

# Physical Education *is* Character Education

## Winners or losers?

Anecdotal evidence from teachers and teaching assistants with 20-30 years' experience suggests that today's apparently ebullient youths are actually far less likely to cope with failure and bounce back from defeat than their counterparts in the 1970s and 1980s. On top of this, young people are increasingly sedentary and self-destructive. They are more likely than their parents and grandparents to grow up to be obese, binge-drinking smokers.

## *PE helps young people to be self-motivated, morally-centred and community-minded*

One teacher attending an ACT training day said, 'School league tables tell children that a D-grade at GCSE is worthless and the children come to see themselves as failures rather than successes.'

Another teacher commented, 'I have students who struggle if they do not receive an A-grade because they cannot understand that everyone is not the same. In course work they ask how they can get an A when they are just not academically capable of it.' This begs the question: *How can we encourage students to develop their gifts and talents whilst also helping them to come to terms with their limitations in a pastorally sensitive way?*

All too often, teachers and teaching assistants hear youngsters surrendering right across the curriculum: 'I can't learn French'; 'I'm no good at art'; 'I'm useless at ICT'; 'I'll never understand calculus.' Of course, many young people may never be as good as they would like to be ... but they can be more proficient than they are now ... because past failure does not necessarily indicate that future success is impossible.

But what *can* and *should* Christian educators do to help their students cope with academic failure and



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success without them falling into the trap of labelling themselves a total loser or a perpetual winner? And – this is the focus of this article – what role, if any, can Physical Education (PE) play in helping young people feel better about themselves; overcome their fear of failure; take sensible risks; and become well-rounded, happy, healthy citizens? How can PE help young people to 'throw off everything that hinders' and 'run with perseverance the race marked out for us all' (Hebrews 12:1-13)?

## Ultimate success

Christian teachers, whatever their subject specialism, see 'failure' and 'success' (and the nature of 'reality' itself) in the context of God's plan for the universe He created. In Mark 12:30-31 Jesus cites the two most important Commandments as: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' and 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' These golden rules imply self-love, self-respect and self-development. If we do not love ourselves, it is meaningless to

say we should treat other people in the same way. Similarly, if God wants to be honoured with all our heart, soul, mind and strength then we really ought to value and develop these aspects of our humanity.

Whilst cardio-vascular activities give the physical heart a work-out, PE activities designed to promote respect and concern for others, and for oneself, strengthen the emotional heart. Whenever PE lessons require learners to acknowledge, justify or rethink their inner feelings and values and beliefs (eg racist assumptions, gender stereotypes, a belief that if the referee doesn't see a player cheat then it does not matter, etc) and, in so doing, to wrestle with, and respond to, questions of ultimate meaning and moral significance (Why am I here? How should I live my life?) the spiritual self (ie the soul) is developed. PE is good for the mind. Physical activity stimulates blood-flow which, in turn, brings more oxygen and nutrients to the brain, enhancing thought and memory. Minds are also expanded as learners increase their repertoire of knowledge, skills and understanding. Last, and by no means least, the body becomes stronger and more co-ordinated.

*I suspect that Paul, if he was anything other than a 1st century letter-writing, tent-making apostle, could have been an inspirational 21st century PE teacher*

### Humility and grace

PE is about nurturing healthy habits and promoting regular physical activity through childhood, adolescence and adulthood; it is about helping everyone to understand, appreciate, care for and use their own body responsibly. At its best, PE is about self-discipline, selflessness, being a team player, playing by the rules, winning with humility and losing with grace. In short, Physical Education *is* Character Education.

In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul explains that he takes his own spiritual journey as seriously as an athlete 'forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead' to reach the finishing line and 'win the prize'. But – it should be stressed – this is *not* an argument in favour of making PE lessons more competitive. Paul uses a sporting metaphor to illustrate the fact that everyone who accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour shares in His victory and receives the ultimate prize: the gift of eternal life.

I suspect that Paul, if he was anything other than a 1st century letter-writing, tent-making apostle,

could have been an inspirational 21st century PE teacher. He clearly has a love of sport and his philosophy of education is sound enough. Paul writes: '... physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come' (1 Timothy 4:8). Paul also reminds us that sport, like the rest of human life, is a value-laden enterprise: '... if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules' (2 Timothy 2:5).

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul uses an extended sporting metaphor to give four life lessons that are especially apposite for PE, but are readily transferable to every other subject in the curriculum and every other facet of human activity:

- **Be disciplined and dedicated** – Don't give up and don't be half-hearted. Take your spiritual life seriously. Push yourself to the limit; be prepared to put in the time and effort required; make the necessary sacrifices. Be as disciplined in your spiritual life ... as an athlete training for the Olympics. Paul writes: 'Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training' (1 Corinthians 9:25a).
- **Focus on your ultimate goal** – Complete the race and claim the prize that awaits you, but never lose sight of the most important things in life. Paul writes: 'The athletes run their race to win the *stephanos* [the laurel-like wreath placed on the head of the champion]; but we run our race to win a crown that will last forever' (1 Corinthians 9:25b).
- **Stay on track** – Don't lose your way. Remember what is important and make sure you do the right things in the right way, otherwise



you are wasting your time and energy. Paul writes: ‘... do not run like a man running aimlessly ... do not fight like a man beating the air’ (1 Corinthians 9:26).

- **Play by the rules** – Don’t risk being disqualified because you lose control of yourself or are ignorant of what is expected. Don’t forget God’s rules for righteous living; don’t forget what God has done for His people over the centuries; and don’t forget what God has done – and continues to do – for you. Paul writes: ‘I make my body my slave ... I do not want to be disqualified for the prize ... I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact that our forefathers were saved by God ... God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear’ (1 Corinthians 9:27, 10:1-13). Rules define a sport, and keeping those rules is not an option. Whether we feel like it or not, we should always strive to do the right thing.

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*PE has the potential to make a disproportionately massive contribution to student wellbeing and happiness*

When PE helps young people to be self-motivated, morally-centred and community-minded (living according to Jesus’ golden rules), the whole school or college benefits. Why? Because PE can develop the human heart, soul, mind and strength in ways few other subjects are able. Thus PE has the potential to make a disproportionately massive contribution to student wellbeing and happiness.

In conclusion, PE lessons should do much more than promote the physical strength, stamina and suppleness, and technical skills and tactics required to win medals and break records. PE should contribute towards the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all learners and, in common with every other curriculum subject, it should be relevant, enjoyable, inclusive and challenging.

■ Rupert Kaye

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