

Changing the Focus of Physical Education

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Abstract

Physical Education has been an important part of the education system for over 100 years in India. Successive Governments and States have modified the focus of physical education within the school curriculum from physical training in the early 1900's towards the current physical education (PE) provision. Physical training and the introduction to sports and traditional games was the initial focus of PE whilst later developments have included an emphasis on sports education, recreation, character building and discipline, according to Kumar and Sharma (2019). The addition of well-being to physical training, yoga and sports has more recently led to a new focus of physical literacy being suggested for PE. Physical literacy is our unique disposition towards valuing and engaging in physical activity for life (Whitehead, 2010). The root to developing our disposition lies in our innate and acquired motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding. It is the physical education teachers of India who have the opportunity to create positive learning environments for their students so that they can develop their confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding, which in turn will increase their motivation to engage in physical activities for life. However, if traditional methods of teaching large classes, with limited facilities and equipment and a focus on medals for the few, continue to prevail within the schools then the opportunity to impact on future generation's holistic health may be lost. This article aims to encourage physical education teachers to reflect on their philosophy, pedagogy and practice and then consider physical literacy as a focus for the future of physical education.

Keywords: Physical Literacy, Physical Activity, Sport, Affective

Introduction

In 2016 Pullela Gopichand realised that there was an issue in India. Children were not receiving a broad physical education that prepared them for life and adults were not engaging in sufficient physical activity to promote healthy lifestyles. The ever-increasing levels of cardio-vascular problems, obesity, diabetes and other health related medical issues was becoming a strain on the government, industry and individuals. In an attempt to change people's lives Pullela Gopichand engaged a group of like-minded professionals whose aim was to increase the physical literacy of the Indian population. The Excellence in Learning and Management of Sports Foundation (ELMS) is working with the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA) and other agencies to promote physical literacy in India and encourage more people to be physically active for life. This article considers why change is needed and how approaches to teaching physical education need to be modified to foster physical literacy. The relatively new concept of physical literacy utilises a term that has been used to describe physical education, health and movement vocabulary, but now, as a result of new research into movement science, embodiment, and neuroscience, describes our unique disposition to engage in physical activity. The concept has the potential to change the thinking and practice of parents, teachers, coaches, medical practitioners and policy makers for the benefit of everyone's holistic health. Many nations across the world, who want to promote physical activity for all, for life, are embracing physical literacy as a golden thread that draws together varied agencies that have a common goal of holistic health. The United Nations 'Recognise the right of everyone to be able to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental

health' (WHO, 2000). It is not surprising that the World Health Organisation have as their mission an aim: 'To ensure that all people have access to safe and enabling environments and to diverse opportunities to be physically active in their daily lives, as a means of improving individual and community health and contributing to the social, cultural and economic development of all nations' (2017). But we are not currently in a position where everyone is able to enjoy the highest standards of physical and mental health or where physical activity is a part of daily life. Why are we in this situation? Obviously there are many causes of inactivity but there is one area that we have some control over and that is the physical education (PE) of our children. Physical education takes place in schools where we have a captive audience who we can influence from both a positive and negative point of view, in relation to their desire to be involved in physical activity for life. As physical educationalists our aim is to consider the holistic development of every individual student we teach. Across the world we have curricula which aim to provide guidance on the education of children in, through and about physical activity.

An example from The Ontario Curriculum in Canada states that its key focus of PE is to create the environments where 'the knowledge and skills students acquire in the program will benefit them throughout their lives and enable them to thrive in an ever-changing world by helping them develop mental health and wellbeing, physical and health literacy, and the comprehension, capacity, and commitment they will need to lead healthy, active lives and promote healthy, active living' (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). But what is happening in reality? Are positive learning environments in PE being created in India? Indian schools have used many traditional activities in PE and have focused predominantly on health and fitness, games and yoga. There has also been a clear focus on sport coaching and school teams, which has seen perhaps more time being spent with a minority of students aiming to attain excellence whilst the majority of students are not engaging or being engaged as much as they might be. A traditional approach to skills, drills and games appears to dominate in lessons, along with fitness sessions. Large teaching classes inevitably lead to stricter control of classes and limited opportunities for individuals to develop holistically. Suggestions from the White Paper on Establishing National Curriculum Standards for Sports Education in India, by the Confederation of Indian Industry (2016, p.8), claimed that 'steps are being taken in the right direction with increased emphasis on physical education, yoga and sports. A holistic curriculum program which blends sports and physical education is what is required to make India a sports superpower in the coming years on both fronts –mass general participation as well as distributive specific performances that produce excellence.' The focus on success in sport and excellence can be detrimental to inspiring all young people to be physically active, due to the exclusive rather than inclusive nature of sport. Not everyone can be excellent, but we can all aim to make the most of our capabilities and aim to engage regularly in physical activity for the holistic benefits it provides.

What is also worrying is the White Paper goes on to suggest that 'A well organised curriculum increases the chances of developing genuine sports lovers which raises the profile of a sport and in the future will translate into 'Sports Money' through gate revenue, sponsorships, merchandise, sports tourism, sports facilities, competitions, equipment consumers and other revenue generating avenues (p. 12).' The obvious connotations are that the focus of PE is to produce sports success for the few which will enrich the country with medals and other ulterior motives related to the generation of income. This encourages PE teachers to concentrate on sport and team success in school rather than the holistic development of all children through physical education. If we refer back to the core purpose of physical education then we need to move away from a 'sport' focused curriculum to a curriculum that develops the physical, affective and cognitive domains

of each child through physical activities. Sport will inevitably be a part of that curriculum but so could many other activities and pedagogical approaches that will hopefully engage all children in physical activity that they enjoy. Sporting success will not be lost as high level performers will still be able to develop and by engaging more people in physical activity we will create a wider population to draw talent from. Government and State policies need to reflect the importance of including and motivating every child in school to be physically active. We know that political parties regularly update and modify education policy but changing curriculum framework documents, historically, have little to no impact when it comes to influencing PE teachers' practice, particularly in relation to content and approaches to teaching. Whilst we have competing discourses and ideologies of PE, as Green (1998) suggests, PE teachers derive their understanding of the substance and pedagogical form of PE from an 'everyday philosophy' that is shaped by enduring themes, such as sport and personal experience in sport and physical activity. Regardless of the curriculum framework proposed, it is the PE teacher who determines the activities of PE as they make valued judgements about content and pedagogy' (Pill and Stolz, 2017, p.68). It is therefore a PE teacher's philosophy or ideology that influences what and how they teach. The underpinning philosophy influences the direction, opportunities and ultimately the impact on children. Many PE teachers base their philosophy or ideology on their own previous experiences and therefore historical practices often perpetuate. Teachers do not always reflect on alternative practices or innovative ideas in relation to content, pedagogy and assessment and therefore we continue to get the same results from our teaching where a small number of students become motivated to be physically active for life but a significantly large number lose interest in physical activity. And as the saying goes, 'if we always do what we have always done then we will always get what we have always got' (Jeffers, 1987). So how can physical literacy help? Physical literacy is a relatively new concept based on the philosophical principles of Monism, Existentialism and Phenomenology.

From a Monist perspective, it suggests that our mind and body are inseparable, interconnected and intertwined and therefore each individual must be treated as an individual rather than separating the mind and body, as in a dualistic approach, where we train the body and educate the mind. From a physical education perspective we need to engage each individual holistically in lessons rather than putting children through training sessions or skill practices that they do not learn from or see relevance to. PE teachers need to help children develop physically, affectively and cognitively through their lessons and learning outcomes need to reflect these aims. They also need to recognise that the physical, affective and cognitive domains are considered to be of equal importance to our holistic development and need to be stimulated appropriately through physical education. From an Existentialist perspective, it is argued that every individual is who they are as a direct result of the experiences they have had. It is through working within and responding to different situations that individuals will 'craft' their uniqueness and develop their potential to thrive. The notion of 'literacy' within the concept of 'physical literacy' arises from the importance of our interactions with different environments and movement forms. Essentially, we create ourselves as we live and interact with their world.

We have a personalised ongoing dialogue between ourselves and our surroundings. It is important therefore, that children have positive experiences in PE so that they develop a positive relationship with physical activities. A teacher needs to consider the types of learning environment and the range of activities that they are providing at school as these will directly affect a child's future engagement in physical activity. From a Phenomenological perspective, individuals perceive the world from their unique perspective based on their previous experiences, and if these are positive then again, they will be more likely to want to repeat these experiences. On the other hand if students have negative experiences in physical education they will be less

likely to want to repeat those experiences and this impacts on life choices in the future. We can all recollect children who we have worked with whose experiences have been positive and they are still physically active years later, whereas there are also many children whose experiences were not positive and these are the children who become the adults with medical and well-being issues. The importance of these underpinning philosophies is that we must consider each child as an individual and accept that they have a unique view of the world which we need to take into consideration when we are teaching them. Teachers need to consider an individual's motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding when planning activities for them so as to ensure they are challenged but are able to be successful within the activities we choose to teach. By recognising an individual's previous experiences, providing them with challenges through which they achieve success and develop their physical, affective and cognitive domains and treating each of them relative to their capability, we have an opportunity to influence their future relationship with physical activity in a positive way.

As an individual we have an innate desire to explore our environment in a physical manner. From an early age we explore and learn about our environments and our capabilities within those environments. As we experiment with different movement forms in different environments we become more competent and confident, which increases our motivation to engage physically. If we continue to be provided with challenges that are appropriate for our capability then we will continue to develop our confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding and motivation throughout our life. Creating the appropriate environments is the key to progression and this is the role of the parent initially but then becomes the role of the PE teacher and coach as the children grow older. Every individual's physical literacy journey is unique to them. It starts in the womb and continues throughout life, taking different pathways according to the nature of our experiences. Jurbala (2015) suggests that we are on a spiral of development where our exposure to different environment allows us to develop our movement repertoire, self-efficacy, health and well-being, as long as the environments we experience are positive. This then impacts on our engagement in physical activity throughout life. However, our experiences are not always positive and we have to take into account injuries, work and family commitments etc. so our journey and engagement in physical activity may ebb and flow throughout our life.

It is important to acknowledge that everyone's journey is different, based on their experiences and influences. Just consider how you have engaged with physical activity throughout your life and what significant influences there have been on your own engagement with physical activity. The role the PE teacher is crucial as they need to create the appropriate environment for each pupil that allows them to develop holistically whilst engaging in a specific physical activity or experience. If the children are motivated, confident and physically competent, and have the knowledge and understanding, they are more likely to engage in physical activity and continue engaging in the future. But there are opportunities for the PE teachers to get things wrong which can lead to apathy if there is a lack of motivation, anxiety if there is a lack of confidence, frustration if there is a lack of physical competence or confusion if there is a lack of knowledge and understanding. If physical education teachers create appropriate learning environments then they have the opportunity to influence the engagement of the next generation in being physically active for life. Consider what attributes, developed through physical education, we would like to see from students who leave our schools. It could be argued that most PE teachers and parents would like to see an individual, who Wants to take part in physical activity Has confidence when taking part in different physical activities Moves efficiently and effectively in different physical activities Has an awareness of movement needs and possibilities in

different physical activities Can work independently and with others in different physical activities Knows how to improve performance in different physical activities Knows how physical activity can improve well-being Has the self-confidence to plan and effect a physically active lifestyle.

Conclusion

In order to see students demonstrating these attributes, as PE teachers, we must reflect on our focus and modify our practice. We should use all methods as required to respect, enhance and extend individuals capacities and opportunities for holistic growth and development throughout their physical literacy journey. We need to remember that we are not teaching skills, sports, activities or fitness, we are teaching a human being, an individual, and are taking into consideration their previous experiences, interests and capabilities. We need to empower individuals to grow holistically throughout the life course so that they value their engagement in physical activity, and that they can embrace their physical literacy journey. We need to endeavour to provide environments that allow individuals to flourish holistically through their engagement in physical activity, whilst also constantly embracing and extending their physical literacy journey. And finally, we need to share our knowledge and experience with others and challenge everyone to go outside of their comfort zone, to challenge tradition and explore opportunities that will encourage everybody everywhere to enjoy being physically active.

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