

OPERATIONALISING PHYSICAL LITERACY

FACTORS TO CONSIDER FOR WHOLE SCHOOL PLANNING: LESSONS LEARNT AT THE COAL FACE

Simon Padley [afPE member]

I have recently had the privilege of moving back into full-time secondary education having been a senior lecturer for over ten years researching, teaching and writing about concepts around pedagogy, youth sport development and physical literacy. This has presented an exciting and challenging opportunity to fully operationalise my years of theorising into effective practice that doesn't just constitute a short-term intervention or action research project. This article will reflect upon the journey I have been on in contributing to a whole school programme based around physical literacy whilst wrestling with the often-juxtaposed priorities of participation versus performance. I will attempt to outline some of the challenges of compartmentalising approaches to physical literacy and identify a model of factors that will help practitioners to consider the impact of the philosophical premises of physical literacy on whole school planning, pedagogy and teaching behaviours.

Physical literacy is a concept developed by Margaret Whitehead and most recently described as “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life.” (IPLA, 2017). It is a philosophically based concept founded on the ideas of body and mind as one (monism) and that we are shaped and find meaning through all our personal choices and interactions in life (existentialism). (This is a grand oversimplification of these concepts so please explore them further through Whitehead's vast body

of work.) Physical literacy finds traction in educational/developmental settings through the multifaceted nature of one's development (e.g. developing the whole person through physical activity and sport) and the strong connection to the impact of positive physical literacy characteristics upon long-term engagement in sport.

As such, physical literacy is a term now commonly adopted in educational and developmental settings, although not always commonly understood. Too often it finds itself isolated in the philosophical ivory towers of academia or reduced, at the coal face, to an isolated practical outworking of the concept in a scheme of work, e.g. fundamental movement skills. To this end, Almond (2013) challenges the concept of physical literacy to justify its value away from the philosophical into practical contexts for both the individual pupil/athlete, as embodied self, and the professional(s) and systems 'delivering' the physical literacy agenda. This article locates itself within an increasingly challenging teaching and coaching context whereby teachers/coaches are tasked with developing positive lifelong pupil/athlete outcomes juxtaposed with the pressures of developing talent and performance-based results (Collins *et al*, 2009; Taylor and Garrett, 2010; Padley and Vinson, 2013; Vinson, Padley and Jeffreys, 2012).

Contextually, government policy has remained focused on competitive sport environments and the potential of competition to provide a rich platform for the holistic development of pupils/athletes including opportunities for self-

discovery, experiencing excellence, health and wellbeing benefits, and building social and moral attributes (Watson and White, 2007; Trimble *et al*, 2010; Petitpas *et al*, 2005; Collins *et al*, 2009) and yet research identifies that competitive contexts are challenged by issues of pupil/athlete burn out and drop out (Bean *et al*, 2014; Crane and Temple, 2015; Côté *et al*, 2007). Most people have no issue with the potential of youth sport/physical education contexts to provide positive opportunities for holistic development, e.g. the 4 Cs of coaching: character, competence, connection and confidence (Côté and Gilbert, 2009), and these characteristics have stimulated a body of work around the concept of positive youth development (Côté and Gilbert, 2009; Bailey and Ross, 2009; Bennie and O'Connor, 2010) with characteristics closely aligned to definition(s) of physical literacy. However, recent work from Allen *et al*, (2017) through a meta-analysis of positive youth development and physical literacy, has called for research attempting to understand physical literacy supporting coaching practice, pedagogy and environment design.

So what do we focus on in order to design whole school programmes that support the building of mass *confidence* in order to enable long-term participation, physical *competencies* in order to facilitate individuals to have choice across a breadth of activity types, and *knowledge* and *understanding* to make informed autonomous choices in the present and future whilst still enabling students to thrive in competitive environments?

MOTIVATION

A potential solution would appear to start where the definition of physical literacy begins, with the concept of motivation. If we can create environments whereby pupils/athletes are highly intrinsically motivated to take part in sessions, we are most likely to have the time and opportunity to develop the other facets so important in developing the physically literate pupil/athlete. We know our role in managing climates affects meaningful engagement (Keegan *et al*, 2009), the creation of positive psychological, behavioural and performance-related outcomes (Bartholomew *et al*, 2007) and the facilitation of enjoyment, effort, persistence and wellbeing, to name just a few facets (Amorose and Butcher, 2007). At its best, humanity is curious, adventurous and critical. Flourishing individuals have a sense of choice and are inspired, striving to learn and master themselves (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Such outcomes are often the reported benefits of a successful physical education or activity programme, which can be significantly aided by developing autonomy-supportive environments (e.g. Balaguer *et al*, 2012; Conroy and Coatsworth, 2007).

Deci and Ryan have spent over two decades identifying the key components of environments that stimulate motivated individuals through their theory of self-determination. They articulate the need for three facets to exist in any environment: autonomy (a sense of choice), competence (a sense that people can achieve the task at hand, based on current abilities) and relatedness (a sense of connectedness to and belonging with those they are working with). To develop effective whole school approaches to physical activity, education and sport, we must find the factors that can best facilitate self-determined

characteristics. Recently I have presented a model whereby three major facets sit around the outside of motivation (See diagram 1). These facets are those that contribute most directly to developing these three aspects of self-determination theory and if any one of these pieces doesn't contribute to the overall aims, I believe the outcomes are compromised.

This article will now outline the major factors in system planning that must function synergistically in order to afford the best opportunity for the development of physical literacy. I will briefly endeavour to articulate lessons learnt in each of these spheres of how best to maximise effective planning and practice.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

Recent work, internationally, has identified the need for leadership philosophies, styles and consequent behaviours to move from traditional linear, transactional methods to something more transformational. Transformational leadership itself has a growing traction amongst researchers looking for the most effective styles to develop highly motivated teams and individuals (see Turnnidge and Côté for an expanded body of emerging work). Transformational leadership emphasises the importance of the individual in the process, focusing on leaders developing other leaders through the four I's of leadership. Leaders should aim to demonstrate the following:

- *Idealised influence*: leaders lead by example, modelling the behaviours they expect of pupils/athletes.
- *Inspirational motivation*: leaders believe in the potential of their pupils/athletes to achieve the task at hand, setting appropriate shared goals and tasks.

- *Intellectual stimulation*: pupils/athletes are highly involved in the process of knowledge development and are empowered to make choices.
- *Individualised consideration*: leaders ensure the individual is at the heart of the process.

(Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999)

Transformational leadership represents one of a number of effective leadership models emerging based on authentic, philosophically based assets rather than just a set of behaviours. Robert Greenleaf's work around servant leadership emphasises the need not to fall into a pattern of behaviours to increase productivity but rather to do the right things because of the right set of values. Greenleaf's model describes a set of values on which behaviours can be founded, such as listening, empathy, awareness, foresight and the commitment to the growth of others.

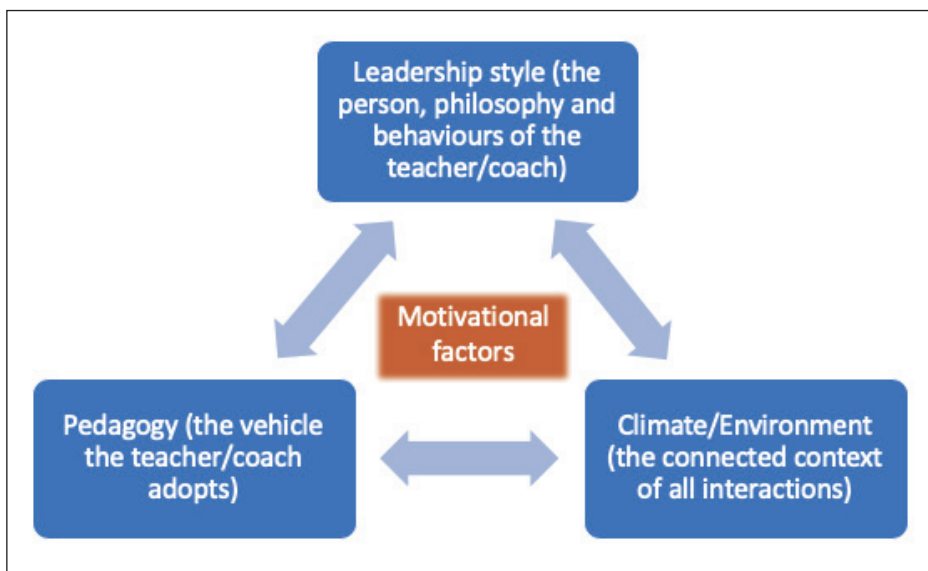
In building climates for highly motivated individuals, we must adopt a philosophy that places the individual first, believes in their ability to succeed whilst allowing for pupil/athlete autonomy and relatedness through shared goals and tasks. This doesn't require one set of behaviours but a teacher who starts from the perspective of serving the needs of those in their care before individual competitive goals that commodify pupils/athletes into dispensable pieces in a performance jigsaw.

If pedagogy and environment are planned appropriately but delivered by transactional leaders who value extrinsic factors beyond individuals, then the long-term aspects of pupils' confidence and retention will be compromised. Similarly, the most impressively designed curriculum which doesn't allow for student autonomy or differentiation will reduce intrinsic motivation within and across sessions.

PEDAGOGY

Leadership philosophies that support pupil autonomy are compromised when faced with rigid pedagogical models based on narrow fields of skill development. Much work has been done over the last decades to develop, refine and revisit pedagogical practice models that better support student and athlete learning and retention. However, a number of authors have still challenged the sector to move away from linear, transactional pedagogical approaches (Padley and Vinson, 2013; Jones *et al*, 2009; Cushion, 2003). Learning is complex (Jones, 2006), chaotic (Bowes and Jones, 2006), and multifaceted

Diagram 1.



(Turnnidge and Côté, 2017) and effective pedagogical practice is not just about what practitioners do, it's also about how they do it (Becker, 2009; Erickson and Côté, 2016). The 'how' can refer to the method (e.g. verbal interactions, demonstrations, or environmental cues) and tone (e.g. emotion, motivation, leadership) of pedagogical behaviours. Additionally, this can relate to how activities are structured (e.g. patterns, consistency) and who is on the receiving end of practitioner curricula and behaviours (Turnnidge and Côté, 2017). Too often curricula and pedagogic approaches focus on the competence element of physical activity and not the more holistic development of knowledge, social and emotional attributes and enjoyment.

If leaders are willing and able to adopt transformational leadership perspectives and values, but are hamstrung by a curriculum focused narrowly on physical skill competence (even fundamental skills), then pupils will immediately measure competence based on their ability to excel at a skill they may have little or no experience within. Skill-based curricula often start from the perspective of teacher as sole expert and students as incompetent other. We have probably all experienced the look on pupils' faces when, however transformationally we may have delivered it, they hear our lesson objectives and

appear to have already decided they may not achieve them. What emerging pedagogical models seem to share is their adoption of concepts as the primary curriculum learning outcomes with skill development being individualised based on pupils' endowment to solve the problem from their own foundations. Having lived the change from a skill-based to a concept-based hockey curriculum, I can attest to the positive motivational impact this has had upon a wide spectrum of ages and stages of development. This has been particularly effective in that many of the pupils coming to our programmes have little or no previous experience of the sport. Our pupils look confident, are willing to have a go at our games and challenges and are willing to refine their skills within the context of solving the problems at hand. At the performance end of the spectrum, pupils have avoided team labels (e.g. "I am a first team player") due to their ability to solve problems even without the same skill-base as someone exposed to more practice time. Therefore, we have enjoyed a greater sense of community and much bigger squads of players regularly interchanging.

However, a transformational leader with good pedagogical factors supporting their practice can still be derailed when the poisoned chalice of a factor such as fixtures presents itself.

CLIMATE/ENVIRONMENT

This article has challenged practitioners and system designers to consider a triad of factors that all need to operate in synergy to enable the physical education professional to have the best possible platform for developing long-term physical literacy outcomes in pupils. We have discussed pedagogical approaches and leadership philosophies that can support motivational climates; however, fixtures and competition often turn the transformational into the damaging. I have witnessed first-hand teachers and coaches mutate from caring, gentle practitioners to something representing a vocal jack-in-the-box constantly popping up to shock and derail the young people playing the game due to an overemphasis on a score line as a determining factor in progress. Whilst I am not against competition per se, I am aware of the damage that inappropriately conceptualised competitive environments can have on the confidence, competence and long-term motivation of young people in sport.

Competition is an explicit part of our national curriculum and authors such as Bergmann-Drewe (1998) and Torres and Hagar (2012) have written extensively about the potential of competition to provide a rich environment for wrestling with holistic aspects of development



but without guarantee of these always ending positively. Watson and White (2007) articulate that often competition starts with the perspective of opponent-as-enemy and the encounter as warlike and such encounters will inevitably reconfigure the learning environment to commodify pupils as pieces on a chess board to be traded for the potential of victory. Competition appropriately conceptualised is the mutual pursuit of excellence and a working together towards realising our personal and corporate best. As such, the primary focus of such encounters in an educational setting must be learning. This opens up fixtures to a wonderful spectrum of opportunities that we are beginning to explore in our programmes. One example is where we have invited teams to join with us in mixing up teams between schools to challenge pupils to learn social skills, how to interact with others, how to lead and be led and collaborate towards common goals. Such opportunities take the pressure off pupils to win as it is no longer *school against school* but *school with school* in a tapestry of learning.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES FROM OUR SCHOOL

WILL PARKER: DIRECTOR OF SPORT

At a high level, the concept of physical literacy is widely accepted, and yet there is still not consensus around its nuances. As a sector we still undertake much discussion and debate about the finer details of physical literacy. If we are still debating the finer details, then we shouldn't expect the lay person to be fully au fait with the concept.

Given this, gaining whole school buy-in beyond a simple acknowledgement of 'ABCs' or 'fundamentals' can be challenging. Recruiting (and educating) advocates at all levels is a commonly adopted approach, but it's not straightforward, especially if the advocates will need to get their hands dirty to enable system change (which they invariably will). We also need to remember that, despite our unwavering faith in the importance and value of physical activity, there are many important factors for schools to consider and physical literacy is just one of these. With that in mind, our focus in gaining buy-in should be the ultimate outcome of a well-rounded physical literacy approach: long-term positive engagement.

A key factor in the buy-in we have gained has been the physical activity guidelines published by the UK Chief Medical Officers

(CMOs), which are so much more than a daily prescription. If one can take any positives from the current worldwide crisis [the Coronavirus pandemic], it is that the position of the CMOs is much more widely understood; this adds weight to their recommendation of one hour of physical activity per day and is slowly moving us towards an activity version of 'five a day'. This is not the answer in and of itself, but is an incredibly useful tool in our ongoing mission to create physically literate young people. We are committed to enabling our pupils to relish the opportunity to be physically active across a wide spectrum of opportunities and spaces.

PENNY THOMAS: HEAD OF CURRICULUM PE

There have been numerous challenges in navigating whole school planning towards physical literacy outcomes. At the beginning, the biggest challenge was convincing a department of teachers that this was the way forward. There was a lot of fear that, by reducing time spent on traditional sports, we would affect our performance in fixtures. Once staff were on board with the changes, we then faced the challenge of adapting the way we teach and what we teach. A degree of upskilling happened, and staff have become really good at delivering sessions to target a wide spectrum of outcomes from different developmental domains. We are fortunate to have amazing facilities, a large department and support for implementing such a culture change so that delivery is made easier and pupils get maximum impact in lessons.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has attempted to outline the need for all parts of an educational environment to function synergistically to best support the aspirations of physical literacy. The challenge is that any one of these factors working outside the overall aims can negate the work of the others. Pedagogical approaches and leadership may be transformational but a focus on results will stamp on learning and confidence. Similarly, the philosophically transformational leader chained to a narrow, competence-based curriculum will see pupils struggling to build confidence in their ability to succeed when presented with a skill beyond their reach. The challenge is to find the time and space to step back from our programmes and view the landscape in its entirety; this will help us to align all the pieces to develop motivated, confident, competent and knowledgeable pupils who stick with sport and physical activity throughout their life course. ■

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Simon Padley is Head of Hockey at Cheltenham Ladies College and Vice Chair of the International Physical Literacy Association.