



Physical Education: Sport and Respect

What if grade-school soccer taught fairness and respect?

Jim is a retired teacher who comes in to help run the school soccer teams. The teams are fairly experienced, and the first team plays in a local school tournament. There had been problems with the way they responded to decisions by the referees and linesmen, and Jim felt that this was due to influences coming from professional soccer.

"I divided the students into several teams, and over a number of weeks I made sure that all team members experienced being both players and referees as we played practice games. In the final session I asked team members to pair up and to describe both experiences thinking about the following:

- What was good about both roles?
- What was negative about them?
- In each role, how would you want to be treated?

"The pairs shared their insights, and then we looked at a series of video clips of professional games that showed how referees are treated and how players feel when bad decisions are made. I also showed some clips of players and referees who behaved differently. We teased out what was different, focusing on fairness and respect.

"Rather than giving them rules, I asked them to come up with and commit to a way of behaving as a team that was fair and respectful to both players and referees."

What's going on here?

Jim saw the interaction of referee and player as a context for behaving justly and treating people as beings made by God who deserve respect.

He engaged students in experiencing contrasting roles and reflecting explicitly on their experiences in a manner framed by ideas of fairness and respect.

He reshaped his practice by using roles, video clips, intentionally chosen questions, and the framing concepts of fairness and respect to shape students' engagement.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

The discord and disrespect that is sometimes exhibited in society is often the result of injustice — accidental or deliberate — that we experience as part of life. The Bible makes it clear that life now is not as God intended. Christian hope for the future is a world where there is no injustice or unfairness, and Christians seek to reflect that hope in daily living. Treating others with respect and fairness is an aspect of love. Fairness is one aspect of justice and most people seem to have an awareness of what is and is not just, hence the frequency of the cry "That's not fair!" For Christians, justice is a reflection of a just God.

What difference does it make?

Giving students an experience of both roles helped them to empathize with those in other roles and to reflect on their experiences. As a result they were better prepared to create ways of behaving that would be fair. It is all too easy to create what we consider fair from our own perspective.

Where could we go from here?

In gym class, students can look at ways in which fairness and respect can be embedded in how they engage in a sport. The strategy of giving students a taste of another person's experience helps them to think about the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) and can be used in different parts of the curriculum. Giving students a direct experience is not always appropriate, since there are some situations and people we would not want them to experience or to empathize with. Neither experience nor empathy is intrinsically good, but each can be used to serve good purposes.

Digging deeper

God calls people to follow “justice and only justice” ([Deuteronomy 16:20](#)). In her song, Mary reflects on a God of [justice](#) who humbles the proud and lifts the poor ([Luke 1:51-52](#)). Jesus welcomed the marginalized, mixing with the poor and the rejected and people labeled sinners by others ([Matthew 9:10-12](#)). God’s justice shows itself in acting on behalf of the powerless ([Psalm 72, 7, 12](#)), often represented as the orphan, the widow, and the stranger—those with no one to defend them and who often are treated unfairly. God expects his people to make justice and redressing wrongs their aim ([Isaiah 1:13-17](#)).

Charity is no substitute for justice withheld. St. Augustine

Sometimes people respond to unfairness in a way that just creates a situation of unfairness for a different group. Jim tried to encourage justice and respect for both groups. He tried to encourage his teams to see both players and referees as children of God ([1 John 3:1-2](#)); as such, they both deserve to be treated with respect. They do not have to earn it. Respect comes as part of being made by God, but responsibility for acting fairly and being responsible for actions also comes as part of being a child of God.

In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person’s place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. C. S. Lewis

The Bible describes God as angry at injustice, and the prophet Amos thundered against the injustices of his day, where the vulnerable were oppressed and the rich just got richer. He called for justice to roll like a river ([Amos 2:24](#)). People seem to have an innate sense of justice and are rightly outraged at the injustice they see in the world ([Malachi 2:17](#)). When we resist injustice, we acknowledge that the opponent as a responsible moral agent. To resist is to pay people the compliment that they are responsible for their actions.



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