Encountering Sport:
How Does Religious Affiliation of Schools Influence Educator-Coaches?

Theorists rarely encounter sports and athletics when writing about the religious identity of schools, despite many Catholic schools drawing much of their identity from these programs in practice. In response, this poster presentation offers findings from a qualitative research study about the experiences of educator-coaches and their mentorship in Catholic schools. Drawing from these interviewees’ experiences in sport, I uncover how the lived spirituality of these educator-coaches is influenced by the catholic identity of the school. Findings highlight a number of positive, negative and negligible effects of catholicity on the experiences of coaches and raise questions about how educator-coaches can support the catholic identity of the schools.

My Topic

I am interested in the educational significance of the intersection of religion and sport. I have completed a full qualitative study of sport educator-coaches in Catholic schools in ____________, where I asked participants about how they experience their religion and spirituality as an educator-coach. Based upon this data and my research analysis, I am concentrating on one area of interest for the REA conference: the reported effects of religiously-affiliated schooling on educator-coaches.

My Research Question and Methodology

My research question—how does religious affiliation of a Catholic school influence educator-coaches?—investigates the lives of coaches via a phenomenological methodology. Creswell writes (p. 57-8) that this kind of study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.” Phenomenologists try “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 58). The power in this methodology then is in studying the lived experiences of these coaches, where primary emphasis is centered on how they experience their religious lives when coaching. In this way, it is an approach “without presuppositions” where the researcher aims “to suspend all judgments about what is real—the ‘natural attitude’—until they are founded on a more certain basis” (p. 58-9). The reality of the object, in this case a broad sense of coaching spirituality at a Catholic school, is necessarily linked to coaches’ experience of it—instead of something strictly taught from the pulpit or written in a catechism.

More specifically, I follow Moustakas approach to phenomenology—i.e., empirical or psychological—which emphasizes the descriptions of the participants’ experiences and taking the freshest look possible at the phenomenon.

Theories That Inform My Research and My Core References

Several educators (McGrath 2004; Kelly 2015; Power 2015; Evans 2009) promote a catholic approach to sport coaching that is based upon Church teaching, moral thought and their own encounters in athletics. This is helpful, but I turn to a phenomenological method to unearth the lived experience of these coaches, and in particular wish to understand how
they experience coaching at a catholic school. Instead of telling coaches how they *should* act, I want to know how they *experience* their coaching at a catholic school.

Based upon the findings of the research, educator-coaches spoke of the benefits of working at a Catholic school: they can talk freely about faith; challenge students to become moral people; sense that their beliefs align with their coaching philosophy; integrate faith in coaching; promote a deeper sense of community from a common faith; link church to sport at the school; respond to Jesus’ call to service through coaching, etc. At the same time, some coaches thought that there was little difference between sport in catholic and public schools. Another coach spoke of the risks of being outwardly religious because coaches run the risk of being rejected by other coaches, players and school staff.

To draw conclusions, I want to engage these findings with theory about Catholic schools in a secular North American society. Franchi (2014) presents challenges to catholic schooling in a secular world. Rymarz (2016) argues how to create an authentic catholic school today, holding that the schools need to be counter-cultural but not irrelevant. James K.A. Smith (2014) offers a vision for faith in a secular age. These and other sources will make conclusions about the experiences of coaches in catholic schools and offer suggestions for understanding athletic programs as a means of religious education in a secular context.

**Innovation for Religious Education**

Based upon qualitative data amassed, this study enables an in-depth look at how people live out their religious tradition as educators in the sporting world. Educator-coaches have a prominent mentoring role in youth sporting programs and examining their experiences—both good and bad—enables an enriched understanding for the field of religious education. Fundamentally, my research challenges assumptions about youth sport in education and presses for further thinking in this area of practice. I believe my work is innovative because too often we limit religious education—and education, for that matter—to instruction instead of non-didactic forms of learning like service, communal life, and worship (Harris 1989).

**Current Status of My Research**

I have completed the qualitative research interviews, finished the transcribing, and thoroughly analyzed the data. I have a colleague from another academic institution reviewing the transcriptions and my analysis currently. In June, I will submit a paper for publication on the study as a whole, and now wish to present a poster focused on this one element of my findings at REA. Additionally, I plan to read more in the above areas of research to deepen my understanding.