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Operationalizing Physical Literacy: Special Issue Editorial

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Abstract

Physical literacy has been described as a “longed for concept” and has in turn gained much interest worldwide. This interest has also given rise for calls for physical literacy to be operationalized, providing clarity and guidance on developing physical literacy informed practice. Operationalizing physical literacy is crucial in moving the concept forward by providing “substance to the claims made by (physical literacy) advocates.” This special issue aims to respond to calls for research to “unpack” physical literacy across a number of areas in pursuit of operationalizing physical literacy in practice. Nine articles are included within this special issue.

Keywords: physical activity, physical education, practice

The concept of physical literacy is increasing in popularity in both policy and practice in the fields of sport, health, education, and recreation in several countries around the globe (Lundvall, 2015; Jurbala, 2015). With this increased popularity, so too are the calls for research in relation to clarifying the concept and research in practice. Such research is required to catalyze the operationalization process of physical literacy from theory into practice within a variety of industries and fields. This special issue aims to add clarity in relation to what physical literacy is and what it looks like in practice.

In the first article, Shearer et al. (2018) consider the various definitions of physical literacy that are currently adopted internationally. The authors consulted a range of physical literacy experts, relevant literature, and appropriate media platforms, from which seven leading groups across the United Kingdom, Canada, United States, New Zealand, and Australia were identified as having established physical literacy initiatives. Although each group identified was unified in using the term physical literacy, there were contrasting definitions and interpretations of the concept in use. Common themes or issues were identified across groups, including (a) the influence of physical literacy philosophy, (b) the core elements of physical literacy, (c) the lifelong nature of physical literacy, and (d) the need to scientifically pursue a robust operationalization of the concept. The authors recommend that moving forward, future physical literacy research and programs should provide a definition, a clear

philosophical approach, and transparency with how their actions align with their definition and philosophical approach.

Pot, Whitehead, and Durden-Myers (2018) present an overview of the philosophical foundations of physical literacy in the second article. These are identified as monism, existentialism, and phenomenology. After having set out the key elements of each of these philosophical schools of thought, the authors broadly examine the implications of each to practice. Monism embraces a commitment to the individual as a whole rather than being comprised of separate parts. Significant here is the body/mind split. This has implications regarding teachers' interactions with the individual, who should never be treated as just an object. Existentialism argues that our nature develops as a result of our cumulative interactions with the world. This suggests that a wide variety of activity contexts are important in providing a rich context in which to foster physical literacy. Phenomenological views set out the position that each individual perceives the world from a particular standpoint that has come into being as a result of all previous experiences. This view alerts teachers to the uniqueness of each learner, and thus, the need for differentiation in teaching. These philosophical bases underpin many of the issues in physical literacy and will be referred to in a number of other articles in this special issue.

In the third article, Whitehead, Durden-Myers, and Pot (2018) examine the value of fostering physical literacy. The value of fostering physical literacy is explored from a number of disciplinary areas in the first section of this article. Areas considered include philosophy, neuroscience, social justice, human development, psychology, and sociocultural studies. In each case, developments in the disciplinary area that give credence to the importance of physical literacy are presented. The second section of this article looks at the value of fostering physical literacy from the perspective of the learners and includes issues such as developing confidence and enhancing knowledge and understanding. The final section addresses the issue of physical literacy being of value in its own right. This refutes the belief that physical activity has little, if any, intrinsic value and is best considered as a means to other educational ends

In the fourth article, Durden-Myers, Green, and Whitehead (2018) consider the implications for teachers of physical education aiming to adopt physical literacy as the focus of their teaching. Recommendations for physical education teaching practice including pedagogical strategies, assessment design, and curriculum planning are explored, as well as philosophical implications for practice. This article aims to provide exemplification of how physical literacy can be operationalized in teaching practice.

Green, Roberts, Sheehan, and Keegan (2018) address the issue of assessing physical literacy in the fifth article. This article highlights that for physical literacy to be embraced by the physical education profession, there is an urgent need to articulate appropriate means of assessment, or the charting of progress, without which learning cannot be monitored and managed. Any significant behavior change needs to be pertinent to an individual, indicating progress from a previous assessment event. The authors suggest that measuring fundamental movement skills and creation of norms have dominated early forms of assessment regarding physical literacy. However, this approach undermines the holistic and integrative conception of physical literacy as it was intended. Although recognizing that

physical literacy is a concept pertaining to the whole life span, this article focuses on charting progress in school settings (5–18 years). Furthermore, this article highlights the importance of attending to the affective and cognitive domains of physical literacy, as well as the physical aspects in terms of addressing the truly holistic nature of the concept. This article also reviews and reflects on current strategies that are being employed to measure physical literacy, in relation to their relevance and adherence to the philosophy underpinning the concept. The authors suggest nonprescriptive guidance for future efforts to chart progress that will effectively contribute to the development of each individual's physical literacy. The authors conclude by discussing the mechanisms that encourage individuals to chart and reflect on their own unique journey, while facilitating the intrinsic motivation to continue along that journey. Finally, in light of their reflections on charting progress, the authors encourage the development of approaches that adhere to the integrity of the concept and provide secure support for experiences that enable every individual to make progress on their physical literacy journey.

Cale and Harris (2018) consider the role of knowledge and understanding in fostering physical literacy in the sixth article. The authors address three areas of knowledge and understanding. These are knowledge and understanding of movement and movement activities, knowledge and understanding of health and fitness, and knowledge and understanding of the value of physical activity in life. This includes some detailed materials of the expectations in this field as recommended in the English national curriculum. This article concludes with a debate on the curriculum planning and pedagogical approaches that can foster the understanding and knowledge that form a key role in fostering physical literacy.

In the seventh article, Robinson, Randall, and Barrett (2018) explore how the initial introduction of physical literacy as well as its subsequent uptake has not been without disagreement and has been marked at times by uncertainty, confusion, or resistance (Lounsbury & McKenzie, 2015). This article reports on a qualitative case study in which 12 lead physical education teachers from four Canadian provinces were interviewed, whereby the researchers aimed to gain knowledge about physical education teachers' understanding of physical literacy. Results suggest that these leaders are largely unable to articulate conceptions of physical literacy that are in line with contemporary perspectives espoused by Margaret Whitehead, the International Physical Literacy Association, and Canada's Physical Literacy Consensus Statement. In light of these findings, a discussion about these physical literacy (mis)understandings is also offered.

In the eighth article, Flemons, Diffey, and Cunliffe (2018) discuss teacher preparation in relation to encouraging and empowering future teachers to appreciate the potential and value of adopting physical literacy as the goal of physical education. This article addresses the issue of the role of schools and teacher training programs in developing the next generation of physical education teachers. Of particular concern is the introduction of the concept of physical literacy and the work that may need to be done to encourage those entering the profession to reassess their perception of the nature and role of physical education in school. In respect to the development of personal philosophies relating to teaching physical education, three phases are identified: the anticipatory phase, which is from birth to the start of Physical Education Teacher Education; the professional phase,

which covers the period of Physical Education Teacher Education; and the organizational phase, which takes place throughout the time the teacher is working in the field. The discussion acknowledges the problem of changing attitudes given the long established and little challenged focus on traditional games, movement skill teaching, and a generally competitive ambience of teaching physical education.

Finally, in the ninth article, Durden-Myers, Whitehead, and Pot (2018) propose that the concept of physical literacy is being embraced worldwide, in part due to the contribution physical literacy may have in nurturing human flourishing. This article discusses the relationship between physical literacy and human flourishing in detail, unveiling what value this connection may hold in promoting physical literacy as an element integral in enhancing the quality of life. Aspects of human flourishing are presented and then are examined alongside physical literacy. These aspects include characteristics of human flourishing, such as the requirement that it is objectively good, inclusive, and individualized. In addition, human flourishing is seen as agent dependent, self-directed, and socially constructed. The authors suggest that synergies between physical literacy and human flourishing are not hard to find, and this gives credence to the growing adoption of physical literacy as a valuable human capability.

In summary, this special issue aims to draw attention to areas that need further exploration to continue to drive the concept forward and continue to move toward the goal of nurturing physical literacy in practice. All authors acknowledge the need for empirical evidence to substantiate the impact physical literacy may have in developing a renewed approach to physical education. The International Physical Literacy Association and the contributing authors of this special issue extend their appreciation to the *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* for encouraging the creation of this special issue. It is hoped that this special issue may stimulate future research in driving the concept forward both conceptually and, more importantly, in practice.

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