

2 Phenomenology and physical education

This chapter begins on a personal note. My educational background is in physical education. During my graduate studies I read philosophical texts, and both my master's and doctoral theses were inspired by those texts. Even so, I always take care to point out that I am not a philosopher and I have never studied philosophy. I offer this caveat both out of respect for those who have made philosophy their professional work or study, and – I must admit – in self-defence. I want to avoid being faulted for pretending to engage in philosophy in the academic sense,¹ and I share these sentiments expressed by Sara Ahmed:

It is a risk to read philosophy as a non-philosopher. When we don't have the resources to read certain texts, we risk getting things wrong by not returning them to the fullness of the intellectual histories from which they emerge.

(Ahmed, 2006, p. 22)

Should this risk lead non-philosophers with an interest in philosophy such as myself to avoid using these texts? An argument can be made for this position. In the context of sport studies, for example, Martinkova and Parry (2011) have criticized what they consider to be sloppy use of the philosophical term phenomenology. Much of the work that celebrates the promise of phenomenology, they argue, has little philosophical relevance. Moreover, these scholars point out that many authors use philosophical terms completely incorrectly. Together with a colleague, I have examined the facile manner in which some writers in the sport sciences refer to differences in ontological and epistemological assumptions among phenomenological philosophers (Standal and Engelsrud, 2013). At the same, we observed that it is claimed, *with strength*, that non-philosophers with an interest in philosophy have an obligation to clarify our assumptions and declare which ontology and epistemology we apply: 'the debate between Husserl and Heidegger is about fundamental differences in ontology. It follows that research claiming to use a phenomenological approach must make explicit the ontological assumptions upon which it is based' (Kerry and Armour, 2000, p. 8).

That said, Engelsrud and I (2013) went on to argue that in the phenomenological tradition, the differences in ontological and epistemological assumptions are not as significant as they are sometimes claimed to be. In fact, these differences can be so nuanced that professional philosophers are still working out them out. Due to the vast amount of unpublished work (the so-called *Nachlass*) left behind by Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, his position on various philosophical topics is still emerging; to some extent, this research has revealed striking similarities between the work of Husserl and that of his successors (Zahavi, 2003a).

Certainly, I would not argue that anything goes as long as researchers do not pretend to be engaging in philosophy. One the other hand, I do not think that researchers who are not professional philosophers should avoid entering the philosophical terrain. Sara Ahmed (2006) makes the argument for the promise and perils of philosophy for us non-philosophers succinctly:

the failure to return texts to their histories will do something. Of course, not all failures are creative. If we don't take care with the texts we read, if we don't pay attention, then the failure to read them 'properly' won't do very much at all.

(pp. 22–23)

Striking this balance between not attempting to – or pretending to – engage in philosophy, yet reading and writing on philosophical subjects adequately is challenging, but it can also be productive.

In the case of physical education pedagogy, as Tinning (2010) has pointed out, the phenomenological perspective remains underdeveloped. In writing from this perspective, I hope that with this book I can serve the dual purpose of informing both the philosophy of physical education and the knowledge base of pedagogy. With this goal in mind, I will now offer a brief introduction to phenomenology.

Phenomenology as philosophy

As mentioned in the previous chapter, much of the work in the philosophy of physical education has been based on the analytical tradition. In this book, I take a different approach, inspired by McNamee's (2005) suggestion that Continental philosophy may have

rich seams indeed for philosophers of physical education to plough. In particular, the work of phenomenologists and hermeneuticists has tremendous potential to offer understandings of our experiences in the activities that comprise physical education (whether in sport, games, play or even dance).

(pp. 1–2)

An initial problem in trying to define² phenomenology is that it cannot be considered as one school of thought, in which philosophers are committed to a strict set of doctrines. It is, rather, a movement, which shares 'certain methodological commitments as well as closely related ideas about the proper domain of phenomenological research' (Luft and Overgaard, 2012, p. 1). As I understand it, phenomenology is a branch of Continental philosophy originating in the groundbreaking work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) that has had a profound influence on contemporary philosophy. The philosophical work of Husserl and philosophers who have been inspired by his work has also had great impact on other disciplines, including medicine, sociology and psychology. In addition, scholars have developed phenomenological research methods (e.g. Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1984; van Manen, 1990). Finally, Max van Manen has applied insights from phenomenological philosophy to develop a phenomenological pedagogy (van Manen, 1993; van Manen, 1982).

Despite all of this work, it is still not easy to define what phenomenology is. In an admittedly brief attempt to do so, I will begin by providing an introduction to phenomenology as a philosophy, first exploring the work of Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological methodology that he developed to make philosophy a rigorous science. I will then present a reading of the preface to Merleau-Ponty's (2002) *Phenomenology of Perception*, which begins with the question, What is phenomenology? In presenting Merleau-Ponty's ideas, I hope to show that the development of phenomenology has been a continuous process, encompassing Husserl and subsequent philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty.

Husserl's methodology

In *The Theory and Practice of Husserl's Phenomenology*, Reeder (2010) offers the following definition:

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement based upon a self-critical methodology for reflectively (reflexively or introspectively) examining and describing the lived evidence (the phenomena) which provides a crucial link in our philosophical and scientific understanding of the world.

(p. 21)

Simply stated, Husserl provided a new methodology for philosophy, which he believed would serve to ground all sciences. The object of his phenomenological studies was intended to be the lived evidence of experience. In other words, his project was to look at phenomena, i.e. the things that we have experiential access to. The point was not to examine a concrete experience *per se*, but rather to address the general and objective structures of that experience. Therefore, if you are concerned with the phenomenology of learning in physical education, you would not engage in an examination of my or your experience of that phenomenon. Rather you would try to investigate the general structure of what learning is like in physical education. Even if you began by examining

your own experience, your purpose in using phenomenology would be to develop a general and objective description.

The methodology that Husserl developed and practised has three phases: retention, bracketing and eidetic reduction. *Retention* means to hold in presence a specific 'moment of a living trace (Husserl talks of sedimentation) of the moment just passed' (Reeder, 2010, p. 28). Phenomenological investigation is thus an examination of what is present in retentional experience. At this moment, you attend to your own experience. But, since phenomenology is expressly not about individual, subjective experience (it seeks to identify universal structures of a given experience), Husserl insisted on the adoption of the phenomenological attitude through *bracketing*. Reeder (2010) describes this as a metaphysically neutral attitude, in the sense that one does not assume anything about what caused the experience or what the experience in turn causes, but rather lets the experience simply appear in order to be described.

The final phase of Husserl's methodology involves a process called free variation in fantasy, which seeks to achieve *eidetic reduction*. This involves altering the structures of the experience of X to discern which of them are essential to experiencing precisely X. Take, for example, the experience of drinking a cup of tea or coffee³ (see Reeder, 2010, pp. 75–77). One feature of that experience is the cup's colour (mine, for example, is green). The process of free imaginative variation is then to vary that feature of the experience to find out whether colour is an essential or contingent feature. I have no problem imagining that my cup is white, pink or any other colour. I would therefore conclude that colour is an essential feature of a cup, but the specific colour is only a contingent feature. However, I would also conclude that an invisible cup would not be possible. I might be able to imagine the existence of one, but I recognize that as a fantasy and not what we normally would expect. I could go on to examine other experiential features of the cup in a similar way, and through an arduous process, eventually identify the eidetic features of experiencing a cup.

Any attempt to describe Husserl's methodology for phenomenology in a few paragraphs is of course incomplete,⁴ but I hope this introduction makes it clear that phenomenology was developed as an attempt to create a methodology for describing the structures of subjective experiences that would reveal the 'objective within the subjective' (Reeder, 2010, p. 82). Put simply, phenomenology attempts to provide an account of subjective experience, rather than a subjective account of experience (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008).

Merleau-Ponty: what is phenomenology?

One of the most prominent philosophers who built on Husserl's foundation was Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). In the preface to his principal work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002),⁵ first published in 1945, Merleau-Ponty began by asking what phenomenology is, observing that 'It may seem strange that this question has still to be asked half a century after the first

works of Husserl. The fact remains that it has by no means been answered' (p. vii). This preface, which is regarded as a good introduction to what phenomenology is (Zahavi, 2003b), presents its central themes, as Merleau-Ponty understood them. He identified five: phenomenology's relation to science, the phenomenological reduction, essences, intentionality, and the relation between subjectivism and objectivism.

Merleau-Ponty asserts that an important feature of phenomenology is that it represents a critique of the starting point of science.⁶ Husserl began his academic career as a mathematician concerned with logic, but evolved into a critic of the psychologism of his time. The idea that logical laws are basically empirical laws of consciousness was one of his central preoccupations at the beginning of his career. Contra psychologism, he argued that even if the mind perceives a phenomenon, it does not necessarily follow that this phenomenon is purely mental. The phenomenological point of view is that a third-person science, such as the psychology in vogue at that time, cannot be seen as the foundation of all human knowledge. Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty argues that this position fails to account adequately for subjectivity:

The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is a second-order expression.

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. ix)

In this sense, phenomenology's critique of science is not so much a rejection of the possibility of science as it is a reminder about the conditions under which science is created: It is a human enterprise, in which human beings ask and answer questions.

One of the points where later phenomenologists, such as Merleau-Ponty, departed from Husserl (or at the very least the earlier Husserl texts) is on the question of phenomenological reduction. Merleau-Ponty believed that Husserl's transcendental idealism (Reeder, 2010) was too idealistic. A complete reduction, in which all our judgments about the world and our experiences are suspended, is impossible, according to Merleau-Ponty and other existential phenomenologists, because it would require that 'we were absolute mind' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. xv). The existential perspective is that we can never become transparent to ourselves. For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological reduction involves putting aside our common sense and scientific understanding of the world; it can be described as *wonder* in the face of the world,⁷ yet 'the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction' (ibid.).

The existential dimension of phenomenology is also a theme in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of essences. He points out that a phenomenological investigation searching for the essences of an experience 'is not looking for what it is

as an idea once it has been reduced to a theme of discourse; it is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization' (p. xvii). From this perspective, essences cannot be arrived at through a conceptual analysis (for instance, a conceptual analysis of what learning or education is). Rather, Merleau-Ponty argues that phenomenology puts essences back into existence. Perhaps more surprisingly, he goes on to claim that 'the eidetic method is the method of a phenomenological positivism' (p. xix). Both logical positivism and the positivism of psychology at that time were the targets of the phenomenological critiques. Merleau-Ponty's point is that positivism, which originally was aimed at grounding scientific studies in what is observable, is a fitting description for the phenomenological project. Indeed, Husserl himself remarked that we (i.e. phenomenologists) are the true positivists.

Another key topic in Merleau-Ponty's introduction is intentionality. Intentionality describes the directedness of consciousness, i.e. that all consciousness is consciousness of something. Reeder (2010) explains that intentionality is constituted by an ego-pole and an object-pole: My consciousness is always directed at objects. According to Merleau-Ponty (2002), the contribution of phenomenology is not the discovery of intentionality. Rather, its contribution is to expand intentionality from being characterized solely as a judgment, 'when we voluntarily take up a position' (p. xx). The contribution of Husserl was to ground intentionality at a more primordial level which he referred to as operative intentionality, 'which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life ... furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language' (ibid.). It is this embodied form of intentionality that Merleau-Ponty developed further in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and which I will explore further in the next chapter.

In concluding his introduction, Merleau-Ponty claims that 'the chief gain from phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism' (p. xxii). The whole idea of phenomenology was to turn to experience in order to avoid the extremes of objectivism that Husserl and his immediate followers saw as a crisis plaguing the science of their time. However, even if phenomenology is concerned with subjective experience, it cannot be characterized as subjectivism: it seeks to develop descriptions of experiences that can be inter-subjectively validated – that is, descriptions of experiences that others could plausibly have. It is a way of mediating between the viewpoints of science and common sense, not taking for granted anything that people have 'learned or otherwise believe they know' (p. xv).

Husserl initiated the phenomenological movement and inspired others who have developed their own concepts in phenomenology. Even though they have been critical of various aspects of Husserl's work, it is still considered foundational. One reason for this is that when later phenomenologists developed their own versions of Husserlian terms, their contributions are informed by his work. The following section surveys phenomenological literature concerning physical education.

Phenomenology in physical education literature

The collection of essays published as *Sport and the Body: A Philosophical Symposium* (Gerber, 1972) can be considered an early expression of the growing interest in philosophical studies of sport and physical education. This book includes several essays of philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition, including 'The Body' by Sartre and 'The Lived Body as Phenomenological Datum' by Schrag. However, as the book's title suggests, its overall emphasis is more on sports than on physical education.

One of the first scholars to apply phenomenology to physical education extensively was P. J. Arnold. This is particularly evident in his book *Meaning in Movement, Sport and Physical Education* (Arnold, 1979), in which he highlights the crucial role that embodiment plays in human movement:

[Embodiment] is the *sine qua non* of my existence and therefore of my consciousness. Secondly, it is my mode of experiencing the world, and therefore a prerequisite for discovering who I am. Embodiment allows me both to recognize my existence and at the same time permits me to explore my essence.

(Arnold, 1979, p. 1)

Drawing on phenomenologists such as Marcel, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Zaner, Arnold (1979) argues that the phenomenological understanding of the constitution of the lived body could be relevant to the study of human movement. In developing the notion of 'actional movement', he also discusses how human movement is meaningful as lived experience. He distinguishes actional movements, which are conscious, voluntary and intentional, from reflexes or other non-voluntary movements, and suggests that they operate on three levels: the primordial, in which habits and skills are experienced as peculiarly *mine*; the contextual, in which meaning is generated from a broader movement situation, such as a given game; and the existential, which is perhaps more inspired by existentialism than phenomenology in the sense that moving and participating in sports can become expressions and fulfilments of personal choices.

Arnold's work was widely criticized in Britain, where it first appeared. As I will discuss at greater length in the next chapter, David Best (1978) asserted that Arnold's attempt to justify the inclusion of physical education in the school curriculum did not make a strong case for its educational value. Indeed, it seems that Arnold's work has fallen into disrepute in the British context, to the extent that scholars with a phenomenological perspective on human movement hardly refer to him. Even so, Arnold's (1979) work has recently enjoyed something of a revival in physical education literature (Brown and Penney, 2013; Brown, 2013); in particular, his focus on the meaning-making potential of movement.

Regardless of how Arnold's work is judged in contemporary scholarship, it is clear that the application of phenomenology to physical education is not

new. Indeed, in an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, Maureen Connolly (1997) argued that the change in terminology from 'physical training' to 'physical education' could in part be attributed to 'the influence of a non-dualistic approach to movement, gesture and expression' (p. 535). According to Connolly, this transition paralleled the development of the phenomenological movement. That is, even before scholars engaged in the philosophy of physical education came to think of their work as phenomenological, affinities with the ways in which phenomenology as a philosophical discipline looked at movement and the body had begun to emerge.⁸ At the time, Connolly observes, this phenomenological orientation in physical education was more implicit than explicit, and had not really been actualized at the time her article appeared.

Connolly (1997) also made a distinction between three loose categories of phenomenological work in physical education: *phenomenology as a theoretical framework* for philosophical analysis of physical education; *phenomenological methods* used for researching topics in physical education; and *applied phenomenology*, which is the application of phenomenology in the practice of teaching physical education. An example of the latter category is that zeroing-in on 'eidetic features of a particular type of movement experience can make it clearer how to modify an activity so that persons with various capacities can all participate' (Connolly, 1997, p. 536). Connolly's own work on developing a movement curriculum for people with autism (2008) serves as an example in this regard.

Prior to writing this encyclopedia entry, Connolly (1995) had elaborated on the relationship between phenomenology and physical education. More specifically, she highlighted three sensitizing concepts – lived experience, intersubjectivity and insiders' stories – to develop the common ground shared between the philosophical tradition and the school subject. Drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Max van Manen, she showed how the life-world existential elements of body, space, time and relations could be applied to teaching situations in physical education. The work of Connolly (Connolly, 1995; Connolly and Craig, 2002; Connolly, 1997; Connolly, 2008) is an important source of inspiration for the present work. In particular, I am inspired by the way in which she establishes a relationship between phenomenological philosophy, applied phenomenology and issues of teaching and learning.

Recent work on phenomenology and physical education

Thorburn (2008; 2007) has sought to develop a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of physical education. Based on a study of high-stakes school exams in physical education, and their conceptual relationship to curricular issues (that is, the relationship between how the educational value of physical education is articulated, how the curriculum is structured and how pupils are tested). He argued that the 'problems [of bringing about rich practical learning environments and high levels of authentic attainment in high-stakes tests] are often

exacerbated by trying to resolve conceptual coherence concerns through a narrow adherence to the structures of mind-body dualism' (2007, p. 181). Thus, Thorburn faulted physical education curricula that emphasize academic, theoretical knowledge about the body as an object (e.g. bio-mechanics, physiology) and overlook the practical, embodied character of knowledge on this subject.

In a subsequent work, Thorburn outlined a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological approach that integrates pupils' lived experiences of subject knowledge into high-stakes physical education examination awards (Thorburn 2008). He finds the work of Merleau-Ponty relevant due to its emphasis on the role of the body in perception and movement, and pays particular attention to two concepts, intentional arc and maximum grip (see the next chapter for an explanation of these terms). Drawing on the work of Hubert Dreyfus, an influential interpreter of Merleau-Ponty, Thorburn explores how phenomenology can serve as a foundation for understanding how experiential learning can 'resolve pragmatic difficulties about how the essence of personal experience can be captured within the assessment systems' (p. 267).

Thorburn (2008; 2007) takes up two issues also found elsewhere in the literature on phenomenology and physical education; the importance of embodied, practical knowledge and the possibilities for meaning-making in physical education. Although Arnold (1979; 1991) was also interested in phenomenology's contribution to an understanding of practical knowledge, it is mainly the meaning-making aspect of movement that has been explored in physical education literature.

Brown and Payne (2009) surveyed physical education literature concerning phenomenology of movement, and argued, like Tinning (2010), that phenomenological pedagogy to some degree is marginalized, noting that, 'despite 40 years of important but sporadic contributions to the literature ... phenomenology of movement remains in a nascent stage of development' (p. 436). Their survey revealed four broad, to some extent interrelated themes: challenging assumptions about knowledge production; the importance of attending to the nature of the experienter; shifts in locus and focus of inquiry and pedagogy; and examining the congruence 'between research approaches, aims, problems, design, and methodology' (p. 430).

One important contribution that phenomenology has made to physical education, according to Brown and Payne (2009), is to challenge assumptions of mind-body dualism. Such dualism is expressed, for instance, in an over-emphasis on propositional, theoretical knowledge or a disembodied focus on movement as sheer physiology or bio-mechanics. This relates to their second point, which essentially highlights the positive contribution of phenomenology: If mind-body dualism is overcome by highlighting the importance of the lived body, they assert, then as a consequence one will discover the 'perceptual, sensory, kinaesthetic, and relational dimensions' of movement as experienced by the mover (p. 433). Indeed, they argue, such a perspective would shift the locus and focus of research in physical education towards meaning-making.

However, when it comes to the congruence of related research approaches, Brown and Payne refer to a problem raised by Kerry and Armour (2000), namely, that using the concepts of 'qualitative research' and 'phenomenological research' interchangeably is misleading, in the sense that the former is sometimes used to characterize research that does not share the ontological and epistemological assumptions of phenomenology.

A special 2013 issue of *Educational Theory and Philosophy* devoted to re-conceptualizing physical education contains a number of interesting articles relevant to philosophy of physical education. In Stolz's (2013) contribution on phenomenology and physical education, he argues that the lived body is central to physical education, observing that 'what makes phenomenology educationally desirable in this case is its capacity to take an explicit body-linked subject such as physical education and describe *how our embodiment has a significant role to play in student learning*' (p. 952, italics added). To make his case, he draws on the work of Maureen Connolly and Margaret Whitehead on physical literacy (see below) and of Hughson and Inglis (2002) on the phenomenology of soccer performance. In addition, Stolz (2013) applies the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty to show that movement experiences are essential to becoming aware of spatial forms of activities (exemplified by a tennis swing) and, in turn, to develop skills in these activities. In addition, Stolz, like Brown and Payne (2009), asserts that meaning-making is an essential feature of physical education: without attending to the lived experiences of pupils, he argues, physical education inevitably falls short of its meaning-making potential.

Several of the articles cited above observe that insights derived from phenomenology have the potential to suggest and inform research into physical education. This position is consistent with other sport sciences literature that celebrates phenomenology's potential to increase our understanding of meaning-making and movement experiences, such as the work mentioned earlier by Kerry and Armour (2000) as well as contributions by Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007). All of the studies on physical education reviewed here:

- 1 Its meaning-making aspect, i.e. due to the 'bodily nature' of physical education, phenomenological philosophy, with its emphasis on bodily experiences, is useful in conceptualizing and developing a theoretical framework for it;
- 2 Due to the practical nature of knowledge in physical education, phenomenology's commitment to an ontology that rejects body-mind dualism can be a particularly fruitful approach to examining it;
- 3 Justification, which is related to the other two themes. If education is conceived narrowly as a process of informing the rational mind, the focus will be on propositional and theoretical knowledge, and (potentially) exclude physical education. Drawing on the work of earlier phenomenologists, these authors highlight the educational value of meaning-making, bodily experiences and practical knowledge.

Physical literacy

One physical education researcher who has worked extensively within the phenomenological tradition is Margaret Whitehead. Since the mid-1980s, she has been developing the concept of physical literacy⁹ (Whitehead, 2001; 2007; 2010). Like much of the other physical education literature inspired by phenomenology, her work is grounded in a dissatisfaction with what she has considered to be the dominant, dualist tendencies not only in the school subject, but in physical and movement activities more generally:

Development of the debate regarding physical literacy was stimulated by the study of existentialist and phenomenological writers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, who articulate a particular stance towards the nature of our human condition ... [they] spell out a commitment *inter alia* to a monist or holistic view of the human condition, the centrality of our embodiment in existence and our nature as essentially beings-in-the world. (Whitehead, 2007, p. 283)

In addition to drawing on more traditional phenomenological literature, in her more recent work Whitehead has cited current neuro-scientific literature to support her argument that our embodied existence is fundamental and primordial (Whitehead, 2007).

The definition of physical literacy has developed and expanded over the years. In an edited collection on this concept and its application in different contexts, Whitehead defines it this way: 'as appropriate to each individual's endowment, physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to maintain physical activity throughout the lifecourse' (2010, pp. 11–12). This definition is further delineated with respect to certain attributes that a physically literate person exhibits¹⁰:

- (A) A disposition or motivation to capitalize on one's movement potential;
- (B) Will move with *poise, economy and confidence* in different movement settings;
- (C) Will be perceptive in reading all aspects of the environment and respond to possibilities for movement;
- (D) Have an established sense of oneself as embodied being;
- (E) 'Fluent self-expression through non-verbal communication' (p. 13), as well as empathic interaction with others;
- (F) Have an understanding of the qualities of their movement performance as well as 'the principles of embodied health with respect to basic aspects such as exercise, sleep and nutrition' (p. 14).

Just as the traditional notion of literacy can be extended well beyond knowledge of grammar, reading and writing (i.e. functional literacy) to

include an understanding of various genres and the abilities for self-expression, Whitehead's concept of physical literacy goes beyond a narrow focus on fundamental movement skills (for instance expressed in movement ABC) to include the dimensions of human movement expressed in points A to F. Physical literacy highlights the importance of developing one's capacities for movement in a variety of contexts (points A to C above). This is not so much about developing and mastering specific sets of skills, as it is about realizing the potential of each of us to express ourselves in and through movement – a point which is underscored by the significance Whitehead attaches to 'individuals' endowment' (p. 12). In that sense, physical literacy is not an absolute term with a universal end goal expressed, for instance, through descriptions of specific skills and skill levels. Rather, as I understand her, physical literacy is an ipsative term that must be seen in relation to the unique potential of each individual. Moreover, physical literacy is concerned with one's embodied sense of self, how one can express oneself in and through movement and how one can enter into empathic relationships with other movers (points D and E). Finally, it follows from point F that being physically literate also means that an individual understands principles of how movement performance can be enhanced, as well as 'the impact of activity on all-round health and well-being' (p.14).

The latter point is potentially problematic given the phenomenological underpinning of physical literacy. The strong focus in physical education on engaging in physical activity to promote health has been criticized for promoting a dualistic view of the body (e.g. Tinning, 2010). Whitehead (2007) herself has conceded that the kind of knowledge involved in this aspect of physical literacy 'moves towards dualism' (p. 292). However, she goes on to observe that ignoring these aspects of our embodied existence would be 'out of the question' (p. 294), and argue that incorporating both aspects is essential to create a robust concept of physical literacy.

Critical comments

Before closing this chapter, I want to raise two major criticisms of the literature on phenomenology and physical education. First, that some of this literature is based on a misinterpretation of phenomenology. Second, that Whitehead's concept of physical literacy suffers not only from this shortcoming, but has expanded to the point that it has lost clarity, particularly when applied to physical education.

The point that some of the literature on phenomenology and physical education has suffered from a misreading of its basic philosophical texts, has already been made by Irena Martinkova and Jim Parry (2011). One example they point to is the confusion of *intentionality* in the phenomenological sense and *intention* in the sense of purposiveness, such as in the term intentional movement. This mistake is found in both Brown and Payne (2009) and Thorburn (2008). Martinkova and Parry argue that this confusion represents

a failure to differentiate between the ontological and the ontic: intentionality in the phenomenological sense means that consciousness is always directed at objects (i.e. that consciousness is transitive). This is one of its universal and ontological features. Thus a phenomenological exploration of intentional movements would be concerned with their eidetic structures, which is quite different from the various and particular intentions of the mover.¹¹ The point here is that a minimum requirement for utilizing phenomenology in the context of physical education must be that the work interprets its basic concepts accurately.

A second problem pointed out by Martinkova and Parry (2011) is an over-reliance on secondary sources, rather than expositions of original works by phenomenologists. Their analysis of two prominent texts on the potential value of phenomenology for the study of sport (Kerry and Armour, 2000, and Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007) shows that at times even the secondary literature cited is not sufficiently informed by philosophy. Their conclusion is harsh:

it is useless to provide a sketchy introductory account of Husserl, Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty (especially when there is no direct textual reference to their work, or with reference only to commentaries) ... Such accounts amount to mere ritual genuflections in the direction of authorities.

(Martinkova and Parry, 2011, p. 195)

Both of the problems raised by Martinkova and Parry indicate that future work on phenomenology and physical education must have a stronger philosophical and conceptual foundation. This was also pointed out by Connolly (1997), who came to a similar conclusion.

The importance of this point can also be illustrated by examining Whitehead's development of the term physical literacy. As the quote from Whitehead (2007) above states, she claims that phenomenology has a 'monist' view of the human condition, which she contrasts to the dualism she identifies in traditional approaches to movement and physical education. Roughly, monism is a metaphysical claim that existence can be explained with reference to one substance, as opposed to the two-substance explanation of dualism. However, it isn't accurate to assert that all phenomenologists have been monists. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, explicitly denied that he was a monist, stating that the ontology he had developed was 'beyond monism and dualism' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 54).

The point here is not so much whether Whitehead is mistaken about the metaphysical claims of phenomenology, but rather that her work opens the door to rejection of phenomenological approaches to understanding human movement in general. For example, in an otherwise excellent article on how human movement can be understood from a post-structuralist perspective, Larsson and Quennerstedt (2012) argue that, 'the major problem with Whitehead's theorizing, from the poststructuralist point of view, *as is the case*

with phenomenologist approaches generally speaking, is the preference for a monist approach to movement as an alternative to the dualist approach' (p. 293, italics added). Even if their critical comments about physical literacy are valuable and plausible (see below), their rejection of all phenomenological approaches to physical education and movement in general is unfounded.

Larsson and Quennerstedt go on to state that they 'are, instead, searching for an epistemological position that is neither dualist nor monist, but, rather, *pluralist*, and where human movement can be understood on the basis of the concrete social situation in which humans are moving, where any movement is performed by / performs somebody' (p. 294, italics in original). I will argue that there is little reason to think that phenomenology does not open up the possibility of an epistemological understanding in which movement is always movement by somebody (see Standal and Engelsrud, 2013). It should also be noted that Larsson and Quennerstedt (2012) are not entirely consistent in their critique of phenomenology, since they also cite with approval Young's work, 'Throwing Like a Girl' (1998), which, contrary to what they seem to believe, is an example of phenomenology's potential to illuminate how human movement is always movement for somebody and cannot be divorced from the social situation in which it takes place.

Other salient criticisms can be levelled against the concept of physical literacy and how it has developed. One is the problematic connotations of the word 'physical'. As scholars have argued in the case of physical education (Arnold, 1979) and, more recently, physical literacy (Kentel and Dobson, 2007), inclusion of the word physical may suggest the dualism that the concept of physical literacy was intended to overcome. Kentel and Dobson (2007) propose *movement* literacy as a more appropriate term. This critique, however, might be seen as more semantic than substantive. Given the amount of space devoted by Whitehead to elaborate on the phenomenological foundation of physical literacy, it is a bit disingenuous to suggest that her use of the term physical literacy implies a dualistic approach.

Two other issues are, as far as I can see, much more pressing than the term applied to the concept. The first, which has also been raised by Larsson and Quennerstedt (2012), concerns the normativity that seems to underlie the concept of physical literacy. As they put it, if physical literacy is something that 'a person achieves and does not have from the beginning; the question can then be posed: literate/illiterate in relation to what?' (p. 294). It should be clear from Whitehead's work that physical literacy is not a congenital disposition or ability – it is something that is developed and learned. Therefore, the question, 'literate in relation to what?' must be answered. Whitehead's response is that physical literacy is not to be judged based on a universal standard. As noted above, she sees it in relationship to the endowment of each individual. However, a focus on endowment can create new problems. As I will discuss in a later chapter, we need to problematize ideas of 'endowment' or 'ability' that understand them primarily as characteristics of an individual. An illustration of the difficulties this perspective creates can be found in one of the chapters

in the anthology on physical literacy, where Gately (2010) asserts that 'overweight and obese children would be considered to have lower levels of physical literacy ... compared to their normal weight peers' (p. 98). First, assessing levels of physical literacy is in itself problematic; it is based on the premise that physical literacy is an ability (or set of abilities) that can be measured against a population norm that expresses how much physical literacy each individual is expected to have. Second, it is difficult to reconcile a focus on each individual's endowment and movement potential with the assertion that obese children by default have low levels of physical literacy.

The second critical point I want to highlight is that the definition of physical literacy has expanded greatly in the decade between 2001 and 2010 (see Whitehead, 2001; 2010). Her definition in the 2001 paper concerned only what became points B and C in the 2010 elaboration, i.e. to move with poise, economy and efficiency in a variety of **challenging situations** and to be perceptive in reading the movement environment.¹² This expansion may be a sign that the term lacks precision. How useful is a concept if its 'defining' characteristics are continually expanding? A related criticism is that some of these additional characteristics attributed to a physically literate person have more to do with public health concerns than with the development of what one normally thinks about in relation to moving with poise, economy and efficiency. For example, Whitehead now includes 'knowledge to maintain physical activity at an individually appropriate level throughout life' (Whitehead, 2007, p. 287). She also puts emphasis on sleep and nutrition as part of physical literacy. It could be objected that including this kind of knowledge at least to some extent blurs the focus on the lived, experiencing body. In addition, including health discourse in the context of physical education has been criticized for objectifying and disembodiment pupils (see, e.g. Tinning, 2010) and, as the obesity example cited above shows, this focus on public health can undermine the very laudable approach of understanding physical literacy in relation to individual endowment, as opposed to a population norm.

A rebuttal to this critique could be that strengthening the case for the vital importance of physical literacy requires recognizing that physical activity is considered an appropriate tool for public health. One could also argue that even if this perspective is, in a sense, a form of objectification, the experience of being objectified is a lived, embodied experience (see Chapter 7). From this perspective, the notion of embodied health (Whitehead, 2010) can be seen as a productive engagement with the public health discourse, which would make sense if Whitehead's ultimate goal is to establish an integrated theoretical justification for physical education (see Loland, 2006).

Even if this is true, I think it is reasonable to argue that in expanding her definition of physical literacy, Whitehead is drawing on ideas and ways of thinking that do not comport with a phenomenological approach. From this perspective, I would argue that in the context of school physical education, her narrower 2001 definition of physical literacy is more useful. My reasoning is related to Kirk's (2010) discussions of alternatives to the multi-activity,

physical-education-as-sport techniques that he asserts are standard practice in physical education. Kirk's alternative is a models-based physical education approach, in which different models such as sports education and health-based physical education are used to create a programme that pupils would consider both coherent and relevant. Kirk (2013) argues that physical literacy can be one such model, but that at present, it remains 'a philosophy in search of a pedagogical model' (p. 979). Serving as a useful theoretical framework would not require that physical literacy incorporate all forms of justification arguments. Rather, it might be more useful if its advocates focused on its strengths and left health issues to other physical education frameworks. Not only that, physical literacy might be a more influential concept if it were developed in depth rather than in breadth.

By going back to the phenomenological basis of physical literacy, this book attempts to provide both a strengthened philosophical foundation for this concept and guidance toward developing a pedagogical model based on it. I will, however, use the term 'movement literacy' rather than physical literacy to avoid potential misunderstandings related to the dualism use of the word physical might generate, and, more importantly, to distinguish my conceptual framework from Whitehead's more recent iterations of her concept of physical literacy. At the same time, my debt to her path-breaking work should be clear, beginning with her original definition of physical literacy:

The individual 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.

(Whitehead, 2001, p. 131)

Notes

- 1 Philosophy is also sometimes used to mean some sort of personal orientation in life, but this is of course very different from the academic study of philosophy.
- 2 I must point out, however, that phenomenology does not find its expression in definitions, but rather in how it is applied in practice (Reeder, 2010).
- 3 There are lots of examples of drinking from cups in the phenomenological literature, perhaps because the coffee cup is very ready to hand for armchair philosophers. Husserl is supposed to have said, 'give me a cup of coffee and I shall make phenomenology out of it' (Moran, 2005).
- 4 In addition to Reeder (2010), Zahavi (2003a) and Moran (2005) are widely recognized as providing valuable introductions to the work of Husserl.
- 5 I use the 2002 edition of *Phenomenology of Perception*. A new English language translation of the book was published 2013, and for Merleau-Ponty aficionados there might be some nuances in the language. For the purpose of this book, these details shouldn't worry us.
- 6 Here, one should remember that 'science' at that time meant natural science.

- 7 Merleau-Ponty attributes this expression of wonder in the face of the world to Eugen Fink, one of Husserl's assistants.
- 8 According to Merleau-Ponty (2002), phenomenology can be thought of as a 'style of thinking, that existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy' (p. viii).
- 9 The term was not coined by Whitehead, who credits it to Ruth Morrison.
- 10 The same attributes also appear in Whitehead (2007), albeit in a slightly different order.
- 11 It is important to note here that we are talking about phenomenological in a philosophical sense. Conceivably, one could study student experiences of intentional, purposive movements using phenomenological research methods. Martinkova and Parry (2011) would be critical of the use of the term phenomenological to characterize empirical, qualitative research. In addition, the object of study is then not intentionality in the philosophical sense, but the experience that (some) students have when they engage in activities involving purposive movement.
- 12 More specifically: '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' (Whitehead, 2001, p. 131).

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3 Phenomenology and practical knowledge

In this chapter I will pursue the idea that phenomenology can be a useful resource for understanding practical knowledge in the field of physical education. I will proceed by examining the history of how practical knowledge has emerged as central to debates surrounding physical education, in particular when it comes to legitimizing its place in the school curriculum. Continuing from that, I will draw on Svenaeus' (2009) argument that phenomenology can be a theory for practical knowledge. An elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological study of embodied learning will then be used to illustrate the relevance of phenomenology to the practical knowledge involved in movement.

Practical knowledge in physical education

Practical knowledge has been a theme of interest for philosophers of physical education for many years (e.g. Arnold, 1988; Carr, 1981; Parry, 1998; Reid, 1998; Stolz, 2014). One important reason for the interest in practical knowledge has been to provide arguments that can justify the value of physical education in school curricula. In particular, the work of the philosopher of education Richard Peters has had a profound influence on the thinking about the educational value of physical education and the knowledge claims that can be made on behalf of the subject.

According to the early work of Peters from the late 1960s, the subject matter of physical education did not have the necessary cognitive and theoretical content to be considered educationally valuable. Indeed, the claim was made that 'there is very little to know' about physical activity skills (Peters, 1970, p. 45, as quoted by MacAllister, 2013, p. 913). McNamee (2005) summarized Peters' thesis and its effect thus:

education, properly conceived, referred to the initiation of the unlearned into those intrinsically worthwhile forms of knowledge that were constitutive of rational mind. Its shorthand was that education referred essentially to the development of rationality. Despite the hugely influential educational efforts of muscular Christianity, physical education enjoyed little more than a Cinderella existence, even in British education, throughout the