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Developing Physical Literacy

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Four sections:-

Developing Physical Literacy as a philosophical challenge

1. Brief philosophical background to concept
2. Provisional definition of Physical Literacy

Developing Physical Literacy for all young people

3. From Physical Education to Physical Literacy
4. Implications for content and method in movement work in the Primary School

As a life long advocate of physical education, and someone who has, and still is, involved in a range of physical activity, it has always seemed to me that there was **more** to being physically active than just having

a refreshing change from academic work
an opportunity to let off steam
or just having fun.

I have found my involvement in physical activity **profoundly fulfilling and rewarding** - although I have never reached the dizzy heights of international sport.

Philosophical background

Intrigued to understand my own experience, I was directed to the work of some philosophers who articulate a particular stance towards the nature of our human condition.

These philosophers, existentialists and phenomenologists, hold two very important views, as far as I am concerned. Firstly they **reject Cartesian dualism** and secondly they are committed to the **pivotal role played by our embodiment in life as we know it**. For them we do not have a body, rather we are embodied.

To give you a flavour of their views, I would like to share with you a few of their beliefs. I hope that you will agree with me,

that these views are thought provoking
that they throw new light on our area of work
and that they can add weight to our advocacy of the value of physical activity.

And I hope that you can understand why I wanted to study them in depth:-

I can only give you a few here, more are in my full paper and many others can be found in my other papers and my references. Please see the Physical Literacy website for these. The address will be on the last power point slide.

With regard to monism - the refutation of dualism (that is the body and mind being separate)- they argue cogently in establishing the following positions:

For human reality, to be is to act (Sartre 1957 p 476)

Prior to the Cartesian I think, there is an I can (Burkitt 1999 p 74)

It is not 'I think therefore I am' but 'I can therefore I am'

The mind is inherently embodied (Lakoff and Johnson 199 p 3)

The concept of a person is logically primitive and is not derived from mind and body(Strawson quoted in Gill 2000 p 18)

We do not have to struggle with putting mind and body together to create a person. Each one of us is a person, comprised of inter-dependent and inter-related dimensions and capabilities.

It is no surprise that it is all but impossible to find a way of explaining how body and mind collaborate, because the mind **is as it is** because it is embodied, and the body **is as it is**, because it is a dimension of a 'minded' person.

As Gallagher (2005 p 248) writes '*Before you know it, your body makes you human and sets you on a course in which human nature is expressed in intentional action and interaction with others*'.

With respect to the pivotal role played by our embodiment in life as we know it, these philosophers work to establish the following conclusions, which follow on from the notion of the intricate relationship between mind and embodiment:-

The perceiving mind is the incarnate mind (Merleau Ponty 1962 p 3)

Reason is not disembodied but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies and bodily experience (Lakoff and Johnson 199 p 4)

Mind, body and world thus emerge as equal partners in the construction of robust, flexible behaviours. (Clark 1997 p45)

As Gallagher (2005 p 247) says '.... *nothing about human experience remains untouched by human embodiment: from the basic perceptual and emotional processes that are already at work in infancy, to a sophisticated interaction with other people; from the acquisition and creative use of language to higher cognitive functions*'.

In relation to intellectual development four final quotes:-

Prior to thought and representation, then, there is a primordial coexistence between the body and its world, which grounds the possibility of developing conscious awareness and knowledge. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999 p566)

Indeed there is now a large amount of evidence from a variety of studies and disciplines to show that the body through its motor abilities, its actual movements, and its posture, informs and shapes cognition. (Gallagher 2005 p8)

Cognitive development, it is concluded, cannot be usefully treated in isolation from issues concerning the child's physical embedding in, and interactions with, the world. A better image of child cognition (indeed of all cognition) depicts perception, action and thought as bound together in a variety of complex interpenetrating ways.

(Clark 1877 p36)

Thus the basis of meaning is not to be located in the rules that order cognition, nor in the grammatical structure of linguistic sentences, but the bodily pattern and order of active perceptions. (Burkitt 1999 p 85))

Thinking is consummately wedded to bodily life; indeed it begins in, and with, bodily experience. In the most fundamental sense it is modelled along the living lines of our bodies .(Sheets-Johnstone1994 p 327)

Our embodied dimension is the ongoing axis of thought and knowing. (Gill 2000 p 130)

'...what we call 'mind' only exists because we have bodies that give us the potential to be active and animate within the world, exploring, touching, seeing, hearing, wondering, explaining; and we can only become persons and selves because we are located bodily at a particular place in space and time, in relation to other people and things around us.'(Burkitt 199p 12)

What I have understood from these philosophers is that our embodied dimension is **not** an insignificant aspect of our human nature - a mere machine, that can easily be relegated to a position of having little value other than 'housing' our mind - **but it is the very fabric out of which life is fashioned.**

Interrogating these views, our embodiment has at least two key roles :-

- it is the foundation for much of our development, as well as being a central player in many aspects of life - be it thinking, reasoning, feeling and expressing emotion, or relating to others
- it is an inherent part of our personhood and as such its development has the potential to enrich our self realisation, self esteem and self confidence

The quality of life, to which exercise of our embodied dimension contributes, goes **way beyond simple absence of disease or the enjoyment of playing sport with others** - which is not to deny the benefits of either.

Attention to our embodied dimension **is not a disposable added extra to education**, not a waste of precious time in school, **not a trivial pursuit.**

Attention to our embodied dimension is a critical aspect of education **to which all are entitled.**

Definition of Physical Literacy

My study in recent years has been to marry these philosophical views with what is happening in education. Critically important seemed to be that every pupil should have a personally rewarding experience that motivates him or her to continue with physical activity after leaving school. All should leave compulsory education with an attitude to physical activity that opens doors.

As reading and writing - what is called literacy - opens innumerable doors in life, and the management of figures - numeracy - is the springboard for a range of opportunities, so **all should develop a literacy in movement** which motivates them to establish **a life-long habit** of taking up options in one or more areas of physical activity.

I judged that current practices in physical education and school sport, were not always successful in providing this, and so I looked for another direction for our work. To this end I have begun to draw up and define the concept of what I have called physical literacy. (Although I am not the first person to have used this term)

Here is my current definition:-

Physical literacy can be described as the ability and motivation to capitalise on our motile potential to make a significant contribution to the quality of life. As humans we all exhibit this potential, however its specific expression will be particular to the culture in which we live and the motile capacities with which we are endowed.

I want to argue that it is a universal concept, **but** I have to recognise the influence - both of the social practices which surround an individual, and the fact that everyone's embodiment is different.

An individual who is physically literate moves with poise, economy and confidence in a wide variety of physically challenging situations. Furthermore the individual is perceptive in 'reading' all aspects of the physical environment, anticipating movement needs or possibilities and responding appropriately to these, with intelligence and imagination.

I would want to include here not just movement in a PE/Sport/Dance context, but also all movement involved in daily life.

The physically literate individual will interact with sensitivity and ease with others in group situations, appreciating the expressive quality of movement in her/himself and in others.

Again, I do not want to limit this to 'our' context, but would want to encompass sensitive inter personal skills in everyday life. For example an awareness of many aspects of non-verbal communication.

Gallagher p 208 The understanding of the other person is primarily neither theoretical nor based on an internal simulation. It is a form of embodied practice

In addition the individual has the ability to identify and articulate the essential qualities that influence the effectiveness of his/her own movement performance, and has an understanding of the principles of embodied health, with respect to basic aspects such as exercise, sleep and nutrition

Physical literacy, I argue, must incorporate a rational, informed grasp of our human situation.

I am currently working on the role of Physical Literacy in relation to the development of the self concept, and so another paragraph will soon be added. I believe we would all concur with this from experience with working with pupils. There is considerable support from a range of authors. For example:-

In respect of our realisation of self as an embodied being they write:-

The original sense of 'I' is the 'I can', a practical sense of the body's possibilities, and therefore the sense of identity possessed by humans is not based on disembodied thought, nor in early visual representation of the self. Instead, the sense of self we develop is primarily based on the feel we have of our body and the way it connects us to the world. (Burkitt 199 p76)

In some fashion, quite obviously, the human person is embodied in human form and matter. The human body, and the way it structures human experience, also shapes the human experience of self, and perhaps the very possibility of developing

a sense of self. If the self is anything more than this, it is nonetheless and first of all this, an embodied self.(Gallagher 2005 p 3)

Implications for work in school.

I want to advocate a move from Physical Education or becoming physically educated to a goal of enabling all to achieve **physical literacy or become physically literate**.

Work in physical education lessons has the overarching goal to produce ‘**physically educated**’ young people. This would suggest that what is desired is a particular **end state**, often being the mastery of a prescribed set of skills. These skills are usually realised within a narrowly defined set of activities. The intent and reality of physical education can therefore become to produce able gymnasts, games players, dancers and swimmers. Following from this there is the danger of teachers , teaching, for example, gymnastics or swimming, rather than **teaching young people**.

With **the intent of physical education as the nurturing of physical literacy** there would need to be a move away from a **prescribed activity-centred performance** model, to a **person centred participation** model. Experience within this aspect of the curriculum would be focused on becoming physically literate, through a realisation of embodiment in its widest experiential sense.

The constituents of the definition of physical literacy given above should be addressed with the goal **of all young people** having the motivation to continue with physical activity – a motivation founded on the **enhanced self confidence and self realisation** they have experienced in physical activity settings in their childhood and youth.

Content will need to

A. enable all to realise motile aspects of physical literacy as indicated above

that would include coverage of, inter alia:-

- i) body management itself with only gravity to contend with
- ii) moving in different environments

- iii) moving in relation to fixed obstacles, manipulating objects during movement, moving in response to moving objects
- iii) moving in relation to others

B. include work that helps pupils to understand the nature of movement and its contribution to health

C. be broad to cater for all and be relevant to opportunities for physical activity throughout life

Each of the above sections warrants detailed consideration and a group of us are working on this.

For example in relation to **A i)** we suggest the following attributes that relate to the key qualities of poise, economy and confidence:-

- balance
- co-ordination
- flexibility
- agility
- fluency
- harmony
- spatial awareness – own space, general space, others' space
- control
- precision
- strength
- perception
- power
- endurance
- effective movement at different speeds
- self awareness, knowing the body

The attention given to the movement attributes signalled in **A** as well as constituents of **B** and **C** above, needs to be planned within a clear structure.

Elizabeth Murdoch, Dominic Hayden-Davies and I are working on an outline of such a curriculum. It is particularly good that Dominic is sharing in the debate as he has actually devised and run a curriculum to promote physical literacy in two schools.

Our current thoughts have resulted in a modular structure for Foundation, KS1 and KS2. We are looking at six types of modules

Body management
 Manipulating objects
 Confidence in the Outdoors
 Moving with Others
 My Movement
 Exploring Movement across the Curriculum
 Planning my own module.

These are being designed not only to cover the range of movement capacities mentioned above, but also to embrace the use of language, working with others, creativity, self assessment, decision making and issues concerned with health and well being. It is planned that the modules will give clear guidance without being narrowly prescriptive. The range of physical activity contexts in which the modules could be delivered will be proposed.

The raison d'être of the outline is not to develop proficiency in specific physical activities but to foster the development of a basic grasp of a wide range of movement capacities, an appreciation of the significance of movement in many avenues of life and a motivation to accept the exciting and rewarding challenges that taking part in physical activity can provide.

While the content and the organisation of the content is of key importance nothing will be gained, Physical Literacy will not be developed **unless** the teaching methods used and the teacher approach adopted are sensitive to the needs of the embodied pupils with whom they are working.

I cannot stress too much the integral nature of their embodiment to children, and the enormous amount of care we need to take in asking them to exercise this most personal aspect of themselves in so public a forum.

I would argue that while **the capacity to find physical activity profoundly rewarding** is common to all, attention directed to this dimension of an individual has the potential to be experienced as embarrassing and humiliating.

Methods will need to:-

- be inclusive/individualised
- be clearly planned/focused

- be purposeful and have clear intent
- offer opportunities for all to experience success/satisfaction/pleasure/enjoyment
- be varied in freedom/direction
- allow time for repetition
- incorporate assessment for learning
- give opportunities for pupils to take responsibility
- encourage self awareness/promote pupils' awareness of own learning
- enhance self esteem/self confidence

The teacher will need to be

- sensitive
- appreciative
- encouraging
- non-judgemental
- be ready to recognise both effort and success

The teacher is patient, caring and empathetic, but is also challenging, demanding and sets high standards.

Overall work in the physical area must be carried out in lessons where **enjoyment comes from success and from the actual experience of mastery**, maybe at a modest level. The sheer joy of successfully managing one's embodied dimension is hugely rewarding. It is an experience open to all. Progress and achievement are available to all, at every level. The development of self-confidence and self-respect are palpable in such lessons. These sessions do not encourage truancy but promote participation.

To conclude..

Activity centred on our embodied dimension is a powerful holistic experience, taking us back to our roots.

How right Sheets-Johnstone (2005 p 254) is, to write:-

A living body is too alive with knowledge, with affect, with nonverbal understandings and capabilities. It is too alive to itself, to the world, and to a growing repertoire of powers. She then argues against those who say *'It must indeed be shut up'*.

No, we will not shut it up.

Developing Physical Literacy is a crucial aspect of education, and some would advocate that there should be life-long opportunity for this element of education. The goal of movement work in school must be to develop the physical literacy of all young people.

We are as we are, because we are embodied, and to respect this human characteristic in all young people **is a right for every pupil.**

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Website www.physical-literacy.org.uk

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