I argue in this paper that sport should be retained as an important part of the educational rationale for physical education. I consider Siedentop’s critique of physical education and his alternative in the form of Sport Education. Siedentop’s goals for youth sport and physical education and use of the work of Alisdair McIntyre are explored. It is argued that if we work to experience activities that are inherently pleasurable and intrinsically satisfying, then there is a possible future for activities such as sport. I conclude that school physical education is well placed to take up this challenge of sustaining sport as a moral practice and that the pedagogical tools already exist to do this in the form of a critical pedagogy.

After all, what would be the point of work or of political brinkmanship or, for that matter, of life, if there were no pursuits we humans find intrinsically satisfying that make life worth living in the first place, that is, worth all the struggle and hardship that are an inescapable part of life. And since play, games, and sports are best conceived, as the philosophical literature suggests, as just such intrinsically good things, they are among the most important and serious of human activities, and they are the very activities which things like work derive whatever seriousness they possess. All of which suggests, that when physical educationists endeavour to secure the academic legitimacy of their subject in ( . . ) instrumental ways ( . . ) they are barking up the wrong tree. (Morgan, in press)

This statement by philosopher Bill Morgan is part of an elegant and persuasive argument for physical education that runs against the grain of currently dominant instrumental justifications based on health, economic, and social development. While Morgan confirms health, economic, and social aspects of life are important, he considers such derivative justifications to run three risks. First, physical education is always viewed as of secondary importance to these other social goods. Second, each of these social goods is merely contingent upon participation in physical activities;
that is to say, one does not necessarily become healthy, more productive, or more socially adept through participation in physical activity, and indeed the opposite effects are often observed to occur. And third, there are perhaps means other (and possibly more effective and less expensive) than participation in physical activities that can achieve these outcomes. In Morgan’s terms, we do what we have to do in order to do what we want to do; we work to live, to engage in those activities that are in and of themselves deeply satisfying and rewarding. Play, games, and sports are just such activities for many people.

This philosophical position on the importance and seriousness of social practices such as sport has major implications for the consideration of the educational significance of physical education and its place in school curricula. According to Kirk (1988), a critical pedagogy concerned with emancipation, empowerment, and cultural critique are key features of an educational rationale for physical education. Within the critical pedagogy literature (e.g., Wright, Macdonald, & Burrows, 2004), however, and indeed elsewhere in the physical education and other literature (Bradbury, 1993; Penney & Chandler, 2000), it is currently unfashionable—indeed perhaps heretical—to make an argument for retaining sport as a key subject matter of physical education. At the same time, it may be hypocritical of physical educators to insist that sport and physical education are distinct and separate entities when indeed physical education, in the USA, UK, and Australia, at least, has consisted of little else but sport in teachers’ practices since the 1950s (Green, 1998; Kirk, 1992; Siedentop, 1994). A commonplace distinction made between physical education and sport, in the English-speaking physical education world at least, tends to view sport as organized, competitive physical activity with winning as a primary goal, whereas physical education involves the use of physical activity as the medium for the realization of broader educational goals. This ubiquitous distinction, I suggest, has done untold damage to the credibility of physical education in the public domain. It has also led, ironically, to a situation where sport is generally poorly taught within physical education classes (Siedentop, 1994).

Building on a philosophical position consistent with Morgan’s argument, I will argue in this paper that sport should be retained as an important part of the educational rationale for a critical pedagogy in physical education. As part of this rationale, I suggest that emancipation, empowerment, and critique are three key dimensions of critical pedagogy which are embedded in and constitutive of the practice of sport.

A major concern of critical pedagogy is emancipation from unjust and inequitable practices. Examples of such practices are differential treatment of individuals on the basis of their sex, sexual preference, race, skin color, disability, and age. In its broadest sense, and in terms of Habermas’s theory of knowledge-constitutive interests (Habermas, 1972), human emancipation involves the ability to change and adapt to new challenges and new sets of circumstances. Since change is a common feature of all aspects of life, emancipation in this sense is a vital and necessary human interest and is a practical, day-to-day concern of all who work within the complex social institutions of sport and education.

Critical pedagogy seeks to achieve human emancipation through the empowerment of individuals and groups. Empowerment can take many forms and does not stop short at merely raising individual consciousness. For authentic change to occur at all levels of society, empowerment must incorporate change at institutional
and social structural levels as well as change at the level of individuals and groups. Indeed, since each of these levels is interdependent, strategies for empowerment need to account for how these levels of human activity interact. Even though it is a multi-level process, empowerment only becomes authentic when it is realized in the practical daily activities of individuals.

_Cultural critique_ is one of the main educational strategies for working toward empowerment and emancipation. Critique is not mere criticism. Instead, critique aims to assist people to see beyond the obvious, the commonplace, and commonsense of everyday life in order to better understand the interrelatedness of human activity on a number of levels. Critique can take many forms, depending on the setting in which it is applied. At the level of the individual, critique can help to enhance self-knowledge and assist individuals to act in informed ways. At the level of institutions, critique may take the form of established, evaluative processes that monitor, assess, and modify the work of the organization. At the heart of this notion of cultural critique is an individual’s willingness to see beyond surface appearances and to act constructively and positively in meeting new challenges.

In addition to these three components, an essential feature of a critical pedagogy in physical education is that it is centrally concerned with education for social change. In this respect, the term _pedagogy_ should not be interpreted too literally to refer to the “art and practice of teaching” (following one dictionary definition), nor should it be restricted only to children. Instead, pedagogy should be regarded as a multidimensional concept concerned with the interaction of learning, teaching, and curriculum and their situatedness in social and physical environments. Even though a critical pedagogy begins from the assumption that all human activity is value laden, it does not seek to indoctrinate. On the contrary, with its central concern to bring about social change through education, a critical pedagogy aims to open up possibilities and alternatives, to reveal the complexity of social life, and to resist the imposition of simplistic explanations and quick-fix solutions.

I want to propose in this paper that, properly conducted, a learner-player will engage in processes of emancipation (including inclusion and equity), empowerment, and critique as a constituent part of playing sport. What I want to do here is to offer a view of what “properly conducted” sport might mean in an educational setting such as schools and also youth sports clubs.

While the argument in this paper focuses on sport, I do not want to imply that there are no other physical activity media for education in, about, and through the physical. On the contrary, a balanced program of physical education across the years of compulsory schooling will include a range of physical activity media such as dance, exercise, outdoor adventure activities, and so on. My intention here is to show how sport can be represented in physical education in a way that highlights and accentuates those features intrinsic to sport that are of educational value.

In this paper, I will first consider Siedentop’s (1994) critique of the multi-activity model of physical education and his alternative in the form of Sport Education. I will then consider four goals for youth sport proposed by Siedentop (2002) and his use of the work of moral philosopher Alisdair McIntyre to explore how Sport Education in physical education might contribute to the realization of these goals. I conclude with a comment on how a view of the intrinsic goods of sports participation might sit within a critical pedagogy of physical education.
Siedentop's Concept of Sport Education

Siedentop first presented his concept of Sport Education in the early 1980s (Siedentop, 1982). It took almost a decade for the idea to catch hold beyond Siedentop's own circle of students and colleagues. In a review paper, Wallhead and O’Sullivan (2005) cite over fifty peer reviewed papers published since 1987 reporting research on Sport Education, with the majority of these appearing in 1995 or later. From the beginning, Siedentop has viewed the Sport Education model as a desirable alternative to the traditional presentation of sport in physical education through the multi-activity model.

A Critique of the Multi-Activity Model of Physical Education

Siedentop (1994) suggests that the form of physical education currently dominating programs in North America, in Australia, and the UK too (e.g., Curtner-Smith, 1999; Green, 1998; Kirk & Macdonald, 1998), is the multi-activity curriculum. The multi-activity curriculum typically offers students short sequential though unrelated units in a wide range of sports and other activities. Sometimes there are as few as four lessons to a unit. In this context, Siedentop argues, students can develop only a superficial level of understanding and competence, where introductory units are taught “again and again and again.” Siedentop notes that even though multi-activity physical education is sport-based, the “sport” in this context is abstracted and less than meaningful:

Skills are taught in isolation rather than as part of the natural context of executing strategy in game-like situations. The rituals, values and traditions of a sport that give it meaning are seldom even mentioned, let alone taught in ways that students can experience them. The affiliation with a team or group that provides the context for personal growth and responsibility in sport is noticeably absent in physical education. The ebb and flow of a sport season is seldom captured in a short-term sport instruction unit . . . physical education teaches only isolated sport skills and less-than-meaningful games. (Siedentop, 1994, pp. 7-8)

One reason why short units of instruction have become established in school physical education programs may be due to the view, increasingly commonplace among physical educators since the 1950s, that as many activities as possible should be represented in programs so that young people might discover at least one they would like to continue to pursue into adulthood. Moreover, this approach to teaching sport may have persisted in schools because some teachers lack in-depth knowledge of specific sports and games. Teaching specific sports techniques out of context may be less challenging than teaching skills and tactics in game contexts.

Sport Education as an Alternative to the Multi-Activity Model

As an alternative to this way of representing sport within physical education programs, Siedentop has developed the Sport Education model. According to
Siedentop (1994), the key learning outcomes for Sport Education are the development of competent, literate, and enthusiastic sports persons. A competent sports person is someone who has developed skills and strategies to the extent that he or she can participate successfully in a game. A literate sports person understands and is knowledgeable about the rules, traditions, and values associated with specific sports, and can also distinguish between good and bad sport practices. An enthusiastic sports person plays and behaves in ways that preserve, protect, and enhance the sport culture.

In order to achieve these learning outcomes, Sport Education has a number of key features that distinguish it from the multi-activity curriculum model. Most notably, units are organized as sports seasons that continue for a minimum of twelve lessons. During a pre-season phase, students are assigned to teams that remain the same for the rest of the season. These teams become “persisting groups” and are the cornerstone for the development of a sense of identification and affiliation among students. Also in contrast to the multi-activity model, students take on roles additional to player, such as coach, referee, equipment officer, journalist, statistician, and so on. The season has a competition phase and ends with a festival.

Situated Learning and Sport Education

Kirk & Macdonald (1998) argue that Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of situated learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice is a useful means of understanding the learning trajectories of learner-players within the Sport Education model. This concept of learning stresses the context-embedded character of learning, its social dimensions, and the importance of authentic participation based on membership of a social group. The community of practice is in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) terms an epistemic community and thus is a repository of knowledge, traditions, and modes of conduct. Sport can be viewed as an amorphous, complex, and contradictory community of practice, instantiated in a range of sites and experienced by young people sometimes directly (in terms of their own sports participation) and sometimes vicariously (in terms of their experiences of media sport). In situations where sport is experienced directly, such as Sport Education or community-based sport, the teacher or coach may represent the most experienced or expert performer. In situations where sport is experienced indirectly, such as spectating at a sports contest, other players may represent the most experienced or expert performer. Given the prominence of media sport in the everyday lives of many young people, it may be helpful to consider indirect experiences of sport as significant in relation to young people’s legitimate peripheral participation within the community of practice, alongside direct experiences where expert performers may not always be present.

According to this way of conceptualizing young people’s learning, a key challenge for Sport Education is the extent to which it can provide learner-players with meaningful, rich, and enjoyable experiences of sport as a community of practice in the extended sense just described (Kirk & Kinchin, 2003; MacPhail, Kinchin, & Kirk, 2003; MacPhail, Kirk, & Kinchin, 2004) and facilitate the achievement of key goals for physical education and youth sport. This concept of learning as
legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice provides a theoretical framework for understanding how Sport Education’s key learning outcomes of competent, literate, and enthusiastic sportspeople may be realized.

**Four Goals for Physical Education and Youth Sport**

A tension in Siedentop’s work on Sport Education is the extent to which the key learning outcomes of competent, literate, and enthusiastic sports persons contribute to the realization of four broad goals for youth sport programs and, by imputation, since he discusses Sport Education as an example of the pursuit of these of these goals, physical education also. Siedentop (2002) has proposed that these are the educative, public health, elite development, and cultural preservation goals. The educative goal, according to Siedentop, is concerned with the development of knowledge and skills in, about, and through the medium of organized physical activity. The public health goal is focused on providing the skills to adopt an active lifestyle. In the case of both goals, Siedentop argues that their achievement would require physical education programs in their current forms to be more inclusive and more appealing to those young people who currently choose not to participate in such programs or, where participation is required, to meet minimal expectations. He proposes that these goals for physical education can be realized through Sport Education. Siedentop argues that Sport Education can go a long way toward contributing to the cultural preservation goal since many of the positive features of sport in community settings are reproduced in and through the Sport Education model. The elite development goal is concerned with optimizing opportunities for young sports people to pursue excellence. In Siedentop’s (2002) work, the exclusionary character of this goal appears to conflict with the inclusive features of the educative and public health goals. While Siedentop is frank about the negative effects of pursuing this goal in practice, he argues nevertheless that the pursuit of excellence is an essential part of sport, and hence this goal is essential to Sport Education also.

**McIntyre and Sport as a Moral Practice**

Siedentop draws on the writings of the moral philosopher Alasdair McIntyre and his notion of “practice” to support his position on the importance of the elite development goal. Siedentop quotes McIntyre’s definition of practice:

> By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (McIntyre, 1985, p.187)

McIntyre’s examples of practices consistent with this definition include music, architecture and farming, and games such as chess and football. Siedentop quotes
this passage in support of his discussion on Sport Education and the core notion of the persisting group (Siedentop, 1994a). This is significant because it is clear that Siedentop regards practices to be profoundly social activities organized and sustained over time by communities of practitioners, a view supported and clarified further by situated learning theory. McIntyre argues further:

To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. Practices . . . have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. Thus the standards themselves are not immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realised so far . . . If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch. In the realm of practices the authority of both goods and standards operates in such a way as to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgement. (McIntyre, 1985, p. 190)

Siedentop states that in order to become a member of a sport practice, young people learn to accept the authority of the standards of excellence and to subject oneself to rules and traditions “as one attempts to achieve the goods that are defined by participation in that sport and the respect and admiration of those with whom you are engaged in that sport practice” (2002, p. 15).

The coherence of this position depends on members of a community of practice having a concept of excellence, having models of excellence, and having incentives to strive for excellence. This is why Siedentop goes to some lengths to state that heroes and heroines are necessary in sport because they stretch the limits of excellence. Without these concepts, models, and incentives, there are no authoritative standards to which one can subject oneself, and there are no “goods” intrinsic to the practice itself.

The Notion of Intrinsic Goods

The notion of intrinsic goods is a key to understanding Siedentop’s position and to resolving the apparent tension between educative and public health goals on the one hand, and the elite development goal on the other. McIntyre argues that all practices generate both intrinsic and extrinsic goods. Intrinsic goods are unique to the practice itself and cannot be gained in any other way than through wholehearted participation in a practice. For example, it is not possible to acquire the goods of being a tennis player, the repertoire of skills and tactics, understanding of etiquette, respect for the rules and traditions of tennis, and respect for opponents without immersing oneself in the practice of tennis. On the other hand, someone who is an excellent tennis player can gain extrinsic goods such as money and prestige. But these goods are not unique to tennis in the way that the skills, strategies, and knowledge of traditions of the sport are.

McIntyre suggests that it is possible that some performers may be motivated solely by goods external to a practice. But he claims the durability of such a person’s motivation to engage in the practice may be limited. He also argues that
even though such persons may exist, their achievement of external rewards from engagement in a practice is entirely dependent on the willingness of others to be motivated by internal rewards:

External goods are therefore characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners. Internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice. (McIntyre, 1985, p.191)

In other words, an epistemic community exists to provide a context for the sustenance of a practice such as sport and for the preservation of the internal goods of sport.

According to McIntyre’s account of practices, tensions with other goals arise only when the elite development goal is reduced to the pursuit of external rewards. As Siedentop correctly avows, the pursuit of excellence is logically necessary for the existence of sport practices in the first place. Without elite development, there are no collective standards to which an individual can submit. There are no models and no incentives. It follows then that elite development is as central a goal for physical education as are the other three goals and that moreover it is intimately related to the realization of the other goals.

Physical Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Intrinsic Goods of Sport Participation

There can be no question that elite professional sports offer a poor model for sport in an educational context (Kirk, 2004). Cheating, drug use, abuse of athletes, the celebration of hegemonic masculinity, and the corrupting power of money all contribute to undermine the moral value of this form of human practice. But it is important, at the same time, not to read-off from elite professional sport all of the possible manifestations of sport. Bryson’s (1990) analysis of the reproduction and celebration of hegemonic masculinity in sport provides a cautionary example. She notes that there are particular sports that are, in a sense, the flagships of hegemonic masculinity, such as rugby and cricket in Australia and the UK and baseball and football in the USA. But not all sports, not even those played predominantly by men, require or condone the physical violence and aggression that seem part and parcel of these professional sports. There are, in other words, various ways of practicing sport, some of which may be more or less socially and educationally desirable than others.

This issue is of major significance when we come to consider Sport Education as one form of physical education, since we need to be clear about which aspects of the amorphous, complex, and contradictory community of practice of sport we wish to reproduce in schools. It seems to me that within a critical pedagogy, sport offers both a medium for the development of McIntyre’s (1985) virtues of justice, courage, and honesty and also a vehicle for young people to critique corrupted forms of sport.

Both McIntyre and Siedentop argue persuasively that properly conducted, sport embodies a concern for emancipation in terms of the fair and equal treatment of all players. For example, players who break the rules automatically infringe a moral
contract with other players, which is why cheating in sport so often provokes an indignant response. Enthusiastic sports persons do not cheat since they recognize that cheating undermines and transforms the very practice about which they are enthusiastic. McIntyre and Siedentop also argue that the pursuit of excellence can be an empowering process for players as they strive to become the best player they can be. In Siedentop’s terms, the competent sports person seeks to continually improve skills and tactical awareness that is essential to game performance. Moreover, as the psychological literature has shown repeatedly, a task-oriented climate in physical education is more likely to produce self-motivated and confident individuals than an ego-oriented climate concerned solely with winning (Lirgg, in press). Finally, I suggest that the development of the skills of cultural critique is a central dimension of becoming a literate sports person, since it is through critique that one is able to distinguish between good and bad sports practices.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to make a case for an intrinsic justification for physical education, drawing on Siedentop’s work on Sport Education and, following Siedentop, McIntyre’s moral philosophy and aspects of situated learning theory and critical pedagogy. The focus on sport is intentional since within some contemporary sociological and philosophical analyses of physical education, sport is sometimes written off as an appropriate medium for education in, about, and through the physical. My argument has been that sport is an important subject matter for physical education, though I have also proposed that it is not the only appropriate educational medium. Siedentop’s Sport Education model was presented as just one example of how sport can be represented in physical education in an educationally valuable form.

Notwithstanding these aspirations, such is the power and pervasive influence of elite professional sport and its mass diffusion through forms of electronic and print media, the goals expressed for Sport Education cannot be easily achieved. But as McIntyre’s (1985) analysis shows, sport as a human practice is not sustainable when the extrinsic goods of wealth and fame dominate. Unchallenged, this version of sport must inevitably cease to be sport and may be transformed into mere entertainment. As Morgan (in press) argues, on the other hand, if we work to experience activities that are inherently pleasurable and intrinsically satisfying, then there is a possible future for sport. School physical education is well placed to take up this challenge of sustaining sport as a moral practice. The pedagogical tools already exist to do this in the form of a critical pedagogy embedded within the Sport Education model (e.g., O’Sullivan & Kinchin, in press). Whether the physical education community has the vision and will to take up such a challenge is, of course, another matter.

References

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