A great leap of faith: Editorial for JSHS special issue on physical literacy

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Abstract:

The concept of physical literacy seems to be an abstract idea. Since it emerged in the literature about 25 years ago, it has been a *philosophical* topic for scholars and intellectuals in the field of physical education (PE). But with the recent adoption of the idea as an *operational* platform for designing PE curriculum and physical activity programs in Europe and Canada, it has reborn as a practical idea for operation. Most recently, the Society of Health and Physical Educators of the United States, the national organization responsible for developing national goals and standards for PE in the US, has adopted the concept of physical literacy as the ultimate goal for K-12 PE.[1] Not only was the concept used to help conceptualize future programming as a philosophical guide, but also it was used as the platform to develop learning outcome assessment standards and benchmark measures.

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Editorial

A great leap of faith: Editorial for *JSHS* special issue on physical literacy

The concept of physical literacy seems to be an abstract idea. Since it emerged in the literature about 25 years ago, it has been a *philosophical* topic for scholars and intellectuals in the field of physical education (PE). But with the recent adoption of the idea as an *operational* platform for designing PE curriculum and physical activity programs in Europe and Canada, it has reborn as a practical idea for operation. Most recently, the Society of Health and Physical Educators of the United States, the national organization responsible for developing national goals and standards for PE in the US, has adopted the concept of physical literacy as the ultimate goal for K-12 PE.[1] Not only was the concept used to help conceptualize future programming as a philosophical guide, but also it was used as the platform to develop learning outcome assessment standards and benchmark measures.

These developments might fundamentally change the future of PE. They challenge scholars and practitioners alike in many fronts with a potential to re-shape PE at the both philosophical and operational domains. Regardless of the outcomes of the change, the developments have placed all professionals in PE in a position to re-examine own educational beliefs, operational guidelines, and practices. In short, we will somehow have a "great leap of faith" toward educating children and adolescents in PE one way or another so we can best position ourselves to better serve their needs for a physically active life. The purpose of this special issue of *Journal of Sport and Health Science* (*JSHS*) is to unpack, operationalize, and interpret the concept of physical literacy from the theoretical, historical, practical, and empirical perspectives.

There are nine chapters in this special issue. In Chapter 1, Roetert and Couturier MacDonald[2] carefully define the concept, explain the process of operationalizing it in revising the U.S. PE standards, dissect the relationship between the abstract ideas with the concept and tangible actions in PE, and lay out challenges ahead in adopting the concept as the goal of PE. They reiterate the core idea of physical literacy, that is, the individual is a holistic being and a physically moving individual must be viewed as a whole and be taught as a whole person. They further lead the reader through the revised national standards to show the intricacy of the complex process of becoming physically literate. Along the way, they clarify the difference between physically literate and physically educated person in defining the goal of PE.

By reviewing and critiquing published works on physical literacy, Lundvall[3] attempts to organize evidence from physical literacy scholarship into actionable themes in Chapter 2: assumptions of the concept physical literacy and its educative role, sports development and physical literacy, and assessment and physical literacy. The themes provide a conceptual map that helps the reader navigate through the literature to form a focused understanding of each critically important area of research. It is important to note that Lundvall also traces physical literacy to the domain of sports and remind the reader that "…the original meaning of sports, which is not necessarily about competition, winning or losing, it is about the fullest development of a human being". Finally, Lundvall spends much time discussing the importance of assessing physical literacy and emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing the "competence code" and "performance code" in assessing student learning under the framework of physical literacy.

Chapter 3 by Ennis[4] gives a much needed historical overview of the tension between cognitive knowledge and physical performance. Drawing from a vast body of historical literature and the most recent randomized controlled curriculum intervention studies, Ennis makes a case for the need to teach children not only for mastering the knowledge of physical activity, but also for nurturing their ability to use the knowledge and to create new knowledge. The chapter convincingly proposes that physical literacy prepares children for lifelong and lifewide engagement in physical activities. In addition, Ennis provides specific examples of current instructional effort, such as the 5-Es, to demonstrate how knowledge can be integrated fully with physical movement to assist learning. These examples vividly actualize Whitehead's conception of embodiment[5] that is considered the most salient characteristic of physical literacy.

To become physically literate, an individual must not only know and do physical activity, he/she must be willingly to initiate his/her own physical activity; especially be able to do so in the face of difficulties and obstacles. Chapter 4 aims at

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the motivation issues that may facilitate or hinder the process of becoming physically literate. Chen[6] argues that in the physical activity domains, motivation is not only a mental disposition but also an acquired/learned attribute. Based on a targeted review of literature and research findings, Chen presents evidence showing that motivation to move is acquired along with competence and knowledge. Further, Chen reiterates the importance of understanding how the self-regulation mechanisms from the self-determination theory[7] function to motivate children to engage in something that they may not care to take part in the first place, such as physical activities.

Hastie and Wallhead,[8] in Chapter 5, provide a thoughtful discussion about the concept in relation to a particular curriculum model: Sport Education. The sport education model is aimed to help students become competent, literate, and enthusiastic sport person.[9] Hastie and Wallhead elaborate that sport may be a viable avenue for children to learn playing sports with knowledge and motivation. On the basis of a large body of evidence from the research on the sport education model, the authors align findings with major tenets of physical literacy to demonstrate the close connection between the abstract ideas of physical literacy and practical operation of the sport education model. Hastie and Wallhead argue that the experiences students receive in the sport education will assist the process of embodiment.

Chapter 6 by Lounsbery and McKenzie[10] provides thought-provoking arguments that question the need to adopt the concept of physical literacy to replace "physically educated". Through unpacking and dissecting the new PE standards and the concept itself, Lounsbery and McKenzie caution us that PE's primary concern must be the "physical". In addition, they challenge the discourse of the adoption of the concept in national PE standards as lack of wide participation of professionals. On the basis of a simple but careful content analysis, they conclude that the current standards has shifted PE focus from "doing" to "knowing". This shift, predictably, may lead to the loss of the "physical" in PE and change PE to a cognition-based content area like all other subject matter taught in schools. Lounsbery and McKenzie call for a consistent focus on the "physical" aspect of PE to provide sufficient physical activity time and enhance fitness for health.

Chapter 7 is focused on the potential of active video games (AVGs) in developing physical literacy in children. In this chapter, Sun[11] provides research evidence showing that AVGs can deliver a holistic physical activity experience to children that requires cognitive, physical, and motivational involvement. Based on a review of a large number of studies on AVGs, Sun documents what AVGs can do to help children become active and skillful in PE. In addition, she also illustrates the current weakness of AVGs as a primary PE content, especially the decline of motivation to continue, absence of clearly defined learning goals, and variable amount of physical activity. But, with fast advancement of technology, Sun proposes that AVGs can stay in the PE curriculum and new designs might overcome some of the weaknesses to assist physical literacy development.

From a motor skill development perspective, Silverman and Mercier[12] reiterate in Chapter 8 the importance of effective teaching in developing a physically literate, motor-skill capable child. In addition to a highlight of important instructional aspects, Silverman and Mercier elaborate on the relationship of motor skills (competence) and physical literacy. They also spend time presenting evidence from research on children's attitude toward physical activity. Silverman and Mercier argue that teaching for physical literacy, like all effective teaching, begins and relies on careful instructional design and an adherence to the principles of effective instruction.

In the last chapter, Castelli et al.[13] put learning to become physically literate into the school setting. They attempt to conceptualize and operationalize the concept from both a general education and a PE perspective. Castelli et al. lay out the challenges that PE teachers may face, including possible confusion of replacing "physically educated" with the "physically literate". Through a review of selected research studies, they develop five recommendations to combat the challenges. These recommendations target policy issues as well as pedagogical practices.

It is not difficult to see that the articles represent an array of diverse perspectives on physical literacy. But it seems to be consistent throughout these articles that although physical literacy may be new as a guiding framework for determining PE goals and standards, the core ideas may have been in the curriculum and content for some time in the profession. The core ideas of motivation, knowledge, and competence are major components in PE curricula and instruction for many years. On the basis of the vast research evidence gathered in these articles, one can conclude that educating children for physical literacy may have been our practice already. The concept of physical literacy, though, may provide a clearer framework for us to re-conceptualize and re-organize the components in the PE curriculum. Whether or not the re-conceptualization and re-organization can be fruitful in bringing up new generations of children who are better physically knowledgeable and competent remains to be seen.

As co-editors of this special issue, we do not expect that reading through the articles will give you definitive answers to every question you might have about teaching for physical literacy. But we do expect that the articles will provide enough fuel for you to start searching for the answers.

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