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## BLOG: Semantics: 'physical education' vs 'physical literacy'



11th Oct 16

by Timothy Lynch, Plymouth University (UK)

Is physical literacy (PL) a clever way to promote physical education (PE) or has it further confused teachers? A recent study by Lynch and Soukup (2016) found that labels such as 'physical literacy' are counterproductive in their efforts to promote movement in schools. The following is written using excerpts from this publication.

### Quality Physical Education (QPE)

Quality Physical Education (QPE) is described by Lynch (2005) as: a lifelong process; not constrained to the boundaries of schools although PE is placed at the core of this approach; prioritises health; plays a dominant role in the development of the whole person; involves quality and diverse PE learning opportunities and instruction; requires enthusiastic, confident and competent teachers; interest in the child's activities are shown by significant others; children have positive and encouraging physical and social experiences enabling them to develop optimistic views and motivation for the physical (confidence and attitude);

Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) are developed in the early years of school; is developmentally appropriate; lessons and programme are engaging and enjoyable; and lessons are inclusive, enabling all participants to succeed (competence). The purpose and benefits of quality PE include; "Promoting intrinsic motivation, enhancing perceived physical competence, and creating a mastery-oriented environment will increase students' enjoyment of physical activity." (Alderman, Beighle & Pangrazzi, 2006, p. 41).

### **Introducing physical literacy**

Physical literacy is not a new term with references made in the early 1900s and again in the late 1950s (Corbin, 2016). Earlier definitions of PL referred to being able to read or write (Corbin, 2016) but "in its broadest context 'literacy' means becoming educated" (Richards, 2016, p. 1). Physical education has been well known in the past as 'education through the physical' (Corbin, 2016, p. 14), hence, there are strong links between the semantics 'literacy' and 'education' (Lounsbery & McKenzie, 2015). Furthermore, the term 'literacy' is not unique to the physical dimension with labels such as science literacy, history literacy, geography literacy, numeracy literacy, religious literacy and even 'literacy literacy' being used in education circles.

Corbin warns of using such terms as physical literacy, health literacy, games literacy, movement literacy and sports literacy; "If one of the proposed benefits of the term physical literacy is to make the public more aware, the relationship between physical literacy and 'other' literacies must be clarified. Flooding the public with many different but related terms would seem to be confusing to the general public and to professionals." (Corbin, 2016, p. 19).

Quality PE components were reinstated as the key qualities of the new-old term PL. Common themes that are identified by Richards in literature are that "Physical Literacy is a lifelong process, that acquisition (competence) of fundamental movement skills is a core component, and that it embraces knowledge, attitudes and motivations that facilitate confident movement." (2016, p. 1). Understandably, PL would appear as an inspiring discovery for non-educationalists or those not familiar with the history of PE, specifically QPE. Lounsbery & McKenzie (2015, pp. 143-144) caution the use of physical literacy for it is perceived as supplementing the already unclear learning area.

the term physical literacy was adopted in the national K-12 PE standards [US] without either widespread consultation among professionals or market research. To date, its adoption has generally been substantiated on the bases that it will help to elevate the profession by providing increased clarity and by coming into line with current general education trends. We fully agree that PE needs clarity. However, to date there is no evidence that using and promoting the term physical literacy will help. There are currently very few peer review publications on physical literacy and none of these are data based.

### **Conclusion**

Literature identifies the confusion that PL has on teachers and students which were findings of the study by Lynch & Soukup (2016). Corbin informs us that classroom teachers in primary

schools in many countries are often responsible for PE implementation, many who have limited confidence, competence and time (Dinan-Thomson, 2009; Griggs, 2012; Lynch, 2013). It is of concern that confusion surrounding terms such as 'literacy' and 'education' may further impede teachers' ability to educate through the physical. "Combined we have spent over 60 years investigating ways to improve physical education, and we are fairly certain that adopting a new label will not address the barriers that hinder it." (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2016, p. 2). For this reason it would be recommended that the original term 'QPE' be advocated globally for education clarity, defined in international policy as:

movement competence to structure thinking, express feelings, and enrich understanding. Through competition and cooperation, learners appreciate the role of rule structures, conventions, values, performance criteria and fair play, and celebrate each other's varying contributions, as well as appreciating the demands and benefits of teamwork. Additionally, the learner understands how to recognize and manage risk, to fulfill assigned tasks, and to accept responsibility for their own behaviour. They learn how to cope with both success and failure, and how to evaluate performance against their own and other's previous achievements. It is through these learning experiences that QPE provides exposure to clear, consistent values and reinforces pro-social behaviour through participation and performance. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 14).

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