Participation, community and learning in the nippers

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This paper seeks to provide understanding of the significant learning that arises from children’s experiences of the nippers (Junior Surf Lifesaving Activities programme). Within a theoretical framework provided by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of situated learning and communities of practice it draws on research conducted in an Australian surf club to examine the processes through which engagement in the practices of surf clubs moves children in the nippers toward mature membership in the communities of practice that constitute surf clubs. In doing so it identifies the range and depth of important yet implicit learning that arises from long-term participation in the nippers. The learning identified in the paper is inseparable from the development of personal identity and a sense of belonging to a community.

INTRODUCTION

EXPANDING conceptions of learning over the past few decades highlight its nature as a whole-person, social process in which the body and the mind are inseparably involved (for example see, Davis & Sumara, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Varella, Thompson & Rosche, 1991). This holistic view of learning points to the significance of sport and leisure for children’s learning, identity formation and social development. School-based physical education and school sport are clearly practices where significant learning occurs. The importance of community-based sport in Australia as a cultural practice suggests that it forms an equally, if not more, significant practice for the human development for children and young people. While youth sport has attracted the attention of researchers, they have
tended to focus on coaching issues and the use of youth sport as a vehicle for developing particular outcomes (for example see, Eley & Kirk, 2002; Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2005; Strean, 1995; Liukkonen, Laasko & Telma, 1996). While a smaller number have inquired into the social and cultural dimensions of youth sport (for example see, Light & Quay, 2003; Roberts, 1996; Thorpe, 2004; Tinning & Fitzclare, 1992), less attention has been paid to the educational dimensions of youth sport and the broad range of learning that arises from young people’s engagement in it. In setting out to redress this imbalance in the literature this paper explores the range, depth and significance of learning that arises from children’s experiences of membership in the junior surf life saving programme known as ‘the nippers’. While there is a distinct sporting dimension to the nippers it is more than just a sport. It is part of a unique and distinctively Australian cultural institution, the raison d’etre of which is to provide an important community service.

Employing Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concepts of communities of practice and situated learning this paper examines the range and depth of learning and what Dewey (1916/97) refers to as ‘human growth’ arising from membership the nippers. Focused on the practices and culture of surf clubs as distinct communities it draws on research conducted in a Victorian surf club (Light, 2006) and my own experiences as an age manager and parent in the nippers programme at a Sydney surf club. This paper highlights the inclusive nature of practices in the nippers, the ways in which they encourage physical activity and contribute toward the development of positive personal identity tied into a sense of belonging to a community of practice.

THE RESEARCH

The research referred to in this paper was conducted over the summer of 2003/2004 at a large surf club in Victoria, referred to here under the pseudonym of the Ocean Village Surf Club. The surf club is one of the older clubs in Victoria and was established over 50 years ago. While surf clubs in cities where there are large nearby populations such as in Sydney have strong links with the local community, the majority of the Ocean Village Surf Club members come from Melbourne and Geelong. Ocean Surf Club serves a normally small seaside village referred to here under the pseudonym of Ocean Village.

The study focused on four, 14-year-old key informants who had just graduated from the nippers programme to cadets (14–18 years) at the time of the study but included other people in the club and the nearby community. Data were generated through observation and a series of three extended, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was conducted using a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach that involves a cycle of generating data, identifying emerging themes and theory, that is then tested by further data generation in an ongoing process that was linked to more formal theory in the later stages of the research.

THE NIPPERS: SPORT AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

The interplay between surf life saving as a sport and as a humanitarian community service provides a unique cultural environment for the social, cultural and moral development of
children and young people. The formation of the first surf clubs in Sydney during 1907 was driven by an alarming rise in drowning that followed the 1903 repeal of laws banning daylight bathing. Since then surf clubs have come to form unique cultural institutions with 34,000 volunteer lifesavers actively patrolling on 364 beaches in Australia. Surf clubs’ prime duty is to provide for the safety of bathers. This includes a range of tasks from performing lifesaving rescues and resuscitation to providing minor first aid and looking after lost children. Nippers in all surf clubs are taught from an early age to go to lifesavers for any problem at all that occurs on the beach.

Interclub competition was ostensibly introduced to keep lifesavers fit for duty but also fitted in with a well-established competitive sporting culture that had emerged in the latter part of the 19th century in Australia (Cashman, 1995). After the establishment of the first surf clubs in 1907 (Bondi, Bronte and Nth Steyne), competition quickly developed as an integral part of surf club culture and by 1915 the SBANSW (Surf Bathing Association of New South Wales) staged the first NSW championships. Indeed, Booth (2001) argues that the surf life saving movement was driven by a strong inclination toward competitive sport from its very beginnings. He suggests that, in the early stages of the surf club movement, the SBANSW tended to emphasise sport over community service to “advance the sport and pastime of surf bathing” (Booth, 2001: 72). From their inception Australian clubs had embraced the culture of competitive sport and it continues to form an essential aspect of surf club culture.

The nippers movement was developed in the 1960s as a strategy for dealing with declining membership in surf clubs. Since then they have grown to form a distinctive feature of Australian sporting culture with more than 10,000 nippers enrolled in programmes along Australia’s coastline each summer. Most surf clubs have a Junior Surf Life Saving Activities (nippers) programme offered for children aged from five to 13 and on any Sunday morning over summer at most beaches in Sydney hundreds of children in their distinctive club colours can be found swarming around surf clubs participating in the activities of nippers programmes. Programmes are aimed at teaching surf safety and channeling children into cadets programmes (14–18 years) to become lifesavers. The younger age groups are generally very popular but there is significant drop-out from the under-11s onward with comparatively few remaining to enter the cadets. While most activities involve training for competitive events in the junior surf life saving carnivals there is a strong emphasis placed upon enjoyment and participation with non-competitive activities often included in the Sunday programmes. Most of the activities, however, are competitive events contested in junior surf carnivals. Typically this would include activities such as beach sprints, surf swims and board paddling. Most programmes would offer children the opportunity to compete in two or three interclub carnivals, a local branch championship and the State championships. Different clubs have their own particular emphases on competition but, in general, most children in nippers programmes do not enter carnivals. Participation is stressed by Surf Life Saving Australia and there is no qualification required to enter branch or State championships making them well-attended events. Each year the NSW junior surf life saving championships attracts 4000 competitors and 20,000 spectators making it the biggest junior sports event in the southern hemisphere.
SITUATED LEARNING

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concepts of situated learning and communities of practice offer ideal tools for understanding the learning emerging from membership in the nippers. Lave and Wenger take into account the ways in which learning is essentially a social process that is situated within, and shaped by, social and cultural contexts. From this perspective learning is viewed as situated forms of social co-participation in which learning and identity formation are intertwined. Lave and Wenger’s concept of a community of practice tries to capture the ways in which we learn through participation in a range of practices in ways that are not always explicit, intended or exclusively intellectual.

Lave and Wenger (1991) stress the importance of engagement in the practices of a community of practice as a means of learning and mastering the understandings and skills required to live in it. To illustrate this they use the example of how a child first acquires language through interaction with adults as experts and habituating him/herself to local conditions to contribute to reproduction of community standards rather than through any direct instruction. Learning is not something that only occurs in defined learning episodes such as in lessons at school or a sports training session. Instead, low-level learning is an unavoidable part of social life. From a situated learning perspective effective and meaningful learning occurs through participation in practice in a process that also involves the learning of the culture of the community. Learning is thus an “inseparable part of social practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 32) that involves the whole person and his/her ‘human development’. The concept of situated learning recognises the social nature of learning and the ways in which it emerges from engagement in performance through co-participation. Meaningful learning is thus dependent upon the ability of the learner to perform tasks rather than learning in instructional settings removed from actual practice and performance as is common in schools. The notion of situated learning is increasingly being applied in research within the physical education and sport field (for example see, Kirk & Macdonald, 1998; Light, 2006).

PRACTICE AND LEARNING

Nippers programmes are run over summer and emphasise enjoyment, learning about the beach environment, learning personal safety in the surf and learning how to become a lifesaver. As communities of practice, surf clubs rely on a constant intake of nippers to reproduce themselves. Clubs in NSW and Queensland will usually run their nippers programme for five to six months from October to March but clubs in Victoria, where the water is colder, run shorter programmes. Each nippers session will typically run for an hour and a half to two hours and with numbers of up to 500 in many strong clubs. High-profile clubs can attract considerably larger numbers. For example, the Freshwater club in Sydney enrolled 650 nippers for its 2005/2006 season over two weekends and then closed its books as it had reached the limits of its capacity to deal with so many children. Each age group has an age group manager and a number of assistants who are usually parents. Age group managers have regular meetings to discuss training programmes and issues that arise such as safety concerns and behaviour management.
A typical nippers session might involve moving through three or four activities such as beach sprinting, board paddling or the flag race. The flag race involves children lying face down with feet pointing toward 30 centimetre sections of garden hose planted in the sand with fewer ‘flags’ than there are competitors who must run and dive to claim a ‘flag’. In competition those competitors who fail to claim a flag are eliminated until there is one remaining. Sessions also includes watching educational videos, listening to talks by prominent people in the club and visiting the patrol tent to talk with a senior lifeguard. Through all of the sessions that nippers attend they are learning the skills and understandings needed to perform the core practices of the club, lifesaving and competing. Nippers begin doing all activities on the beach but increasingly take part in water activities as they move upward through the age groups. Water activities begin with wading in shallow water before moving on to activities such as surf swimming and board paddling. Movement toward mature participation in the community is provided by increasing access to and engagement in the practices of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Increasing participation in water events thus acts as a marker of movement toward more mature participation in the practices of the club.

There is strong involvement of parents in the nippers activity sessions. Cadets (14–18 years) also play a significant part in the teaching of the nippers by taking on mentoring roles. The nippers’ interaction with adults and more senior members of the club plays a significant part in their enculturation into the community of the club. As children move up in the age groups they learn life saving and rescue techniques and are eventually able to sit for their Surf Rescue Certificate that allows them to patrol. They would then typically study and train for their Surf Bronze Medallion to qualify as a lifesaver and possibly become a professional lifeguard.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Even in the more competitive clubs where the better competitors are strongly encouraged, large numbers of children never compete. Even if children never compete they can still become lifesavers. Once nippers progress into cadets and attain their SRC they can begin patrolling with senior members. After graduating from the nippers at Ocean Beach and qualifying to patrol, ‘Lonny’ had concentrated on learning to be a lifesaver. He enjoyed the responsibility involved in patrolling and noted its social nature: “I think the most important thing is like the life saving which is more social and community-based”. In her own words ‘Monte’ was, “okay (at competition) but not really up there”, yet she enjoyed the social dimensions of competing and being part of the club effort, cheering on all her clubmates. Qualifications gained on the way to becoming a lifesaver are tangible markers of her progress toward fuller participant in the practices of the community. While cadets can patrol from the age of 14 they must work with fully qualified lifesavers. This places them in an apprentice-master relationship through which they learn while performing the practice of patrolling.

In discussing the relationship between competing and patrolling ‘Emma’ captured the ways in which cooperation and identity with the club are emphasised in surf clubs: “I think it’s mainly your involvement in the club that is important rather than how good you are at anything”. She played competitive sport at school and in a club. When asked to compare
them with surf club competition pointed to the sense of community in surf carnivals: “I would say that it’s (the surf club) more of a community. It’s not just competing. There are a lot more aspects and you offer something to the community and it’s more social.” All cadets in the study expressed a sense of pride in their new roles as patrollers and enjoyed the extra responsibility, their elevated standing in the club and the elevated social standing. This was more pronounced with those who lived in the Ocean Village community as Monte indicates: “I think (being on patrol) is cool because it does show people that I am part of something and that I am doing stuff and that I have qualifications.”

**SITUATED LEARNING**

Involvement in practices that lead to developing as competitors and lifesavers are easily identifiable. There is, however, a range of implicit learning that arises from just being part of a socio-cultural community and the social interaction arising from it. It is the learning that Dewey (1916/97) describes as a process of ‘absorbing’. Over years of membership in a surf club children are encouraged to view it as their second home. From my own experiences as a nippers parent, my own nine-year-old daughter sees her club as a second home. At almost any time of the year she can walk into the club to engage in forms of social interaction. This ranges from talking and joking with coaches or senior members of the club to borrowing boards to have a paddle in the surf or building sand castles with clubmates her own age. This was also strongly evident at the Ocean Village club as a senior member suggested, it is “a family values club”. There was a clear and articulated intention among everyone interviewed at the Ocean Village club to make it an open and supportive community in which children, young people and adults are encouraged to interact in and identify with. As one of the girls in the Victorian study, Monte, suggested:

Any time I go down to the club there is someone there to talk to or do stuff together with. Even when it’s one of the older guys you can feel comfortable with them and learn things from them. It’s like, you can go there any time and it’s like your own home. (Interview, Monte, 18 January 2004)

Attachment to the physical building, the people who constitute the club and its immediate location stimulate identity with place as well as the community of practice. Surf club buildings are usually prominent physical structures on the beach and provide for the development of identity with a particular place on the beach. My daughter’s surf club is one of three on Manly Beach and there is a strong sense of attachment to ‘our’ particular section of the beach. Meaningful, transformative, learning emerges from physical and social environments such as these (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Davis and Sumara, 1997; Davis Sumara and Luce-Kepler, 2000). Talking to people, playing and engaging in activities such as ‘going for a paddle’ or having a body surf together, provide rich social interaction and participation in practice that moves children and young people toward full participation in the practices of the surf club. Surf club communities are made up of a wide range of people that span generations. There is always interaction, not only horizontally with children of similar ages, but also vertically across age groups and generations. This can occur between nippers in different age groups, between nippers and the cadets, and between
nippers and adults. Reflecting upon their time in the nippers, the cadets at Ocean Village said that they enjoyed making new friends in the club and mixing with their mates. They also valued the relationships they had with the younger children in the nippers in their official and unofficial roles as mentors: “This year I made heaps of new friends like older groups and younger groups. Like you know if you teach a group they tend to just end up liking you and so that’s cool” (Peter, interview). This rich social interaction in the club, the opportunities for informal learning and the increasing access to the practices of the club provides young people with valuable learning experiences that are highly relevant and meaningful for them.

**DISCUSSION**

Although the bulk of nippers activities are competitive events contested in junior surf carnivals, the culture of clubs is shaped, not only by the values of competitive sport, but also by the role that they play as humanitarian community services. In the early age groups of the nippers each age group can typically number 50-60 children but this drops off significantly with the under-14 age groups often reduced to a dozen young people who might continue to earn their SRC and bronze medallion to become lifesavers. There is, however, as the study referred to in this paper indicates, a strong culture of community service in surf clubs that offers a particularly rich learning environment.

Despite the strong sporting dimension of the nippers, the emphasis on participation and the provision of a supportive environment for children stands in contrast to much junior sport. Parent, coach and player behaviour have become such a problem in most team sports that the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and many large sporting bodies have developed a range of programmes to deal with them. Even at state level there is little, if any, of this evident in nippers surf carnivals. There are also few, if any, problems with children spending their season ‘on the bench’. This is largely due to the fact that the nippers programme is more than a sport. As much as some clubs might stress winning and push their better competitors (as many do), children can choose not to compete and enjoy the relatively low stress on competition each Sunday morning over summer. For those who stay on and progress to the cadets, such as Monte at the Ocean Village club, they can also experience the satisfaction of becoming a lifesaver regardless of their success or otherwise in carnivals. At the same time, children who spend a larger part of their lives in the nippers develop a strong sense of belonging in the community of the surf club. Many also develop a sense of belonging in the local community around the club. The learning arising from long-term membership in the nippers involves more than just learning skills, developing knowledge and physical capacities specific to lifesaving or competition. It involves processes through which children and young people develop comprehensive understandings of their world that are inseparable from the development of identity.

Learning in and through membership in the nippers is not only socially and culturally situated but is also situated within a particular physical environment. It is the natural environment of the beach and the ocean that gives learning so much meaning. Skills such as swimming or ski paddling have little meaning out of the water and learning to swim or paddle a board in the surf requires more than technical competence. It requires an embodied
knowledge enacted within a very dynamic and literally fluid environment. While it might conceivably be possible to teach a child to perform the techniques of swimming without going in the water it only becomes swimming when performed in the water (Light, 2006). Surf swimming also requires a ‘feel’ for the connections between the swimmer and the water. Like sailing and surfing it requires what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as a practical mastery of a particular physical environment. In terms used at surf clubs the swimmer or paddler must be able to ‘read’ the surf. Reading the surf implies more than just being able to stand on the beach and describe the conditions of the surf. It implies being able to interpret the movements of the ocean, to make meaning of it and to enact a comprehensive understanding of the ocean in an embodied process of adaptation. In the case of nippers learning to swim or paddle in the surf, the learner, what is learnt is inseparable from the physical environment.

When viewed from a situated learning perspective, learning in the community of the surf club for children involves them in a process of learning through which the knowledge and ability they develop is inseparable from identity formation. This occurs, not only through physical engagement in practice but also through the constant social interaction that characterises membership in surf clubs. ‘Low level’ learning is a constant and unavoidable consequence of social life with up to 80 per cent of what we learn occurring at a non-conscious level (Davis et al, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For children participating in the nippers there is a continuous and ongoing process of learning that is often implicit yet deep, lasting and highly significant for their development of a sense of who they are in the world. Situated learning involves comprehensive understandings of the world within which the learner lives. The processes through which young people learn the skills, knowledge and culture of their social environment involve the whole person and not just a disembodied mind. When viewed from a situated learning perspective cultural activities that children engage in, and the communities formed around them, outside school such as club sport and recreational activities such as skateboarding and surfing emerge as significant sites for social and cultural learning and the development of identity.

CONCLUSION

This examination of children’s experiences in nippers programmes provides valuable insight into the depth and range of meaningful and significant learning that might otherwise go unnoticed. The use of Lave & Wenger’s (1991) notion of situated learning as a means of understanding this learning and identifying how it occurs highlights just how important the nippers and other sporting experiences can be for the personal, social and cultural development of children in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. Over time, children’s experiences of the nippers form an important aspect of their ongoing ‘human development’ (Dewey, 1916/97). Participation in a community of practice such as a surf club or a sports club can form a pivotal influence in children’s learning about themselves, their social and cultural environment and their developing sense of who they are in their world. This confirms the need for recognition of learning as an ongoing process that is part of day-to-day social life and not just something taking place in a defined and formal episode such as a class in a school. We suggest that this requires seeing schools, and school-based physical
education, as one part or aspect of this learning continuum and considering the ways in which schools fit into this learning process. This has important implications for the teaching of physical education and sport in schools. It demands more consideration by teachers and policy makers of the meanings children and young people make of physical activity outside schools, what they learn and the ways in which they learn through physical activity and what schools might learn from this about the development of meaningful programmes and pedagogy.

REFERENCES
