

Physical Literacy: Clarifying the Nature of the Concept¹

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Over the past few years there has been considerable interest, in the UK and world-wide, in the concept of physical literacy. For example, a good number of local authorities in the UK have adopted it as an overall guiding principle for their work in early years and Key Stage 1, and sports coach UK has based some of its recent work with young people on the concept. In countries such as Canada and Northern Ireland, physical literacy has been the focus for considerable rethinking and the inspiration behind the development of new programmes. These new programmes have generated a number of key guidance materials to support practitioners, teachers and coaches. This revitalising process is useful but it carries a number of risks.

One of these risks is the interpretation of physical literacy and how it is translated into practical guidance. There have been a number of interpretations of the concept that have moved away from the central tenets of physical literacy. For example, in both the UK and abroad, physical literacy has been the name given to a programme of fundamental movement skills or the ABCs of movement. While physical competence is part of developing and maintaining physical literacy, there is much more to the concept than skill development. Other interpretations have focused on knowledge and understanding, particularly in the games context. Again, this can be seen as an element of physical literacy, but far from the whole story. Some developments have presented the concept as if it is only relevant to younger learners or only worthy of attention in compulsory education. This is not the case; physical literacy is valuable and important to all: the young, the mature and the older adult.

In this short article we would like to clarify what physical literacy is and explain the significance for all in being physically literate. We will also set out briefly the relationship between physical education and physical literacy and differentiate between being physically literate and being physically educated. Finally, we look briefly at the role of the physical education teacher. While this article is written for the teaching profession, many of the sections are equally relevant to coaches.

What is physical literacy?

Physical literacy is a fundamental and valuable human capability that can be described as:

“A disposition acquired by human individuals encompassing the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding that establishes purposeful physical pursuits as an integral part of their lifestyle.”

Fundamental and significant aspects of physical literacy are that:

- all can be physically literate
- everyone's physical literacy journey is unique
- the disposition is valuable at all stages and ages of life
- the concept embraces much more than physical competence

¹ This is the first in a series of articles on aspects of the concept of physical literacy.





- at the heart of the concept is the motivation and commitment to be active
- the disposition is evidenced by a love of being active, born out of the pleasure and satisfaction individuals experience in participation
- charting of progress of an individual's personal journey must be judged against previous achievements and not against any form of national benchmarks.²

(See Whitehead, 2010 and physical literacy website: www.physical-literacy.org.uk)

What is the value of physical literacy?

Physical literacy is valuable because it fosters an essential human capability. It puts the spotlight on our embodied nature and enables us to enhance the quality of our lives. Through making progress on their physical literacy journey, individuals can not only enhance their physical competence to take part in a wide range of purposeful physical pursuits, they can grow in self-confidence and self-esteem, relate more readily to others and appreciate the beneficial effect of being active on their total wellbeing. In addition, in becoming physically literate individuals can:

- develop physical potential
- grow in self-awareness and self-assurance
- enhance their health and wellbeing
- interact readily with a wide variety of settings
- develop a commitment to an active lifestyle
- realise the importance of taking responsibility for their own wellbeing and learn to make informed decisions about the kind of purposeful physical pursuits that they want to engage in, on a regular basis.

Becoming physically literate is an end in itself because of the intrinsic benefits of realising an aspect of our human condition. However, on account of our holistic nature, that is our being a whole with experiences in any domain resonating throughout our being, participation will affect all other aspects of our nature, such as our social and emotional health. Physical literacy is founded on a belief in monism and a rejection of dualism. Furthermore, the concept is very much in line with current research which sees our embodied dimension as integral to who we are and all we do, in no way being merely of value as a servant of our intellect. (See Whitehead, 2010)

Those who identify their philosophy of physical education as rooted in physical literacy would evaluate all their work from the perspective of its success in helping learners/young people to make progress on their physical literacy journey and ultimately flourish. What then is the relationship between physical literacy and physical education?

Physical literacy and physical education

Physical education is the name of a designated area of learning within the curriculum – the name of a subject area. Physical literacy, on the other hand, identifies the goal of, and the inspiration behind, all structured guidance in respect of developing our physical capability. The concept is not confined to an individual's time in compulsory education; rather, it fosters a positive attitude to all types of purposeful physical pursuits throughout life. We would argue that the two concepts are of a different order. There is no competition between them, they can and do work hand-in-hand. Physical education offers the opportunity for learners to have those experiences that can help them become physically literate, while physical literacy can add to the credibility and standing of physical education by providing a clear rationale for its inclusion in the curriculum.

Physical literacy is, in itself, not a programme of study. However, on account of its nature and characteristics, it gives direction and purpose to devising and delivering physical education in respect both to content and to method (Whitehead, 2010). Because physical literacy is not a programme, a teacher does not teach physical literacy; rather, appropriate content and method are selected that provide the opportunity for physical literacy to be developed. Many of the attributes, such as confidence and motivation, cannot, in fact, be taught directly – they are nurtured.

² Assessment of physical literacy will be the topic of a later article in this series.

Physical literacy and the notion of being physically educated

There has long been debate about what it might mean to describe someone as physically educated. Many writers (for example Hardman, 2011) and most national physical education associations articulate what they understand by the term. Definitions range from explaining that a physically educated person is someone who is physically literate to listing descriptors of such an individual. For example, the USA National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 1995) specifies that a physically educated person:

- has learned skills necessary to perform a variety of physical activities
- is physically fit
- does participate regularly in physical activity
- knows the implications and benefits from involvement in physical activities
- values physical activity and its contribution to a healthful lifestyle.

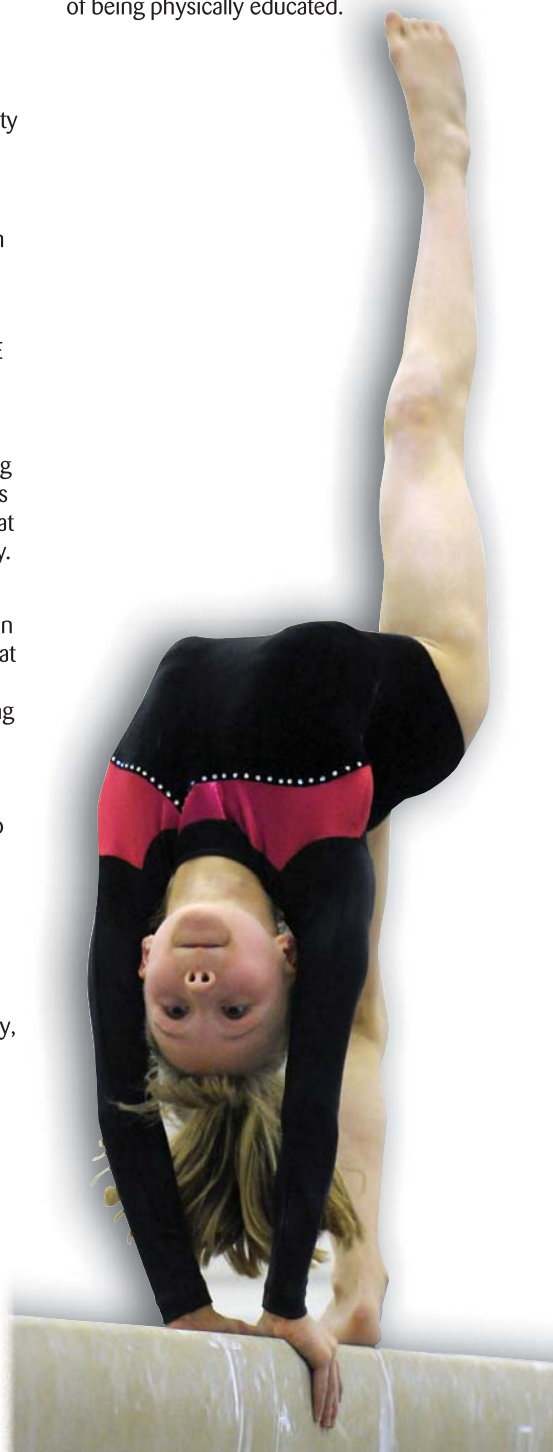
Those descriptions that mirror that of NASPE relate, in part, to the concept of physical literacy but exhibit, in our view, at least two unsatisfactory characteristics. The first concerns the actual use of the notion of being physically educated and the second concerns the fact that they omit some key elements that are integral to the concept of physical literacy.

In the first place, we would argue that the notion of being physically educated implies an end state that has to be achieved – a state that is the product of a cluster of particular experiences, characteristically those occurring in a physical education curriculum in school. The implication is that a person succeeds or fails to achieve this end state, and that is the end of the story. No consideration is given to individual endowment or potential. Furthermore, the notion of being physically educated would seem to support the view of there being a separate physical aspect of the person that can be isolated in education. In other words, it is a dualist notion. In the context of our commitment to physical literacy, the notion of being physically educated does not sit easily with the monist, individualised nature of the processes involved in a lifelong journey, as exemplified in the concept. On these grounds we do not find the notion of being physically educated acceptable.

Our second concern relates to the omission, in many descriptions of being physically educated, of a number of key elements and attributes. There is insufficient emphasis on

the motivation and confidence that are inherent in being physically literate. Similarly, there is scant reference to either the development of self-esteem or the increasing sensitivity when working with others. Also missing is the clear recognition of the way physically literate individuals take responsibility for making choices throughout their lives and demonstrate a considered commitment to taking part in purposeful physical pursuits.

On these grounds we find the notion of being physically educated inadequate, confusing and lacking in appreciation of the individual. We would urge the profession to adopt the goal of fostering the lifelong process of being physically literate rather than the dualistic, product-related and norm-referenced notion of being physically educated.



Physical literacy and the physical education teacher

While many can play a part in developing physical literacy, the physical education teacher has a unique opportunity to facilitate the development of this capability in all learners. School physical education is the only guaranteed time when all learners work with experienced and knowledgeable practitioners.

A teacher who is concerned to foster physical literacy will use the concept as his/her guiding principle.³ The tenets of physical literacy would underpin the teacher's beliefs and values in respect of work in physical education. In fact, physical literacy would become the teacher's philosophy of physical education. The teacher would:

- value the nurturing of motivation and confidence in the sphere of participating in purposeful physical pursuits
- ensure the inclusion of everyone in the promotion of reaching full potential in respect of physical competence in a wide variety of environments and contexts
- be concerned to ensure that everyone appreciates the value of maintaining a commitment to engaging in purposeful physical pursuits throughout life
- appreciate the nature of human movement and set tasks that respect the developmental processes of movement pattern acquisition
- strive to provide experiences that are positive for each individual, thus establishing the foundation for lifelong participation
- engage all learners in purposeful physical pursuits in such a way that they experience the benefits of optimal human functioning in the broadest sense.

Physical literacy playing a significant role in education for life

The opportunities that teachers give learners in school in relation to nurturing their physical literacy have huge potential to make a positive impact on their lives when they leave compulsory education. For example, we believe that the individual could have a wealth of experiences that lead them to:

³ Implications of a commitment, by a teacher, to physical literacy will be the topic of the next article in this series.

- love being active
- appreciate the value of purposeful physical pursuits as an established element of their lifestyle
- understand that purposeful physical pursuits can make a significant contribution to their health and wellbeing in the broadest sense, enabling them to flourish
- appreciate that regular physical pursuits energise their lives and enable optimal functioning of body systems
- be able to access the many and various physical activities within our culture
- have the confidence to learn new pursuits
- appreciate that it is their responsibility to maintain a commitment to purposeful physical pursuits, as appropriate at different stages in their lives
- actively evaluate their life habits and patterns, with respect to participation in purposeful physical pursuits, from an informed position.

What is new, significant or different about physical literacy?

Physical literacy is different in two ways. Firstly it is a re-focusing of physical education and, secondly, it is the identification of a rationale for physical education founded on the scholarly study of a wide variety of respected academics.

Re-focusing of physical education practice

Many of the aims and recommendations associated with physical literacy are not new, but we are of the opinion that these aspects of the work have tended to be lost in the whirl of targets, stage assessment, attention on the gifted and advent of school league tables.

Physical literacy puts the spotlight on every child, acknowledging that all can improve, get satisfaction from and grow in self-esteem from taking part in purposeful physical pursuits.

Physical literacy stresses the central importance of fostering confidence and motivation alongside physical competence.

Physical literacy reminds us that learners thrive in doing what they know they can do rather than hurrying on to the next skill or tactic.

Physical literacy alerts us to the fact that a narrow curriculum is not in the interests of very many learners.

Physical literacy reminds us that learners must learn to be realistic in their self-evaluation and accept responsibility for making their own decisions.

Physical literacy reminds us that we should present and manage experiences that help learners to value active participation and develop a commitment to continued participation.

Physical literacy reminds us that physical education is as much for the learners' future as it is for their here and now in lessons.

Physical literacy reminds us that we succeed if our learners continue their physical literacy journeys throughout the life course.

A solid foundation for the rationale of the value and importance of physical education

We would argue that physical literacy is different because it identifies a goal that has well-documented and well-supported value. The value lies in the extensive evidence from scholars in many fields of study, for example philosophy, cognitive science and developmental physiological psychology. All demonstrate, from their different perspectives, the significance of the embodied dimension in human life. All advocate and support capitalising on our embodied potential to enable us to thrive, raise the quality of our lives and reach the goal of experiencing the good life. (Whitehead, 2010 and website)

Conclusion

Physical literacy is not an alternative to physical education nor is it a defined programme to be followed. Physical literacy identifies a goal all learners can reach in working in structured physical activity settings and, at the same time, articulates the value of capitalising on our embodied dimension. Physical literacy is much more than developing physical skills and much more than developing knowledge and understanding of games playing. The importance of physical literacy is not confined to the young child. Physical literacy is relevant and valuable to all and its nurturing in the years of schooling can enhance self-esteem and self-confidence and bring benefits throughout the lifespan. It can open the door to participation in a wide range of purposeful physical pursuits. Through positive



experiences in purposeful physical pursuits, individuals can grow to love being active, their lives can be energised and they can accrue the benefit of enhanced health and wellbeing in the broadest sense. We are of the view that a life devoid of participation in purposeful physical pursuits is a life less fully lived, a life without the exhilaration of realising our embodied potential and the wide range of benefits this brings.

References

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