

WHAT NEXT? REVITALISING WITH PHYSICAL LITERACY

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The answer to the question ‘what next?’ for physical education is physical literacy, Nigel Green¹ contended in the still recent distance before COVID-19 came to dominate every agenda. With revitalising young people’s engagement in learning the prime challenge for schools in the aftermath of the crisis, physical literacy’s time has surely come – even given the significant system hurdles to be navigated before its intent can be properly realised.

After staring into lockdown-heightened shadows of self-doubt, existential fear, inter-personal conflict, suffering or loss, and having had more time to ruminate and fewer of the regular distractions, young people will clearly be returning to classrooms more precariously placed in terms of their faith in the future and the purpose of classroom action. Some will have discovered improved direction during the months of drift, but the mind-set of plenty will be jeopardised by swelling disconnection.

Revitalised engagement will be at the heart of successful outcomes in the new era, whatever the individual or group disposition and whatever the activity. This theme corresponds fully with physical literacy’s focus on addressing the insufficiency of participation, motivation, confidence and understanding currently marring many young people’s relationship with physical activity, sport and, frequently, broader community life.

Revitalisation entails empowerment, and this should mean provision of authentic contexts to develop self-efficacy, initiative, ingenuity, resilience and teamwork skills so that young people are enabled to feel more assured about their own capacity to negotiate the immediate consequences of this crisis as well as the clouds of other uncertainties and conundrums looming on the horizon. With its intrinsic recognition

of individuality, cultural identity, equity, community connection and holistic principles of health and wellbeing, physical literacy is already pedagogically positioned to provide these contexts.

On the back of this year’s calamitous circumstances, the case for change to routine approaches should be more compelling than ever, but enduring system constraints prevail and if we are going to successfully prioritise physical literacy principles, there are some perennial obstacles to contend with.

PRIVILEGING LESS-MEASURABLE SKILLS

Although the aspiration to grow self-sufficiency of character and capability to connect is inherent in school mission statements everywhere, granting sufficient time and resources to directly address these objectives is rarely regarded as justifiable in an education environment that remains largely suspicious of the less measurable or tangible. Teachers of physical literacy could take the initiative for establishing school-wide metrics for assessment of self-efficacy and students’ capacity to contribute.

RECLAIMING CURRICULUM SPACE

While the assessment tail continues to wag the curriculum dog, and curriculum planning is dominated by gatekeeper assessment, ranking data imperatives and audit, real choices about teaching and learning remain corralled in the hands of examination boards, universities and inspection ideologues. These prescriptive paradigms continue to narrow, compartmentalise and, too often, drain the joy out of teaching and learning, but physical literacy has the latitude for revitalising programme innovation beyond such constraints – if school leaders are prepared to license this.

SECURING LEADERSHIP BACKING

As pronounced support from school leaders is a pre-requisite for changing thinking in both the profession and the community, physical literacy can only gain traction if leaders sincerely appreciate the importance of the holistic skills-development it offers. With support not a given, determined discourse with all school stakeholders should be an ongoing part of the advocacy for how physical literacy can support cross-curricular skills development.

DEVELOPING TEACHER UNDERSTANDING OF INDIVIDUALISED LEARNING

Many teachers are in the formative stages of understanding physical literacy, and many more across all subject areas are grappling with how to convert the enduring call for individualised learning into workable classroom practice. Factoring the needs of the ‘whole’ person into lesson and unit planning remains a tall order, compounded by a ferment of intervening psychological, physiological, inter-personal, institutional and societal variables. With new layers of complexity pervading school environments, sustainable, well-resourced professional development around individualising learning is more crucial now than it has ever been.

Amongst the multitude of matters arising, the pandemic has highlighted how we need to help young people take better care of themselves and others by deepening their understanding of health, fitness, nutrition, mind-set, team synergy and self-efficacy. With its harnessing of the interface between physical, emotional, social and cognitive domains, physical literacy should be a key feature of our re-shaped post-COVID education landscape. ■

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