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Physical Literacy: A Concept of Global Interest

Elizabeth Myers, Liverpool John Moores University

The concept of physical literacy is now being seriously considered across the globe and is becoming readily accepted in some countries worldwide. This might be seen as surprising given that Jurbala (2015) reflects that there is little empirical evidence, as yet, that the concept of physical literacy can be employed to stimulate interest in participation in physical activity, or be a functional basis for physical activity programs.

The increasing academic nature of education in general, but in particular within physical education, combined with the changes in societal lifestyle across the world, has created a widening disconnect between mind and body. With the value of cognitive capabilities, far outweighing physical capabilities and our embodied sense of self. Curriculum and philosophical educational alignment is now not a holistic endeavour, preparing individuals for life after formal education, but instead links instructional content to state-designed tests. This "teaching to the test" (Bushweller, 1997) is now creating an ever-increasing pressurised environment whereby formal assessments, and the results of such, monopolise wider educational objectives to the extent that it becomes the major focus for government, schools, teachers, pupils and parents. The 'teaching to the test' approach rarely helps learning and has a detrimental effect on the education profession as a whole (Volante, 2004), and this is evident with the conflicting pressures teachers feel to "play the game" while trying to remain true to the wider value of their subject beyond formal assessments. The question remains, can or should education serve two masters, preparing students for life after formal education whilst pursuing, for example, floor targets, progress eight targets, percentages at A* to C, gaining a strong foothold in league tables and achieving good to outstanding Ofsted accreditation? Has assessment monopolised education to the point where it's educational philosophy is only a rhetoric masking the true state and purpose of education. Perhaps this has placed physical education in a situation where a concept that values lifelong physical activity over academic or

simple physical performance can serve as a breath of fresh air and enable physical education to get back to its roots of promoting physical activity for all, for life.

The increased focus on the academic nature of education is something that is no longer isolated to developed countries but becoming increasingly evident in developing countries where it is considered that studying harder and longer, with more assessment and accountability, will lead to a more productive society and economy. This pursuit for cognitive excellence is perceived by many cultures to be the means through which children can obtain a better quality of life, through gaining employment and financial security. Gaining employment and therefore financial security is of course important, but what is lost as a result of manipulating education into being a pursuit of cognitive excellence concerned only with obtaining assessment grades and certificates?

In order for humans to flourish, we need to adopt a holistic approach to life and therefore education needs not only to value cognition but also embrace our embodied potential as humans. Only through a holistic approach to human potential will humans truly flourish. Any educational system that favors certain aspects over others is fundamentally flawed. A holistic approach to human potential is not a new notion but is essential in order to achieve human flourishing (Jurbula, 2015). This concept of mind-body connectedness is also known as monism.

Monism is a philosophical concept that describes the mind and body as interconnected, intertwined and inseparable, in essence humans are an indivisible whole. Monism opposes dualism, which considers mind and body as separate though having some mode of operational connection. Monism and dualism are philosophies that inform our approach to our human dimension and ultimately influence how we approach aspects of human life including education. The education system within the UK and in many other countries is typically dualistic with the development of cognitive attributes constituting the majority of education provision, with expressive and artistic subjects often of secondary importance. But even more worrying than this, these subjects that ideally lend themselves to

developing individuals holistically have to then shoe-horn their subjects into a process that conforms and supports cognitive assessment structures.

It is perhaps then unsurprising that physical literacy has been so readily accepted as a concept that can support how physical education can promote lifelong physical activity and values physical education as a valuable educational subject in its own right. Physical literacy is defined as the “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for physical activities for life” (Whitehead, 2016. www.physical-literacy.org.uk). Physical literacy is an inclusive concept that embraces all individuals and recognises that all individuals are on their own unique journey. Physical literacy has received global interest from a variety of cultures, which highlight a unified human desire to embrace physical activity for its intrinsic value and for its contribution to holistic wellbeing. For example, a number of states within India, including Delhi and Andhra Pradesh, are aiming to be early adopters of physical literacy.

Case Study: India as an early adopter of Physical Literacy

A small but very passionate and well-connected working group in Andhra Pradesh, India, contacted the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA) after discovering the concept of physical literacy. The working group is headed up by Gopichand Pullela, an Indian sporting hero who was inspired to find out about physical literacy after he passed a shuttlecock to a child who was not able catch it. Gopichand then shifted his thinking from a sporting excellence focus to a concern for mass participation, and found that the concept of physical literacy and particularly the philosophy that underpins physical literacy could be the solution not only to increasing physical activity levels for all, but also as a vehicle for social change.

Since his initial discovery of physical literacy, Gopichand and his working group have trail-blazed a path direct to Andhra Pradesh State government where the chief minister has given his support. Their first project brought together circa 800 physical education teachers from Andhra Pradesh to receive physical education training as well as an introduction to physical literacy.

The 800 teachers were given a range of workshops facilitated by Sport for Life Society, a Canadian organisation that included sessions on lesson planning, teaching games for understanding, assessment as well as some content knowledge for physical education lessons.

Gathering this many physical education teachers in one place to undergo training is a first in its kind for India and its success has now attracted interest from central government with talks potentially rolling out this project across the whole of India. With what has been achieved already and what potentially is yet to come, this working group is in a position to impact millions of children and hundreds of thousands of teachers, not to mention the wider impact on families, society and the Indian population of 1.2billion.

How has this momentum come to be? Primarily, it has arisen due to the connection between a need and longing for improvement in physical education provision, as part of a larger view to improve general health and wellbeing for the whole population, and the discovery of physical literacy as the means to achieve this.

What is next? Currently an action plan and organisation structure is being designed by a working party of internal and external advisors including the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA) and Sport for Life Society to provide a roadmap for how physical literacy can continue to be developed within physical education and how physical literacy can also be a source of inspiration for wider social change enabling all to become active for life.

This working group has the potential to change the face of physical education within local districts within India, hopefully creating a snowball effect changing physical education across the whole of India. India has the potential to lead the world in how physical education, when informed by physical literacy, can promote an enriched quality of human life.

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