

The Value of Physical Literacy

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In the first article in this series, Physical Literacy – Clarifying the Concept (Physical Education Matters, spring 2012) we looked broadly at:

- the nature of physical literacy
- the value of physical literacy and its role in education
- the relationship between physical literacy and physical education
- some implications for physical education teachers in respect of promoting physical literacy.

In this second article we will look in more detail at the value of physical literacy, particularly the participation in purposeful physical pursuits, and at the key experiences and knowledge that learners need to have to ensure that they make progress on their physical literacy journey.

The value of physical literacy

The value of physical literacy was outlined in the first article and is also discussed in Whitehead *et al* (2010, p.32-37). In these presentations, the holistic value of physical literacy was explained in the context of looking at what we suggest are desirable outcomes of being physically literate, such as fostering physical potential, building self-confidence and developing a commitment to an active life style. In this article we would like to share some thoughts on the value of this commitment.

Physical literacy is a fundamental and valuable human capability, a key aspect of which is that the individual comes to understand the benefits of regular engagement in purposeful physical pursuits. Physically literate individuals appreciate that this engagement is a valuable component in leading a fruitful and satisfying life. They understand the far reaching positive outcomes of being physically active and the

ways this can be significant both **in** their lives and **for** their lives. Thus, they see physical activity as an important priority and take steps to embed it in their life pattern.

Purposeful physical pursuits as important *in* people's lives

Purposeful physical pursuits represent a range of activities that can have great significance and value and that affect people in a very pervasive manner. They have the power to enrich and transform lives, becoming an absorbing interest that rewards and fulfils and also provides avenues for the enhancement of human potential. Where purposeful physical pursuits become part of individuals' life pattern they can enrich and energise lives. Where people are engaged in something they consider valuable and worthwhile, they experience how participation can enable them to flourish and enhance their wellbeing. In addition, this commitment enables them to access purposeful physical pursuits that have become a fundamental and important part of our human heritage and cultural life.

Participation in this range of pursuits provides the opportunity for individuals to develop a variety of human capabilities. For example, these pursuits can foster appropriate interpersonal skills. The collaboration required in many purposeful physical pursuits requires participants to develop co-operative skills such as empathy, reciprocity and sensitivity. Participation may also provide situations that rely on trust and respect for others. Similarly, personal skills are called on, such as the adoption of conduct that reflects fairness, an appreciation of rules and conventions and the willingness to take responsibility. Effective participation also often depends on unselfishness and respect for others.





It needs to be stressed that participation should *not* be seen as a means to develop such desirable social and personal ends but rather a medium in which, if there is engagement and commitment, these additional benefits are possible outcomes.

Purposeful physical pursuits as important *for* people's lives

Purposeful physical pursuits have a significant role to play in promoting the health and wellbeing of individuals. By engaging in a variety of purposeful physical pursuits on a regular basis, young people are ensuring the development of the complex inter-related systems of their body to an optimal level of functioning that enables them to engender their lives. In achieving this, young people are building a wellbeing resource and reserve that provides the conditions for enriching their lives and enables them to feel good and flourish well.

In achieving this state there is an added bonus that can affect individuals beyond the school years throughout their lives. A commitment to active participation has the potential to be an invaluable investment for the future. For example, regular participation in purposeful physical pursuits has the potential to reduce the risk of many chronic diseases that can have a major impact on people's lives. It is, of course, also the case that such activities can have a therapeutic role for people who already have certain chronic conditions as they can ameliorate some of the effects of the condition. In the same way, certain forms of exercise can help to restore people's physical capacity and aid recovery following ill-health, an operation or a condition that inhibits a person's normal life.

The paragraph above can be read to focus on physical health; however, involvement in

purposeful physical pursuits has great potential in maintaining mental health, interpreted in its widest context. Here we are referring to the way that participation can satisfy a variety of the needs within a life pattern. As discussed in Whitehead *et al* (2010, p.184) there are a wide range of movement forms, participation in each of which offers particular experiences and potential rewards. It is suggested that individuals may relish participation in purposeful physical pursuits that involve interaction with other people or they may find satisfaction in activities in which they are challenged personally by features in the natural environment such as wind, water or mountains. Other individuals may favour activities that are purely focused on physical health while others may be attracted by activities that embrace expressive movement genres. Participation can have a highly significant 'balancing' effect in a modern life of tensions and stresses.

By fostering physical literacy, we are working to help people get on the inside of different purposeful physical pursuits. We are striving to open the minds and hearts of young people to the satisfactions that can be generated and the needs fulfilled by participation in purposeful physical pursuits. As a result, we need to go beyond simply 'engagement' in school-chosen activities; young people need to learn from their engagement and begin to appreciate the characteristics and values of different activities. We must so enthuse our learners that they develop a commitment to participation and, in addition, are appropriately informed and empowered to take responsibility for the choices they make. These choices include both the adoption of an active lifestyle and decisions about the purposeful physical pursuits in which they will engage. In other words, we need to help our learners to acquire a commitment to participation and recognise it is up to them to

make choices. A person's wellbeing can only be promoted if they accept that it is their responsibility to do all they can to enhance it. No one else can do this for them. Thus, we need teachers with the skills to cultivate, nurture and help people to cherish their sense of vitality, dynamism, energy and wellbeing, and so avoid their squandering of these aspects of their human potential.

The role of physical literacy in education

The role that fostering physical literacy can play in education was set out in the first article (Physical Education Matters, Spring 2012). However, the considerations above add further justification for the inclusion of rewarding and engaging experiences of purposeful physical pursuits within and beyond the curriculum.

It goes without saying that it falls on teachers to take steps to ensure all make progress on their physical literacy journey, importantly ensuring that young people:

- recognise the significance of life-long participation in physical activity
- appreciate that participation can enhance their wellbeing and enable them to flourish
- have the commitment to overcome barriers to participation
- learn to reflect and consider what they want to do with their lives.

Thus, the task for teachers is to:

- initiate young people into a wide and diverse range of purposeful physical pursuits, providing access to those activities that are important aspects of cultural life



- ensure that young people realise that engagement in purposeful physical pursuits can enrich their lives and enable them to flourish
- provide opportunities for young people to engage in making decisions about their involvement and commitment to purposeful physical pursuits.

To achieve the potential benefits of physical literacy in respect of all young people, teachers will need to address how this can be achieved in their curriculum planning and their teaching. This will be the subject of the next article. However, we would like to finish this article by setting the stage for a more practical approach to fostering physical literacy that identifies the challenge for teachers.

Key experiences and knowledge that learners need in order to make progress on their physical literacy journey and establish a commitment to lifelong participation

We suggest that, for all learners, participation should be rewarding. That is, experiences in purposeful physical pursuits should provide real satisfaction and enjoyment. This must include a sense of achievement and confidence that future participation will be pleasurable. It is suggested that without such positive experiences participation will not become an attractive option for learners.

Secondly, we suggest that experiences should enrich a sense of self-realisation and self-confidence. All individuals should be equally valued and their efforts and progress rewarded. It is suggested that without such positive self-affirming experiences, participation in purposeful physical pursuits may not be continued out of curriculum time or after compulsory schooling is completed.

Thirdly, we would argue that learners should experience the sense of wellbeing during and after participation. We believe that through these experiences learners can be enthused and energised to make purposeful physical activity an enduring feature of their lives.

In respect of these first three experiences, we suggest that teachers should work to establish a pedagogy of engagement in which teachers reach out to students in ways that nurture and guide student learning and help them apply themselves with commitment and interest to the task at hand. Tasks need to be challenging but within their grasp; learners need time to repeat movement patterns, reflect on and evaluate their progress and receive support from peers and teachers.

A fourth experience that is essential to promote physical literacy is the involvement in a wide range of movement forms (see Whitehead *et al*, 2010, chapter 15). This is necessary if learners are to develop a broad range of movement patterns, to deploy these patterns in a variety of environments and situations, and to become aware of the multiple opportunities there are, outside school, for them to pursue physical activity.

Finally, we suggest that all learners should have a basic understanding of the way that physical activity can have far reaching benefits that enhance the quality of life through adulthood and old age. These benefits cover aspects of physical, social and mental health. Learners should appreciate that they need to weigh media and other advice carefully and make their own decisions, responsibly, from an informed position, about their involvement in purposeful physical pursuits.

Physical education teachers are in a position to ensure that all learners make progress on their physical literacy journey by having these experiences and acquiring the essential knowledge to understand the fundamental value of active participation in purposeful physical pursuits.

In conclusion

The ultimate goal of work in physical education is to so enthuse individuals that purposeful physical pursuits are established as an integral part of their lifestyle. This will only happen if the experiences they have are meaningful and rewarding.

Physically literate individuals value involvement in purposeful physical pursuits and care about being active. Positive experiences of rewarding engagement will reinforce this value and promote a resolve, on the part of the individual, to seek out and follow up situations in which they can engage further in activities they have experienced as potentially the most pleasurable and rewarding – or indeed explore new activities. Physically literate individuals will appreciate that they are on a personal journey and understand that it is for each of them to design a route that takes them towards the goals to which they aspire.

We believe that valuing participation in purposeful physical pursuits, and experiencing this as important in their lives, is the way for people to develop and maintain a personal commitment to lifelong participation. Most of us will never reach the heights of Olympic success, but every one of us can enjoy participation, in an appropriate context, can relish the positive impact of this on our wellbeing and experience an enhanced quality of life through being physically literate. This must be the Olympic legacy, a legacy of many in the population exhibiting a self-initiated commitment to participation, built on a wealth of meaningful and rewarding personal experiences.

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