

Review

Operationalizing physical literacy through sport education

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Abstract

Physical literacy (PL), as embodied within physical education (PE), has been vaunted as having increasing importance as a disposition for students of all abilities to establish lifelong adherence to physical activity. The purpose of this paper was to provide a discussion of how the pedagogical features of a contemporary pedagogical model, Sport Education (SE), may be used to operationalize PL in PE and what empirical evidence currently exists to validate this claim. Substantial empirical evidence exists that the attributes associated with the development of PL (Whitehead, 2010) can be operationalized in PE with the effective implementation of the model. SE has distinct pedagogical features which positively contribute to many of the dimensions of PL and can further an individuals' journey towards greater PL and having an embodied self within PE. That stated, there remains concern that the context for this embodiment remains too narrow to be viewed as a panacea for the development of lifelong physical activity. SE must be developed as a connective specialism if these PL attributes are to transform the motivation and confidence for individuals to capitalize on their innate physical potential and make a more significant contribution to the quality of life. Copyright © 2015, Shanghai University of Sport. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Physical literacy (PL), as embodied within physical education (PE), is a concept that is rapidly gaining acceptance around the world.¹ In the US, for example, the latest iteration of the National Standards for Physical Education has embedded the development of physically literate individuals as its foundational goal.² The rationale for this inception is that PL has been vaunted as a key disposition for students of all abilities to establish lifelong adherence to physical activity (PA). If PL is to be viewed as a panacea for the development of lifelong PA then the concept warrants further exploration. This examination should include how PL is defined, and most importantly, how it could potentially be operationalized within the context of PE. The purpose of this paper was to provide an overview of current conceptualizations of PL and discuss how a contemporary

pedagogical model (Sport Education, SE) may contribute to the development of PL in PE.

Whitehead¹ described PL as a disposition acquired by individuals encompassing “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to maintain physical activity throughout the lifecourse” (p. 18). The emphasis of the nature of the lifecourse PL journey is important to recognize. Although recent discourse has focused on PL, as embodied in the context of PE, it is important to note that its development is relevant throughout life and, in fact, the school years only represent two of the life phases of PL. PL is also strongly situated within a monist philosophical tradition; that our embodied dimension is integral to who we are and in no way is it merely a servant to our intellect. This monist perspective resonates in PL descriptions as a holistic disposition characterized by the motivation to capitalize on innate movement potential to make a significant contribution to the quality of life.³ These authors suggest that on account of this focus, individuals who are making progress on their unique PL journey, demonstrate the following attributes: 1) the motivation and confidence to capitalize on

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innate movement/physical potential to make a significant contribution to the quality of life, 2) movement with poise, economy and confidence in a wide variety of physically challenging situations, 3) sensitive perception in reading all aspects of the physical environment, anticipating movement needs or possibilities and responding appropriately to these, with intelligence and imagination, 4) a well-established sense of self as embodied in the world. This together with an articulate interaction with the environment engenders positive self-esteem and self-confidence, 5) sensitivity to and awareness of embodied capability leading to fluent self-expression through non-verbal communication and to perceptive and empathetic interaction with others, and 6) the ability to identify and articulate the essential qualities that influence the effectiveness of movement performance, and have an understanding of the principles of embodied health, with respect to fundamental aspects such as exercise, sleep, and nutrition. These specific PL attributes provide a useful heuristic frame to examine how teachers can begin to operationalize PL within PE curriculum programs. These attributes will be used as an organizational framework to discuss the potential of SE⁴ to provide experiences that enable individuals to make progress on their individual journey towards PL within PE.

2. SE as a pedagogical model

SE is a pedagogical model designed to provide authentic, educationally rich sport experiences for girls and boys in the context of school PE.⁴ As part of this goal of providing rich experiences, the curricular design of SE is such that the positive features of sport as it is experienced outside of school are highlighted and replicated within PE. Within SE, students participate in *seasons* that are often two to three times longer than typical PE units. Within those seasons the students become members of teams which remain together over the course of the unit. This consistent team *affiliation* allows students to plan, practice, and compete together, as well as benefit from all the social development opportunities that accompany membership in a persisting group. A *schedule of competition* is organized that allows learners to practice and play within a predictable schedule of fair competition. A *culminating event* marks the end of the season and provides both the occasion to mark progress and the opportunity to celebrate successes. *Records* are kept and used for purposes of motivation, feedback, assessment, and the building of standards and traditions. The entire season is *festive* with continuous efforts made to celebrate success.⁵

Through the implementation of these features, Siedentop et al.⁶ proposed that students become *competent, literate, and enthusiastic* sportspersons. In other words, the students become knowledgeable and competent games players who understand and value sport, and can distinguish between good and bad sport practices. By consequence these students will then participate and behave in ways that preserve, protect, and enhance positive sport cultures. Siedentop⁵ had the vision that these three goals of the model had a strong cultural emphasis. That is, he commented that “Sport Education has always been

defined as a process through which sport cultures might grow and prosper as humanizing influences in the lives of nations and their citizens”.⁵

As noted, Siedentop’s goal was to recast PE lessons as matches and training sessions, thereby reproducing aspects of the community practice of sport as it exists outside of school.⁷ However, it should be noted that SE is not a direct replication of youth sport, and has structural features that enable student participation to be more inclusive. SE seasons are designed so that all students play all the time, and all teams are involved in the final festivities, irrespective of their ranking. As such, games are modified to promote developmentally appropriate involvement through the use of small-sided games. Finally, students take on sport-related roles other than player, for example referee, coach, manager, trainer, cheerleader, or publicity officer. As Pope⁸ noted, “students are encouraged to share ownership for the way the model is implemented and pursue greater responsibility for the operation of the model” (p. 12).

While it is important that we acknowledge that PL was not defined with a specific pedagogical model in mind, we argue that the pedagogical features inherent in SE and its goals of developing competent, literate, and enthusiastic participants have the potential to contribute to the attributes associated with the development of PL. The following section discusses this potential alignment and summarizes the empirical evidence that currently exists to support these suppositions.

3. Motivation and confidence to capitalize on innate movement/physical potential

Almond and Whitehead³ suggested that individuals who are making progress on their individual/unique PL journey have the motivation and confidence to capitalize on innate movement/physical potential to make a significant contribution to the quality of life. Siedentop⁴ described his long-term aim for SE being to “contribute to a sound, sane, and humane sport culture that maximizes participation” (p. 5). To achieve this goal he suggests it is necessary to give all students the chance to know and love sport and the opportunity to have a good educational and social experience as part of a team. As such, SE aims to reduce the discriminatory and exclusionary practices often present in the way sport is traditionally presented in schools and instead foreground the individual’s contribution to the team culture. This is achieved by foregrounding “team outcomes”, in which the performances of individuals contribute to team performance, and that working together toward a common goal is a key educational and developmental goal. This is achieved by making every effort to select teams that are as evenly matched as possible so that each team has a chance to be successful as a team. Participants are also provided the opportunity to build team affiliation using strategies such as team names, uniforms, posters, and pre-game team cheers. A guiding principle of SE is that all students get equal opportunity to play, which is expedited through the use of small-sided contests. Further, each member of the team has a specific role responsibility that is required to be completed for the team to be successful towards season goals. To promote

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