

Children's Social and Personal Development Through Sport: A Case Study of an Australian Swimming Club

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Abstract

Despite the prominence of swimming in Australia and the large numbers of children participating in it, no previous research has been conducted on what the implications of this might be for their social development. Indeed, there is a lack of empirical research conducted on the personal, moral, and social learning that arises from children's participation in sport. Building on research conducted on learning and the formation of identity in an Australian surf club (Light, 2006), this article contributes toward redressing this oversight by drawing on a 3-month ethnographic study conducted on a swimming club in Sydney, Australia. Focused on children aged 9 to 12 years of age, it explores the range of social, personal, and cultural development that occurs through their participation in the practices of the club. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) analytic concepts of situated learning and communities of practice, it suggests that a range of important social learning, enculturation, and the development of identity arises from participation in the practices of the swimming club.

Keywords

communities of practice, social development, situated learning, swimming, sports clubs, Australia

Public panic over a perceived obesity epidemic in developed societies has highlighted the importance of regular physical activity among children for their health. Although this offers a convincing rationale for physical education and sport, it can also obfuscate

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the contribution that sport can make toward the social and personal development of children. As important as its health benefits are for children, sport offers more for their development than just a form of exercise to reduce the risk of developing lifestyle diseases. For many children and young people, sport forms a significant part of their lives, shaping their development into members of society and the sorts of people they become. Recent developments in social perspectives on learning theory highlight the complexity, depth, and breadth of learning as a lifelong, ongoing, whole person process (see, for example, Davis & Sumara, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). This work offers a powerful means of highlighting the role that sport can play in the social, personal, and moral growth of children and young people and particularly when practiced within club settings (Light, 2008). This is likely to be particularly pronounced in countries such as Australia, Germany, and the United Kingdom where so many children are involved in community-based and commercial club sport.

Within the context of what sport historian Richard Cashman (1995) refers to as a *paradise of sport*, the well-established system of organized club sport in Australia forms a feature of Australian cultural life. A total of 1.6 million of the 2.6 million Australian children aged 5 to 14 were involved in organized sport outside schools in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), with swimming being the most popular participant sport for them. Almost 500,000 participated in swimming in 2006, which is 17% of all children in Australia. Australia has been a dominant swimming nation from the turn of the 20th century (Light & Rockwell, 2005) and enjoys a high profile in the mass media with swim stars such as Ian Thorpe, Grant Hackett, Leisel Jones, and Stephanie Rice being household names. Despite this prominence of swimming in Australia, and the numbers of children participating in it, no previous research has been conducted on what the implications of this might be for their social development. Indeed, there is a continuing dearth of empirical studies that have been conducted on the personal, moral, and social learning that arises from children's participation in sport and on the nature of their experiences of it (MacPhail, Gorely, & Kirk, 2003).

This article redresses this lack of research attention to the role of organized sport in the growth and development of children and young people by drawing on a study conducted in an Australian swimming club. Building on research conducted on learning and the formation of identity in an Australian surf club (Light, 2006), it draws on a 3-month ethnographic study conducted in a swimming club in Sydney, Australia, that inquired into the reasons why children aged 9 to 12 joined the club and the nature of their experiences that kept them in it. Through a close focus on children aged 9 to 12 years, this article explores the range of social, personal, and cultural development arising from being in the club. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning perspective, it suggests a range of important social learning, enculturation, and the development of identity that arise from participation in the practices of the club when viewed as a community of practice (CoP).

Competitive Swimming in Australia

Swimming is organized as a competitive sport in Australia through the two overlapping structures of the community-based club system and the school system. Swimming is also part of the school physical education syllabus, but the focus is on learning to swim and developing competency in the water and not on competitive swimming. Both the primary school and secondary school systems offer access to a competitive sport structures for students who have the ability and inclination to compete and work their way up the various levels from the school swimming carnival to state- and national-level competition. Although the competitive structure of swimming in schools is well organized, schools typically do not provide any extensive training or preparation. Most competitive swimmers train outside schools in commercial swimming schools that are based in local council pools. Even the children in well-resourced independent schools tend to train in these commercial swim schools. Although some do exist, most government schools do not have their own pools and often have difficulty in accessing pools due to the cost of hiring the pool for anything beyond the annual school swimming carnival. They are also unlikely to have staff who are able and willing to provide the intensive coaching required for the development of highly competitive swimmers.

Most people in Australia have access to a public pool that is owned, maintained, and regulated by the local council. Within each pool, there is normally a commercial swim school that offers learn-to-swim programs and training programs for competitive swimmers called *squad training*. Once a child has become a competent swimmer, he or she will often stay at the pool and join a swim squad. As with the pool in this study, almost all also have a separate swimming club that swimmers must join to be able to compete in swim meets organized by the relative state and/or national governing body.

Situated Learning

Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning perspective has had a significant impact on the sociocultural perspective on learning theory in the field of education (Fox, 2000). It has also influenced thinking about learning in the physical education field (see, for example, Kirk & Macdonald, 1998; Kirk & MacPhail, 2002) and more recently in research on community sport (Light, 2006, 2008). Lave and Wenger's analytic concepts of situated learning, CoP, and legitimate peripheral participation provide useful means of accounting the ways in which learning is essentially an ongoing, social process that is situated within particular social and cultural contexts. Their focus on the implicit learning that takes place through participation in the practices of a CoP enables research on children's and young people's participation in sport within CoP, such as a school or a sports club, to highlight the significance of this for their sociocultural, moral, and personal development (see, for example, Light, 2006). Bourdieu's key conceptual tools of habitus, practice, capital, and field also provide a means of

recognizing the power of the implicit pedagogy operating in and through sport as a social practice (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1986). Both Bourdieu and Lave and Wenger's work has at its core a focus on practice, but the context within which this is considered is larger with Bourdieu's concept of cultural fields than it is with Lave and Wenger's tighter focus on a CoP. From a situated learning perspective, learning is viewed as situated forms of social coparticipation in which learning and identity formation are inseparable. Situated learning captures the ways in which we learn through participation in a range of practices in ways that are not always explicit, intended, nor exclusively intellectual.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) perspective on learning emphasizes the importance of participation in practice as a means of learning and mastering the understandings and skills required to live in it. From this perspective, learning is not something that only occurs in defined learning episodes, such as in lessons at school or in being taught how to throw a pass in rugby or kick a ball in football. Instead, learning, it is an unavoidable part of social life and participation in practice. Meaningful learning is thus transformative and involves learning "how to do" practices through participating in them. It also involves gaining access to the culture of communities with learning as an "inseparable part of social practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 32). From this perspective, children in a swimming club learn far more than just the techniques of swimming, such as streamlining off the wall, doing a tumble turn, or how to catch the water with the hands and forearms in breaststroke. They also experience a range of deep, implicit, social, cultural, and personal development as members of this CoP.

The Study

Aims

The study drawn on in this article aimed to inquire into the social and cultural factors that shaped children's decisions to join a competitive swimming club and the nature of their experiences in the club that kept them in it. I visited the club training sessions two to three times a week and attended all significant swim meets that swimmers from the club entered over the duration of the research. This article draws specifically on data-generated inquiry into the nature of experience in the club, with a focus on those aspects that might have shaped important social and personal development.

The Site and the Participants

This study was conducted from December 2006 to March 2007 in a swimming club based at a pool in an inner city suburb of Sydney, Australia and referred to in this article as the Sydney Swim Club (SSC). The club had a membership of approximately 190, with about 40 swimmers aged between 9 and 12. The study focused on children from 9 years to 12 years of age across four squads but with most of them in the top two squads. Questionnaires were distributed among all 43 children aged between 9 and

12 with 33 responding. From those who responded, 20 were chosen at random to participate in interviews with their ages and gender as follows, with the ratio of male to female and between age groups reflecting the make-up of the children in the squads:

Age	Male	Female	Total
9	2	5	7
10	2	4	6
11	1	3	4
12	1	2	3

Of the 20 swimmers who took part in interviews, their time in the club ranged from 2 years, who joined during the study, to those who had been in the club for 4 years, with most having started learning to swim as infants aged between 1 and 2 years. The frequency and duration of training ranged from two 45-min sessions a week to five, and sometimes six, 1.5-hr sessions a week, with 22 competing in interclub competition and 10 of those interviewed competitive enough to place in swimming meets. A total of 6 participants qualified for the 2007 NSW Speedo Sprint Series finals and 3 (within the group that this study focused on) qualified for the Primary Schools Sport Association of New South Wales state championships. The Speedo Sprint meet is contested exclusively over 50 m.

Data Generation and Analysis

Initial data were generated through a Likert-type scale questionnaire distributed among all swimmers aged 9 to 12 years to give a broad picture of all children in the club aged 9 to 12 years. Following this, 20 swimmers were selected from those who volunteered to take part in three rounds of semistructured interviews conducted over a 12-week period. Single interviews were also conducted with 20 parents and with each of the four coaches for a different perspective on learning. The first round focused on reasons for joining the club and factors that might have influenced their decision to join, with the other two focused on their experiences of being in the club and their experiences of, and attitude toward, competition.

The questionnaire and interview data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. This involved identifying emerging themes and ideas and grouping them into major categories. For the last round, the interview questions were developed to test the substantive theories developed from the first two rounds. Auto-photography was used to augment data generation between the second and third round of interviews by giving one child from each of the four age groups a disposable camera and asking them to take photographs that could tell a story of what swimming meant to them. After developing the photographs, I returned them to the four swimmers asking them to organize them in order of importance. The photographs were then used to generate dialogue in interviews by asking the participant to explain and discuss why they took

the photograph and what it meant to them (see Georgakis & Light, 2009; Light, 2008, for more detailed accounts of this method). All names used are pseudonyms.

Results

Membership in the SSC provided opportunities for participation in the practices of the community that included a range of rich social interaction. As the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) suggests, it is this interaction the swimmers engage in from which social learning and the development of identity arises. The study identified three distinct practices through which the swimmers not only learnt to swim better but also engaged in interaction that developed social skills, learnt the culture of swimming, and developed a sense of identity. These practices were (a) training, (b) competing, and (c) social activities. This section of the article examines and discusses these practices focused on the learning involved in them, followed by the views of the coaches and parents on the social and personal development arising from them.

Training

Although social connections and relationships had little influence on the swimmers' decisions to join the club, the strong friendships developed over time in squad training and competition had a profound influence on their enjoyment of being in the club, desire to stay in it, and their social development. The older swimmers in the top squad (referred to under the pseudonym of the *Dolphins*) saw friendships developed at the club and in squads as being more important and more intimate than friendships formed anywhere else and including school. For all swimmers in the study, the formation of valued friendships at the club was an extremely important aspect of life in the club and one of the most important reasons given by them for remaining in squad training and in the club.

During training, small groups formed within each squad with children chatting during the short breaks while waiting for the other swimmers to finish the set. Eamon (12 years) said that the topic of discussion among his friends at this time was "movies and stuff and how hard the next set was going to be." Strong friendships also developed through a sense of shared effort at training, particularly with the swimmers in the Dolphins and swimmers whose families were deeply involved with the club. They said that they did not enjoy very hard training, but from my observations over the 3 months of the study, the harder the training was the more it seemed to bond the swimmers in the Dolphins as they developed a sense of shared effort and suffering. This was very noticeable in some of the more demanding sessions leading up to the Speedo Sprint heats, which was a meet targeted by the club (all events contested over 50 m). Although some in the Dolphins looked exhausted as they climbed out of the pool after hard sessions, these sessions produced more lively and animated discussion about training among the smaller age groups that formed within the squad.

For the competitive swimmers, there were opportunities for interaction during squad training and competing. Only a few arrived early before training, and many

had to rush off immediately after training but others, the younger girls in particular, took time to shower and get changed together after most training sessions. When asked to name what he felt made his daughter most happy about being in the swimming club, Mark lightheartedly said, “Oh, um, showering. The highlight is having a shower with her friends after (training). They all get in there together and it seems to take forever!”

Despite the intensity of training, they were also able to create valuable social spaces for interaction and the development of friendship in the gaps between action in the pool at training and at swim meets, as Anna (10 years) explains:

We get to make friends and talk at training and at meets. We talk to each other at training, like when we’re waiting for the last ones to finish the set and before David tells us what to do next and after and before. And like at meets when we are all waiting for our race to start.

Relationships with the coaches. The coaches were very important figures in the children’s worlds of swimming, and this was particularly marked in the Dolphins. I asked four of the Dolphins (Amber, Anna, Karen, and Eamon) to take photographs that would tell a story of what swimming meant in their lives and to rank the photographs in order of importance. I then used these photographs to generate dialogue during interviews. They all took photographs of David and ranked them in the top three most important photographs, with discussions about the photographs confirming his central position in their worlds. David built strong personal relations with his swimmers at normal training sessions and by including training sessions at the beach over the summer holiday and sometimes playing touch rugby in the park opposite the pool with them. He was at all times approachable for the swimmers and interested in their lives outside the pool. They all suggested that he could be demanding; yet they were all very fond of him and very much valued his opinions about their swimming, as Amber (9 years) explains:

He’s hard. Well, if I won something like nationals he’d go, “you were flying!” Or something like that, but otherwise he’d just say, “that was good—36—yes that’s pretty good.” If I don’t do so well, then I feel a little bit scared of what he’ll say and (I’m) not happy because my chance is gone.

When Amber was discussing her photographs of David, she was holding back tears because she thought he was going to leave the club. Several other children in the squad were equally saddened with the prospect of losing him. For all in his squad, there seemed to be far more attachment to him than to teachers or any other figures in most of the swimmers’ lives other than their parents.

There was a perception among the swimmers of there being strong support and emotional security in the club. Even though David was seen as being hard at times, they all saw him as being supportive and caring. As Danah (9 years) explains, he was always positive in his comments and attitude toward the swimmers in competition:

I like David because when you do something good he tells you, “you did it good.” But when you do something a bit bad, he says that you did good but you have to do a bit more better on the next race.

The opinions of the coaches were important to the swimmers and particularly for the older, more competitive ones. The owner of the swim school was planning to introduce a new squad at a level above the Dolphins, and Eamon was pleased that he had attracted the head coach’s attention: “We’ve got a new Sharks squad starting up soon, and Steve (head coach) is starting to get more interested in me”.

Competition

Competition for the swimmers in the SSC was available in the relatively informal form of club races conducted at the club’s pool and through the more formal system of races provided by NSW Swimming and Swimming Australia leading up to state- and national-level championships (New South Wales is a state in Australia).

Club races. Although the level of competition the swimmers participated in ranged from the relaxed atmosphere of the weekly club races at the pool to the pressure of competing at national-level championships, they saw all competition as a positive experience. It was central to the enjoyment they gained from being in the club and their motivation for staying in it. The more committed swimmers competed all year, but those in the lower squads restricted their racing to the weekly club swims and an occasional interclub meet. For example, Emma (9 years) and her family rarely missed a club swim, but she only swam once a year in an interclub event when she competed in the regional heats of the Speedo Sprint Series. This was a major meet targeted by the club and was one of its big meets of the year.

The less competitive swimmers tended to value the club swims as both a social gathering and a chance to take part in some low-key racing more than swimmers in the Dolphins. In these events, they would often race against swimmers from different age groups, and sometimes doing different strokes, with little importance placed on winners or losers by the swimmers, coaches, or parents. During club swims, the swimmers received coaching tips and were always congratulated for setting a personal best (PB) time. These regular events over summer were very social affairs providing important opportunities for the reinforcing and development of relations within the club as a CoP. The coach of the Dolphins, David, reinforced the importance of social interaction for the club races in an interview: “Yeah, it’s very important; if there’s sort of no social interaction with the kids, they get bored and don’t want to come. If it’s really social, they all look forward to it every Friday night.”

The *social swimmers* tended to swim regularly at club races on both Friday nights and on Sunday mornings but did not compete much beyond these races. For example, Emma (9 years) competed every Sunday morning in club races and most Friday nights but only entered one meet outside the club. Sunday morning races were run at a more leisurely pace than on Fridays with more families attending. With many of the more

competitive swimmers having other sport commitments on Sunday morning, such as nippers (junior surf lifesaving), Sunday mornings provided opportunities for more social interaction than squad training and Friday night races did. Club races offered valuable time for play and other interaction between children that facilitated the development of friendships, as Emma explained in an interview midway through the study:

Well, first (way I got to make friends) is talking to each other before going into (club) races. We started talking before the race, and we kept on seeing each other afterwards, and we started to get to know personal things about them, and then whenever we saw them we just would run up to them and say “hi!”

Open swim meets. Swimmers in the top squad raced regularly over the main, summer season and the winter off-season. Indeed, swimmers invited to join the top squad had to agree to train a minimum of four times a week and compete regularly as a condition of entry. These swimmers, regardless of age, tended to have very high personal goals in swimming and long-term aspirations supported by their parents. The frequency of competition outside club races for the swimmers over a year ranged from no interclub meets to 24 in the club system plus an extra 4 or 5 in the school system.

Most swimmers in the top squad were very competitive and focused on competing at the highest level they could. Although these swimmers, like all in the study, measured success in terms of their PBs, they were also concerned with qualifying for higher level events and accepted the need to hurt at training to improve their performance. Indeed, many said that they enjoyed hurting at training, as is clear in Eamon’s (12 years) response to being asked if he thought that training was too hard, “No, I don’t. I enjoy swimming, I enjoy hurting and I enjoy being fit. I love it.” Four to five hard 1½-hr sessions a week could be seen as being very demanding for a 9- or 10-year-old child. The coach, David, demanded commitment from his swimmers and reprimanded a few whom he felt were being lazy, leading to tears welling in the eyes of a few younger girls on occasion. When asked whether they had ever considered quitting because of the demands of training, most said that they had not considered it, adding that they did not think training was too hard. Shana (12 years) was in the Dolphins but was not one of the more successful competitors. She was also studying at an academically selective high school with a heavy work load; yet she left no doubt about the enjoyment she gained from training in response to being asked if training was too hard and whether she had ever considered quitting:

No, never. I wake up in the morning at 5.15 and I love it. My parents never push me at all and I love it. I never think about giving up at all. The main reason I started was because I had asthma and swimming is good for asthma, but now I love it.

Three did say that training was sometimes too demanding and had thought about quitting but did not because they saw it as a means to an end, as Karen (11 years) explains:

“Yeah, it can get pretty hard sometimes. Actually I’ve thought about it (quitting) when it gets really hard, but I wouldn’t because it’s worth it.” In this case, Karen is hinting at being prepared to sacrifice a little for the future benefits that she thinks it will bring for her. However, like many of the swimmers in this study, she seemed to be talking up how hard training was as part of a shared experience of dealing with physical and emotional stress that bonded the swimmers in the top squad in particular.

Social Activities

In addition to the central practices of training and competing, the swimmers at the SSC engaged in a range of more minor yet related activities through which social learning, identity formation, and enculturation occurred. The Friday night club races held over summer only lasted for an hour, but there was usually a barbeque set up behind the starting block to raise a little extra cash for the club and to make the event a little more social. The same parents usually set up the barbeque but received some assistance from others for the 30 min or so over which it operated. During this time, swimmers and parents gathered around it to eat and talk. Like any barbeque, it formed the focus of a social gathering for exchange, interaction, and the confirmation of social relations. It provided the coaches, the executive of the swimming club, parents, swimmers, and their siblings with the opportunity to interact in a more social way than at training. Interviews with parents of the children in the study suggested that these minor events were very significant for some children, as Mark makes clear when asked what were the most enjoyable aspects of the club for his daughter Anna (10 years): “She loves the BBQ’s and the little events, that are really important to her. And she loves relays. She really blossoms here and loves to do them.”

The coach of the Dolphins, David, said that he valued developing good relationships with his swimmers and sought to engage them in different activities when he could. Over the school holidays, the swim school ran a daily intensive program that involved 1 to 2 hr of training 5 days a week for his squad. During these intensive periods in summer, he would organize for the squad to train at the beach once or twice a week. This would typically involve some jogging on the beach, stretching, and surf swimming. For example, on one session that I attended, he and the squad would sprint through the surf out the back beyond the breaking waves where they would tread water as they recovered waiting in a group. On his command, they would try to catch a wave and race into the beach with, this pattern repeated for 30 min before resting on the beach and moving onto another activity. These sessions typically involved the squad spending up to 3 hr at the beach with far more opportunity for interaction than at normal training. There was also, of course, a more relaxed atmosphere. During winter, the squad would play touch rugby for 30 min before training, which was something that many of the swimmers very much looked forward to each day. All these minor activities provided opportunities for the continuation and confirmation of growing social relationships between the swimmers in the squad and between them and the coach as a central dimension of their membership in the club and the squads.

Coach and Parent Perspectives on Learning/Development

During the interviews conducted with parents and coaches in the study, they were asked for their opinions on what benefits they felt the children might gain from swimming competitively and from being in the club without any specific reference to personal or social development. They were asked (a) what they thought the benefits of competitive swimming for their children/swimmers were and (b) what they felt the most positive aspects of their children's membership in the club were. In response to both these questions, two prominent themes dominated: (a) the development of traits valued in the adult world of work and (b) the development of social skills, the formation of friendships, and the formation of identity.

Moving into the adult world. The coaches and parents were all reasonably uniform in suggesting that being in the club promoted values and traits required to live in the adult world. This included developing personal discipline, setting goals, and striving to reach them and sacrifice for delayed benefits. The owner of the swim school, Simon, suggested that "the discipline a swimmer has to develop at an early age benefits them in other areas of their life." Eamon's (12 years) father, who is a very successful businessman, followed a similar line when asked what he thought were the benefits for his son in competing and being in the club:

It teaches them discipline; it's the values of discipline. To build a focus rather than a competition, a comp. is an end by which you measure the progress. It's really about coming down here and doing the time and fitting in the HW [hard work]. And an enormous amount of work around your lifestyle, that's what's important.

In response to the same question about competing, a few other parents focused more on the social aspects of the club and the ways in which this contributed to the personal growth of their children, as Anna' (10 years) father, Mark, makes clear:

I think their own individuality shapes their attitude to swimming, and I notice people who get upset when they don't win and are very competitive and very serious, but she is exploring her sense of achievement, benchmarked against her own ability. And that's what I like about swimming. For example, because of times. It is harder to justify your success in team sports, and you don't have the same sense of achievement. Because it [swimming] is an individual sport; it gives that sense of achievement to her.

Here Mark refers to the achievement of personal goals in swimming as an important part of the culture of the club and of the wider swimming culture, which was a common theme among the parents interviewed. The notion of a PB was central means through which all swimmers were able to enjoy competing and develop a strong sense of self-esteem. This focus on personal achievement motivated all children in this study regardless of ability, confidence, and competitive drive. Shana (12 years) who was in the

Dolphins was not an outstanding competitor yet loved the thrill of competing and of setting PBs. Her mother felt that competing was good for her because it provided motivation for her to train and encouraged her to set goals that she would then work to achieve:

She loves the competing and it makes her motivated because she needs to be prepared and she gets experience. If she didn't practice and go in competitions, she wouldn't be confident. So that gives her experience and more exercise with the training because she has to set a goal and try to get it. And it also gives her self-esteem to swim at school events. When they come here, they are competing against other people, so it gives her more discipline and lets her know how much she can improve if she tries.

Social and personal development. In response to being asked about the positive aspects of being in the club for their children, most parents focused on the social dimensions of membership with reference to learning social skills, making friends, learning to be part of a community, and developing self-esteem. Mark had been an elite-level swimmer himself who had only narrowly missed out on making a national squad and was still a very committed swimmer competing in the masters division at national and international levels. Despite his own competitive drive, he consistently emphasized the social aspect of his daughter's membership in the club, such as when asked what he saw as the benefits of swimming for his daughter:

A lot of friends, more diverse friends, a lot younger or older, not just sitting in class dealing with her peers, she has to negotiate upwards as well as downwards. So she's mentoring younger kids that are coming through, which is an interesting concept for a 10-year-old when she has 7- and 8-year-olds to care for. There are also a lot of older ones who are mentoring her, so she's getting that different relationships that she has to negotiate.

In this quote, Mark also draws attention to the relationships developed between children in the club. In the SSC, children like Anna learnt to mentor younger swimmers and relate to older swimmers and to adults more than they typically would in the larger community and at school. This is an important aspect of any community as younger newcomers move from peripheral participation to more mature membership and participation.

The mother of one of the 10-year-old girls in the club, Seina, also emphasized the social aspects of the club but also commented on the benefits of competition as well:

I think she meets children outside school, and she's made a couple of really nice friends. It's also nice to compete against people who are all dedicated to swimming. Not because the school says you have to swim. And I think at school you get

that girly type of competition outside class as well, but this is just purely a swimming thing. Now on Sundays she really enjoys having her Dad be a part of the club.

Here Seina's mother also draws attention to the participation of many parents in the community of the SSC where it was not unusual to have three to four parents swimming in the public lanes while their children were training in squads. Seina's father joined the club and actually races on Sunday mornings with Seina, saying that she enjoys this overlap between her family life and her life in the club. Some other parents, such as Mark, often swam in masters squads in nearby lanes, and a few of them also raced on Sunday mornings while their children raced.

Discussion

When the experiences of the young swimmers in the SSC are considered from a situated learning perspective, it suggests that a range of significant learning and development occurs over time through participation in the practices of the club. Through this participation, the swimmers in this study were developing important social skills and understandings as part of their movement toward adulthood and their ongoing formation of personal identity. Situated Learning involves comprehensive understandings of the world within which the learner lives, involving not merely knowing about it but extending to being in it (Lave & Wenger, 1991). 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. It is through this whole engagement of the person that learning and the formation of identity are intertwined. Learning involves processes of embodiment, ways of understanding, and modes of cognition that are neither explicit nor easily articulated.

Sociocultural constructivism highlights the importance of social interaction for learning, with Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasizing the inseparability of practice and learning. As Light and Wallian (2008) suggest, swimming can mistakenly be seen as a solitary sport dominated by endless repetition and hour on hour of following the black line on the bottom of the pool. When actually swimming in training and racing in competition there is limited opportunity for any interaction with other swimmers, but membership in a swimming club and in a training squad is a very social experience as this article suggests. The participation of the children in this study in the three specific practices of training, competing, and the social activities of the club suggests significant social and personal learning. Although the intended explicit learning of swimming technique is easily identified and measured, the attendant social and personal development is far more difficult to pin down with learning at the SSC being multilayered. This ranged from the explicit learning of techniques, such as stroke technique and how to streamline after tumble turning, to the more implicit social, moral, and personal learning of how to interact with peers, adults, and younger children; learning the culture of the club and of swimming; and through to the learning of personal identity.

One of the problems with inquiring into implicit learning is the temptation to reduce it to that, which can be made explicit and measured or quantified. As the work of Lave and Wenger, and Bourdieu (e.g., see Bourdieu, 1986) suggests, most learning occurs at a nonconscious, embodied level that is difficult to identify. Davis and Sumara (2003) are more explicit about the significance of nonconscious learning, suggesting that up to 80% of human learning occurs at a nonconscious level. In interviews with parents, coaches, and children in the study, some of them suggested specific learning or development outcomes, such as the development of social skills and knowledge, moral values, personal identity, social connections, and life skills, they felt arose from membership in the club. Drawing on the opinions of parents, coaches, and the swimmers themselves provides a reasonably persuasive perspective on some of the implicit learning arising from participation in the practices of the SSC CoP. Although it cannot measure all of the important learning that takes place over time beyond the explicit learning of technique and tactics required for competitive swimming, it does suggest the range, depth, and significance of learning that is tied into long-term membership in the SSC.

The demands of the regimes of training to which the children in this study submit to are likely to seem extreme. The demands of long hours, sacrifice of other personal interests, and getting up early in the morning placed on the swimmers in this study exceed those normally placed on most other children (Watson, Blanksby, & Bloomfield, 1985). At one level, such commitment at an early age provides cause for concern, with the imposition of competitive adult values on children and the reduction of the play element in sport. As Coakley (1996, 2007) notes, highly organized, competitive sports (such as swimming) run by adults for children resemble the adult world of work more than a child's world of play. Children's entry into such sporting organizations operates to socialize them into the adult world with its stress on values, such as commitment, effort, teamwork, and delayed gratification. Taking critical perspective on children's sport, Henricks (2006) makes a clear distinction between play and work, arguing that organized competitive sport involves stripping young people of their "less appealing qualities of youth to emerge as quazi adults" (p. 77). This seems to aptly describe the development of discipline and similar traits that some of the parents and coaches identified as a positive social learning arising from swimming in the club.

However, at a deeper level of analysis, the close focus of this study uncovers opportunities available for the swimmers to experience what could be seen as the play aspects of sport where they also develop interpersonal relationships and identity. Although the highly structured world of competitive swimming is certainly far removed from Huizinga's (1955) idea of play as a form of free human expression, the swimming club constitutes a social setting providing opportunities for rich interaction from which learning arises. Many of the children in this study endure constant hard training. They must meet the expectations of the coach, teammates, and parents; with their efforts and progress measured in hundredths of a second the social and physical experiences of training and being in the club provide constant gratification and enjoyment through the meaning it has for them. Most of them have very close personal relationships with

friends in their squads and with their coaches. Despite the demanding training programs, there is also considerable space for informal play and interaction through which friendships and personal identity are formed before, during, and after training; at swim meets; and during the social activities the children participated in.

In an increasingly complex world of rapidly changing meanings and at a time when many young adolescents are struggling to form a sense of who they are, membership in the SSC provides important opportunities for the children in this study to develop identity and a sense of belonging. This real learning (Greeno, 1997) involves a process of enculturation into the language, customs, and beliefs of the community of the swimming club. It is learning that involves the development of identity through transformation into a particular type of person. It is also learning that makes a significant contribution toward their development of self-esteem and the formation of a sense of who they are in the world during their journey from childhood into the adult world. Indeed, there is a clear parallel between the ways in which the swimmers in this study become more mature members of the swimming club and the ways in which they learn to become adult members of society.

Conclusion

This article provides useful insight into the complexity and importance of children's worlds that are constructed through and around sport within club settings. It provides understanding of both what children's participation in sport means for them and the important development that is part of their participation. It also alerts us to the significance of sport for young people beyond just learning skills and getting fit. Looking at the experiences of the children in this study from a situated learning perspective helps capture the breadth and depth of implicit yet important development arising from membership in the swimming club as they move toward more mature participation in the community of the club and the larger community of competitive swimming. In doing so, it highlights the role of movement, the body, and its experiences in learning and the significant part that long-term participation in sports clubs can play in the ongoing human development of children and young people. The physical and socio-cultural environment of the swimming club not only constitutes a CoP but also a different world into which the children in this study enter and within which they develop into particular types of people. The world of the SSC that the children in this study spend so much time in can be seen as being constituted by particular sets of social relationships, a particular physical environment that includes the pool structure and the water within which they spend so much time, and by the collective experiences of the swimmers and others who are part of it and have been part of it.

The tight focus of this study on one particular swimming club as a CoP provides intimate insights into what and how learning arises from membership in a sports club at an individual level in a small community. This is not to say that this is the only influence on the development of the swimmers in the SSC as it can also be shaped by membership in other, overlapping CoP (see, e.g., Light & Nash, 2006) and by its

location within larger cultural fields (Bourdieu, 1986), but this was not the focus of this study. Viewing learning from the broad perspective used in this article, and using Lave and Wenger's analytic concepts, encourages consideration of the significant part that long-term participation in sport, in social settings such as schools or sports clubs, plays in the human growth (Dewey, 1916/1997) of children as shaped by particular social and cultural settings. When considered from this perspective, sport emerges as a deeply socially situated process that is far more complex and significant for the development of children and young people than the bulk of research and writing on it to date suggests. As such, it deserves more consideration from researchers in physical education and sport sociology for the part that sport can play in the development of children, with the social perspective on learning theory offering an ideal framework for conducting such research.

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Bio

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