

# Translating Physical Literacy into Practice for All Teachers

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## Introduction

In the previous two articles we set out a view that physical literacy encompasses the whole lifespan and provides a way of thinking that permeates the role of purposeful physical pursuits and their value in people's lives.

Underpinning physical literacy is a focus on the need to enable young people and adults to learn to make informed choices and select activities that can contribute to the enrichment of their lives and add immensely to the quality of living. However, young people as well as adults need to go beyond mere engagement in a range of purposeful physical pursuits; they need to learn from their engagement and begin to appreciate the values of different activities. In this way they are making choices about what they can do with their lives that can lead to an informed and intelligent use of their time and efforts. The process of nurturing and cultivating interests, engagement and reflection is central to physical literacy.

## Translating physical literacy into practical steps

The definition of physical literacy to which we have been working (See the spring edition of 'Physical Education Matters') is both simple and complex. This simplicity is a major strength because it clearly articulates a vision of what

we can achieve. However, this simplicity needs to be translated into meaningful components that enable practitioners to guide their practice and implement key messages. In this paper we would like to suggest that these meaningful components can be identified.

The key features of physical literacy need to be made accessible to the unformed and uninformed minds of young people as well as adults whose ability to evaluate life plans and make choices about what to do with their lives is not yet developed or more likely may not even have been considered. In the same way, many adults have had little opportunity either to develop an understanding of physical literacy and how this relates to the relevance of being physically active in purposeful physical pursuits or its significance in their lives as well as for their lives. This is our first major challenge – how can we achieve this?

First of all, we have to ask, how do we translate physical literacy into a detailed vision that informs practice and provides more specific guidance on how we should proceed? What are the building blocks that enable young people and adults to become physically literate?

It is rare for us to have the luxury of undertaking this task because the practical demands and issues in teaching severely restrict our capacity to share with others what needs to be addressed. Therefore, in responding to these questions and understanding their implications,





we are addressing our ability to create an authentic physical education curriculum inspired by the idea of physical literacy and seeking to implement it faithfully so that all learners can be enabled to:

- learn to love being active in purposeful physical pursuits
- become competent performers in a range of purposeful physical pursuits
- become intelligent performers in their chosen purposeful physical pursuits
- learn to make informed decisions about what to do with their lives
- withstand/disregard negative messages from significant others about the relevance of purposeful physical pursuits in their lives
- develop a commitment to an active lifestyle
- learn how to accept responsibility for what they do with their lives.

By articulating these aspirations in this way, we are striving to paint a more complete picture of the vision of what could be achieved and of which key messages we need to be aware.

As a result of acquiring these abilities through the nurturing and cultivation of quality experiences for all learners we will help them to:

- develop the attitudes and abilities to flourish and improve their wellbeing and recognise the significance for individual lives
- develop inner resources to enable them to acquire attitudes and abilities to overcome obstacles that diminish flourishing and wellbeing.

Thus, the wider vision of what we are striving to achieve is linked to an overarching aspiration – the wellbeing of all our learners and their capacity to flourish well.

This is an ambitious task involving numerous challenges. In the next challenge we have to find ways of making issues and solutions accessible to teachers, coaches and practitioners working with people of all ages. However, prior to this process is the need to create the conditions for learners to acquire the attitudes and abilities to understand how taking part in purposeful physical pursuits can open up their horizons to new experiences. These new horizons can offer different sorts of experiences that can excite, challenge and become absorbing activities that add immensely to the joy of being active and finding satisfactions in learning and accomplishment. In this process learners need additional opportunities to make decisions about the value of activities in their everyday lives.

How do we provide opportunities that enable learning to occur through constructive and informed teaching approaches/pedagogies?

How can teachers/coaches adopt specific pedagogical sensitivity that enables them to engage productively with learners?

This could encompass the some of the following learning processes:

- cooperative learning with adults or peers
- modelling
- free play or practising on their own
- games-making/creating a dance challenges
- putting into action instructions from adults

together with a pedagogical sensitivity for:

- engagement with learners
- building positive relationships
- creating a voice for learners
- motivation
- communicative competence
- nurturing and caring environment.

Across the learning processes and pedagogies that enhance learning, there is a need to recognise that positive enabling environments and positive activities that nurture understanding and intelligent performance are essential elements. How do we develop these?

The following permeate the learning processes and pedagogical approaches:

- positive enabling environments
- positive activities that nurture understanding and intelligent performance.

### The learning processes

The teacher is seen as the facilitator who creates the opportunities for their learners to learn, the direction of this learning and how it is assimilated and accommodated by learners. This is clearly one of their roles but teachers have to recognise that learners will learn in many ways. In fact, some learners will learn little from the teacher. Learning processes need to be considered from a number of diverse perspectives. Different sources of information can affect learning and recognition needs to be given to the point that many learners will learn by their own volition and will learn a great deal with and from their peers. The whole field of gaming has demonstrated quite vividly that learning can take place without teachers and the structures of a game can generate learning simply from the experience of playing (Hopper, 2012). In this context, teachers need to explore alternative ways of thinking about learning and recognise that acquiring the ability to sustain learning needs to start with the learner and learners' commitment to determine what is learned and retained.

This portrayal raises an expectation of teachers and their schools that goes well beyond the simplistic model that pervades much of teaching physical education. Learners are often taught a purposeful physical activity in small units (maybe six weeks) with the emphasis on technical competence, and the same activity may be revisited every subsequent year, using a similar approach. In such a model, the learning process is also simple – practice what the teacher tells you and you will learn! For many teachers there has been little opportunity for understanding other ways of encouraging learning. Models of informed practice to promote learning are yet to be elaborated in respect of physical education.

On the other hand, there are teachers who have an interest in alternative ways of organising learning and 'Physical Education Matters' is testament to this. In the same way, the QCA consortium of teachers led by Crichton Casbon has demonstrated that teachers can explore new strategies for presenting learning in different ways and involving learners in creating innovative practices. Nevertheless, these are still isolated examples and a reflective teaching culture is only an aspiration not an expectation.

One approach is to consider how teachers can scaffold the learning processes to empower and facilitate learning through constructive and informed pedagogies that enable teachers to engage with all learners in productive ways. This is important for physical literacy because pedagogies need to be compatible with helping learners to get on the inside of an activity, learn to appreciate what it can offer and make informed decisions about the kind of purposeful physical pursuits that will enrich their lives.

In the next section, the idea of pedagogical sensitivity and how it can be translated into practical steps will be outlined.

## Pedagogical sensitivity

Pedagogical sensitivity is underpinned by teachers appreciating the need to:

- have a facility for reading learning situations in schools (being able to interpret and be sensitive to situations)
- have a sound knowledge of classes and individual learners
- have motivational strategies that inform and shape a teacher's pedagogical stance.

## Pedagogical process

The pedagogical process of working with young people and helping them to develop as persons and learning to love being active is a crucial attribute for all teachers. This will entail:



- nurturing (creating positive and enabling environments and establishing caring and productive relationships with learners or players)
- cultivating, shaping and nourishing dispositions.

## Pedagogical skills

The pedagogical skills required of teachers are diverse but include:

### Reaching out to learners

- Developing a trusting learner-teacher relationship
- Creating an exciting/attractive working environment
- Creating clear routines, structures and ground rules
- Treating every learner as an individual

**Connecting** (establishing a connection with individual learners that enables learning to take place)

- Generating interest
- Involving learners, listening to them
- Creating appropriate challenges
- Focusing on the individual making personal progress

**Engaging** (engage with learners productively with enthusiasm and with empathy)

- Creating situations where learners can conquer, cope with or suppress potentially negative feelings towards being involved
- Generating practices that deal with feelings of insufficiency
- Involving learners in their own learning
- Creating appropriate challenges

**Drawing out** (draw learners out with challenges and practices that excite, engage their interest, are playful and allow them to develop with confidence)

- Listening
- Prompting, leading and building up confidence and competence
- Creating a safe environment where learners are confident to explore new situations
- Allowing them the freedom to voice their ideas
- Eliciting and channelling positive productive qualities

**Stretching** (stretch their attitudes and abilities, interests, love of engagement in purposeful physical pursuits and help them to love learning)

- Questioning
- Increasing complexity
- Challenging
- Encouraging them to dare to take risks in their learning and acquisition of abilities
- Helping learners to move beyond personal standards by challenging them through a process of refining, sharpening and challenging their abilities

In a recent small scale intervention programme, the pedagogical skills outlined above were used by teachers who were deemed to be below satisfactory. These skills became the focus for mentoring the teachers to achieve a higher standard. Over a number of weeks the teachers practised these skills, refined what worked well, and reflected on how they could develop ideas that would capture the imagination of their learners. Through this process they learned confidence, recognition of what teaching could be like and a greater understanding of their learners.

The skills outlined above could represent a set of core competences, not simply technical competences because the teachers needed to apply them in context with an understanding of the learners with whom they are working. Thus, technical competences need appropriate practice, critical reflection, refinement and a recognition that they are striving to promote a love of learning. In this context, a pedagogy of engagement is central to the art of promoting learning whether it is academic learning or learning to love being active and finding satisfaction in a range of purposeful physical pursuits.

### Relational pedagogy (building productive working relationships)

This aspect of a teacher's role is, in essence, a pedagogy of care that is exemplified particularly in early childhood education and is inspired by European approaches to pedagogy. This approach has much to offer and includes:

#### Learners building relationships

- With the practitioner/teacher/coach
- With other learners
- With the content of a purposeful physical pursuit

#### Giving learners a voice (listening and communicating)

- Recognising that young people can contribute much to the learning process and our understanding of a purposeful physical pursuit
- Consulting with learners about 'what' and 'how' physical education is accessible to all pupils
- Giving learners the freedom to offer constructive feedback to physical education staff
- Listening to learners' concerns and suggestions and being responsive to their needs
- Explaining and sharing intentions with learners and allowing learners to develop these goals on their own
- Allowing learners to take responsibility for their own practice

### Motivation

Promoting motivation lies at the heart of every teacher's goal, whatever the subject they are teaching, and calls on their developing communicative competence or competent communication. Communicative competence can be conceived as the degree to which a communicator's (the teacher's) goals are achieved through effective and appropriate interactions with learners.

We need to look beyond the view that communication with learners is simply about information exchange. When we communicate information so that it is received and understood, we are sharing meaning. A teacher's communication goals need to be linked to a learner's thoughts, feelings and interests as well as nurturing their ability to interact well.

Thus, the quality of what a teacher says, how much they say, for how long they speak, needs to be closely linked with clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, effectiveness, empathy and appropriateness of instructions and feedback. It is also about focusing on key messages, thin-slicing the messages, and how the teacher listens and is responsive to learner needs. How the learner interprets the teacher's words needs careful attention. Thus, a teacher's responsiveness, perceptiveness and attentiveness are essential to good communication strategies in order to generate a shared meaning and an understanding of what the learner can do to learn and develop.

### Creating and maintaining a nurturing and caring context

Donald Soper made the claim that "you change society to make people better, not the other way round" (*The Guardian*, 21st January 1993). This claim contains a great deal of insight because it has particular relevance for the idea of a nurturing and caring community that provides appropriate environments. An individual can only (or is more likely) to behave responsibly or learn to care about others if the environment or setting stimulates, encourages or supports this form of concerned response.

It is important that the environment, the school climate and the ethos of the way the physical education department functions are concerned with the collegiality and solidarity of the community in which learners are acquiring qualities and abilities. Teachers with their learners should be part of a community that has established an ethos that is conducive to the following:

- all individuals are valued
- there is a caring and considerate atmosphere
- there is a tolerant and sensitive attitude towards individual differences, needs and interests
- fairness for all is promoted in the distribution of scarce goods
- everyone is respected and trust is encouraged
- there is reflection on the consequences of personal actions and collective responsibility
- a constructive sense of the person through interactions and relationships with others is stimulated and pursued.

These conditions can only be established when it is recognised that the commitment to a set of common purposes and shared understandings about the enterprise of creating a learning environment for all learners, and the adoption of appropriate pedagogies, can lead to successful common action. Just as teachers plan the content of specific purposeful physical activities to establish continuity, coherence and progression as well as development, there is a need to consider carefully how teachers can create the conditions that facilitate learning and the development of accomplishments for all their learners. Such a proposal reaches to the very heart of physical literacy.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, physical literacy offers important perspectives that can illuminate our vision of the kind of physical education that could be accessible to all learners in schools and early years settings. This article attempts to outline how we can translate physical literacy into practical steps that will inform practice. These steps are important because they challenge our thinking about pupil-teacher interactions, how teachers can support progressive learning and how they can nurture a love of being active.

Too often we neglect the processes outlined in this paper and, as result, there is gap between our aspirations and our practice. This article is only a beginning because we invite teachers in school and staff in higher education institutes to consider carefully the issues discussed above, share their views with us and the profession and add further proposals and constructive lines of development.

### References

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