

Opening the Door to Physical Literacy

By Brian Lewis, Sean Lessard, & Lee Schaefer

A young boy, we will call him Darcy, steps off the bus. His excitement cannot be contained as he speaks, in a very loud voice, about how much fun it is going to be at laser tag today. I am close behind him as he takes off and runs for the door. Darcy reaches for the door, pulls it open and takes two steps backward while still holding the door. He smiles and makes a gesture with his arm for me to go through the door. He continues to hold the door for each and every one of his classmates as they race to be first in line. Trailing behind everyone, he shuts the door, stomps the snow off his boots onto the rug, and continues on like nothing out of the ordinary has happened. He will now be the last to pick his alias name, last to get his activation card, and last to pick out his laser gun. He doesn't seem to mind.

Like many authors focusing on physical literacy, this piece begins with how physical literacy has been defined by the field. Whitehead (2010) defines physical literacy as “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to maintain physical activity throughout the lifecourse” (p. 5). While Whitehead’s definition, cited by many working in the area of physical literacy, seems quite straightforward, as we inquire into this definition further we are struck by the holistic nature it seems to embody. As we think back to the beginning narrative, we wonder if something as simple as holding a door can create a space for movement, a space to enhance physical literacy?

It seems Whitehead was on to this, as her definition of physical literacy includes cri-

teria that go far beyond fundamental skills and abilities. Yet, when the terms physical and literacy are put beside one another, based on the signifiers that we often hear used, it would seem that if you can move efficiently you are physically literate. In some ways the phrase physical literacy handcuffs us, from a language standpoint, into defining physical literacy as simply being able to move, like being literate signifies that you can read.

At the recent 2014 Association Internationale des Ecoles Superieures d’Education Physique world congress conference in Auckland, New Zealand, which co-author Lee Schaefer attended, Margaret Whitehead provided further insight into what physical literacy is: “In short, physical literacy is an inclusive concept which can be described

The use of “I” is in reference to co-author Brian Lewis, who is the program coordinator of the Growing Young Movers after school program.



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as a disposition to capitalize on our human embodied capability” (Almond, Whitehead, Macdonald, Keegan, & Keegan, 2014).

At one time, we found ourselves focusing on the idea of moving with “confidence and physical competence.” We thought that by teaching the fundamental movement skills in new and unique ways, children and youth would become better movers.

We are still convinced that children and youth need to be confident and competent in the fundamental movement skills, however, we have also come to see that reducing physical literacy to fundamental movement skills neglects the “consideration of the affective and cognitive elements of the concept” (Almond et al., 2014). Thinking about physical literacy as a disposition as opposed to a set of skills awakens us to the holistic nature of physical literacy. Whitehead’s further conceptualizations of what physical literacy is, and perhaps is not, resonates strongly with our experiences of working alongside 25 urban aboriginal youth over the past seven months.

We created a program that would provide wellness activities in a community school. Each Tuesday and Thursday after school, the club meets for a wellness experience

that includes various physical education activities. Students are engaged in a variety of activities within the gymnasium space that would emulate a quality, planned, and purposeful learning experience. Three times a month our club travels off-site to locations within the city. These outings allow students to transfer the knowledge they have learned in the program about personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 2011) to real-life settings. Examples of places we have travelled to include museums, a science centre, bowling alleys, tobogganing hills, and snowshoeing paths.

Returning now to the consideration of the affective and cognitive elements of physical literacy, we continue to wonder about the complexities of physical literacy. Can we enhance the physical literacy levels within the club without considering the social and emotional well-being of the youth? Is it possible to teach the fundamental movement skills if a relationship has not been established? Early on in the program, we had an idea of how things may look and how things may be, based on our previous experiences. We had lesson plans created, activities chosen, and equipment purchased. We were going to teach the participants how to move. We think back to an experience early on in the program that has stayed with us:

The school bell rings to signal the end of an early September school day. Darcy, along with a handful of classmates, scurries to the gymnasium to see what this new after school club is all about. As he enters the gymnasium, I greet Darcy for the first time. I could feel the nervous energy Darcy exuded as he tried to make sense of this space and who I was within it. I invited Darcy to play with any of the new equipment I had laid out on the floor. Darcy’s attention centered on a bright yellow ball sitting in a large black bag. Others from the Grade 3 and 4 classrooms that had arrived earlier were already moving around the gymnasium tossing fleece balls, volleying beach balls, and foot dribbling soccer balls; however, nothing else seemed to matter to Darcy in this moment. As he slowly approached the bag, I could see the excitement in his eyes. Before he reached the yellow ball, another club member unknowingly grabbed ‘Darcy’s ball.’ His response was filled with emotion. Anger and dismay filled his face and took over his body in this unexpected moment. He ran to the corner of the gym and hid his face. Darcy was dejected, and I was at a loss.

This experience is formative. It’s a teaching, a reminder. If we want to work on enhancing the physical skills of the youth in this program, we need to first slow down. We need to be awake. We need to pay attention. We cannot be pre-occupied with the

teaching of movement without thinking about the affective domain, about the lives of the participants. We need to be attentive to who we are in relation to the youth in the club. Until a relationship is formed, we truly wonder if we can teach the physical. At that moment, did Darcy need to learn the proper techniques to volley or dribble a ball, or did he need to feel safe and comfortable within the space? Did he need to see Brian as a teacher of movement focused on completing the lesson, or did he need to feel a space, a space that was responsive and attentive?

Seven months have passed since I first met Darcy. He continues to attend the club each week, greeting me with a hello, a smile, and often a hug. We continue to learn more about each other every week. When I work with Darcy, and all the club members, I continue to consider the implications of physical liter-

cy being a disposition as opposed to a set of skills. The lesson plans that were impossible to implement in September are now being actualized. The students are developing their fundamental movement skills. I see students as more confident in an activity setting. I see them as more competent as they partake in a variety of movement experiences. But I also see a community that supports the affective and cognitive aspects that must be attended to prior to teaching physical skills. I have slowed down in my process. By doing this, the youth and I have created a space where I am now a club member alongside them, not a program coordinator or teacher of them. Perhaps we cannot develop movement until we have developed a relationship. I return now to the opening narrative. Can we consider opening a door a measure of physical literacy? As I reflect on this once again, I wonder: has Darcy 'opened a door' to movement for all of us? ■

References

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To find out more about the after school program go to:
<http://growingyoungmovers.com/programs/gym-after-school-club>

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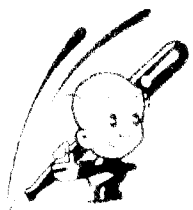
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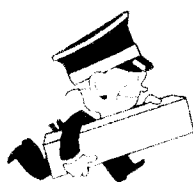
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