to occur to ensure that they too are indoctrinated with the philosophies of Olympism. Leadership, from Olympic Committees and more specifically associated national Olympic Education Commissions (in countries where these exist), is necessary to ensure coach education programmes and sporting bodies adhere to the Olympic ideals and that programme leaders, including coaches, understand the role Olympism education should have in their programmes and development. This would also require a synergetic relationship between the national Olympic committees and the governing bodies for sport.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that better understandings and the embodiment of Olympism in education and sport settings would “contribute to building a peaceful and better world” (International Olympic Committee, 2015, p. 17), where all movement-related educational experiences are underpinned by notions of fair play, ethical behaviour, and equality. With the varied understandings and interpretations of Olympism as an educative project, and the negative perceptions of Olympic Games that impact the integrity of any Olympic-related messaging, it is difficult to see how an explicit focus on Olympism education would be useful in enhancing the legitimacy of PE. Notwithstanding the challenges, Olympism education as a broad philosophical perspective has the potential to extend conceptualisations of what learning in PE could include, and as such may be a useful platform from which to advocate for socio-educative focused PE. This alone is likely to have little impact when the practices of sport for all involved undermine the ideals of the Olympic Movement. Youth sport, through strategic engagement with national Olympic committees and the governing bodies for sport (national and regional), presents a site for changing practices and enhancing the sporting experience and as a result our communities.

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