



# Physical Education and Literacy — The Odd Couple or a Match Made in Heaven?

## SUMMARY

For a group of physical education teachers in central New York, strengthening the connection between physical education and literacy was CHILDSPlay.

This article addresses recommendations 1, 2, 3, and 6 of the “Reading Next” report of the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. (See page 95)

### *It started out as a*

simple challenge in our district:

How can each content area show its connection to literacy? As physical educators, we are accustomed to challenges, but this one wasn’t going to be easy. It would require rethinking how and what we typically teach. Our curriculum is 20 years old and in need of revision. This was the perfect opportunity to meet the challenge and show our connection to literacy. But first, we needed to figure out what the connection to literacy might be.

Physical education and literacy — two words that for too long have been disconnected. But are they really? How many times in your career have you heard a student say, “I just don’t like to read,” “I’m not good at math,” or “I am just not athletic.” In spite of all of our best efforts and practices, there

are students who lack the confidence and understanding necessary to apply the literacy skills we know they should have. In some cases, we know that a student is missing a critical fundamental component or link in the content sequence. In other cases, we know that a child has the fundamental knowledge and understanding but lacks the practice and experiences that build confidence in application and creativity. Whether you teach math, science, reading, or yes, even physical education, there is one goal that is universal — we want all of our students to use literacy skills in our content area.

Content literacy and the traditional idea of literacy are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the common notion of *educating the whole child* should probably be updated to reflect *attaining the total literacies of the child*.

Sara Daggett, an adapted physical education teacher, chairs the departments of health education, physical education K-12, and adapted physical education in the Liverpool Central School District and is a member of the NYSUT Committee for Health, Physical Education, and Family and Consumer Sciences.

## Sara Daggett, United Liverpool Faculty Association

It makes sense that all curricula should be connected to literacy and demonstrate its value-added for every student. The connection between literacy in the physical education curriculum and literacy can't be that difficult — can it?

Before we got started, we needed to define two significant concepts:

- What is literacy?
- What is literacy in physical education?

### Literacy — the big picture

Regardless of the language spoken, literacy is one of the most powerful words in the world. The success of a country or school is almost always tied directly to the literacy rate. Literacy in its simplest form means the ability to use language to read and write.

Teaching literacy has often created a caste system within our schools.

Literacy has been the dividing line for subject areas deemed important for their development of literacy skills and those seen as disconnected. Physical education has been one of the disconnected — but is it?

In recent decades, the application of the concept of literacy has been prominent in the set of skills that are critical to societal success. For example, our world's increasing dependence on technology has led to concerns about computer literacy. The financial events of the last year have increased our awareness of the need for fiscal literacy. In fact, the word *literacy* has taken on such global significance that the United Nations has declared 2003-12 the Literacy Decade.

If literacy has come to mean more than just reading and writing, what do we now use to define a word that can encompass all content areas to its mission? The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — UNESCO — set out to create a more modern definition of literacy that could move the current thinking away from being merely a technical skill toward: “... *a set of practices defined by social relations and cultural processes — a view exploring the range of uses of literacy in the entire spectrum of daily life from the exercise of civil and political rights through*

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*matters of work, commerce and child care to self-instruction, spiritual enlightenment and even recreation.”* (UNESCO 2003). Now here is an idea physical education teachers can work with!

As a further result of their work, UNESCO, in 2003, drafted the following definition: *“Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.”* (UNESCO 2003). Loaded with action verbs, this definition could open the way for all subject areas to take responsibility for contributing to the literacy of our students. Literacy becomes the tie that binds all teachers and subject areas together. It clearly connects the content-specific literacy to its role in developing the total literacy of the child. Many content areas have already begun to demonstrate and develop their connection to “literacy,” and physical education can be no exception.

## What, exactly, is physical literacy?

The concept of physical literacy is relatively new in the United States, although it has been around for more than 40 years. Dr. Margaret Whitehead, a philosopher by training, has spent the better part of the last 30 years looking to define physical literacy and its impact on the future of physical education. Her extensive body of work defines physical literacy in terms of:

- physical competencies;
- the ability to read and respond to the environment and to others in interaction;
- the ability to use the body as an instrument of expression/ communication; and
- the ability to articulate/demonstrate knowledge, skills and understanding of health.

While I could go into more detail, Dr. Whitehead’s chart on *Attaining and Maintaining Lifelong Physical Literacy* (Whitehead 2006), shown in Figure 1, clearly illustrates what we need to know about physical literacy.

## METHODOLOGY

**Figure 1:**

### Attaining and Maintaining Lifelong Physical Literacy

Stages in attaining and maintaining Physical Literacy					
Fundamental Motor development fostered, supported, encouraged	Development of Physical Literacy as a fundamental goal of Physical Education		Consolidation of aspects of Physical Literacy, achieved via own motivation to participate in selected physical activities as part of life-style	Physical Literacy established, contributing to successful and rewarding physical activity being a part of an individual's life style. Continued 'education' in the way physical competence is maintained and in respect of knowledge and understanding of aspects of health promotion	Personal Physical Literacy modified with age. Continued appropriate activity. Increase of knowledge and understanding in relation to changing capacities and health in older age and to the importance of an active lifestyle
	Fundamentals of Physical Literacy: motor competence and knowledge and understanding, developed	Fundamentals of PL established and contextualised in a range of physical activities. Activity opportunities outside of school introduced			
Pre-school	Elementary School	Secondary School	Immediate post-school	Adulthood	Older age
Personnel influencing the attainment and maintenance of Physical Literacy include:					
Parents, family, significant others	Teachers, parents, family, peers, coaches, club and local facility personnel		Peers, family, work place colleagues, personnel in: medical fields, clubs, fitness industry, leisure facilities, evening classes (coaches, sports development officers)	Peers, family, personnel in e.g. medical fields, wellness/fitness and leisure contexts	
Systems, situations, contexts where Physical Literacy can be encouraged, established and maintained include:					
Home, local environment, pre-school programs, Day Care	School Physical Education, extracurricular opportunities, Sports/activity clubs. Home, local environment, local facilities		Quality and quantity of local and national facilities and staffing. Government policy and priorities. Employer policies. Context created by medical professions Context created by media		

Whitehead, M.E. *Physical Literacy and its importance to every individual* - NDA (2007) Appendix 1

#### What does this mean for us as physical educators and classroom teachers?

As a department, we were greatly relieved to discover that creating a physical education program that centered around its connections to literacy did not require throwing out everything we had been doing for the last 20 years. What it did require was a thorough look at what we were doing in our K-12 curriculum, and why.

Our foundation was solid. The five strands that had always been at the core of what we had done remained the same:

- character development
- intelligence/cognitive development
- lifestyle development
- health-related fitness
- motor performance.

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## CHILDSPlay Character Health-Related Fitness Intelligence Lifestyle Development and Skilled Play

What we discovered however, was that the first three strands were often overshadowed by our program's more obvious strengths — physical skills and health-related fitness. Character, intelligence and lifestyle development had to take a more prominent role in our curriculum. The trick would be to develop a balanced program with equal emphasis and accountability in all five strands. We were confident we had all the pieces of the puzzle we needed to revise our program. What we needed was the box top with the picture of the final project!

Discussions began among the 28 members of the K-12 physical education department. What would be different about physical education if it became a core subject? What if we were to develop a PE program that emphasized health-related fitness, moving and learning connections, and character development in addition to the motor skills component we are known for? Not that we shouldn't play team sports and competitive games, but what if they were just a piece of the puzzle? What if we were to focus on developing lifelong active lifestyles? What if we were to expand the concept of physical education to include activities like brain gym, yoga and project adventure? Great questions, intense and at times unsettling discussion, and debate stretched over the course of many months. In the end, the result was

truly **CHILDSPlay** (Character, Health-Related Fitness, Intelligence, Lifestyle Development and Skilled Play). The simple one-page document shown in Figure 2 clarifies what we are about as professionals and how we view ourselves as members of the greater school community. It has set the stage for re-creation of grade-level benchmarks, revised scope and sequence, and assessments that are developmentally appropriate and understandable for both teachers and students. The creation of essential questions at each level clearly outlines what we want every child to take away from our physical education program. Each level builds upon the one that precedes it. Secondary takes the common foundation of skills and knowledge and expands its reach beyond the doors of the school gymnasium and fields, encouraging students to find ways to independently pursue throughout their lifetime something we hope they all come to value and love as much as we do.

### **CHILDSPlay and the classroom teacher**

The CHILDSPlay Essentials document has opened up dialogues between classroom teachers and PE teachers, led to interdisciplinary activities, and new collaborations — all to the benefit of our students. Brain Gym profiles of kindergartners



# METHODOLOGY






**Figure 2:**

## LIVERPOOL CENTRAL SCHOOLS PHYSICAL EDUCATION CHILDSPLAY-ESSENTIALS

There are 5 general goals upon which the pre K-12 CHILDSPLAY curriculum is based. The final objective of these goals is attainment of physical literacy by all students. These outcomes are interrelated and interdependent. Each general outcome is made up of more specific grade level benchmarks. Essential questions are established for each level. Achievement in each of these outcomes and their grade level benchmarks can be reached through participation in developmentally appropriate instruction and physical activities.

STATE AND NATION PHYSICAL EDUCATION STANDARDS TO BE MET:

NYS STANDARD 2    NYS STANDARD 1B    NYS STANDARD 2    NYS STANDARD 3    STANDARD 1A  
 NASPE 5 & 6    NASPE 3 & 4    NASPE 2    NASPE 3 & 6    NASPE 1 & 2

				
Character	Health related fitness	Intelligence	Lifestyle Development	Skilled Play
Students will exhibit responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others....	Students will achieve and maintain a health enhancing level of physical fitness.....	Students will assume responsibility for their development as lifelong learners.....	Students will demonstrate their understanding of the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, and social interaction through participation in regular physical activity....	Students will demonstrate movement skills and understand concepts needed to engage in a wide variety of lifelong health enhancing physical activity.....
<b>Included elements:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Cooperation</li> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Fair play</li> <li>• Social and self responsibility</li> </ul>	<b>Included elements:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal fitness</li> <li>• Lifetime wellness</li> <li>• Self image</li> <li>• Assessment</li> <li>• Stress management</li> <li>• Personal safety</li> </ul>	<b>Included elements:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning style</li> <li>• Brain Gym Profile</li> <li>• Multi-intelligence</li> <li>• Metacognitive skills</li> </ul>	<b>Included elements:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effort</li> <li>• Goal setting</li> <li>• Personal challenge</li> <li>• Active living</li> <li>• Decision making</li> </ul>	<b>Included elements:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic skills &amp; play</li> <li>• Sport related skills</li> <li>• applied skills &amp; play</li> <li>• advanced skills &amp; play</li> </ul>
<b>ELEMENTARY LEVEL</b> Why and when is it important to be able to get along with others? Am I a good team mate? What does it mean to be fair? Why is it important to follow directions	<b>ELEMENTARY LEVEL</b> What does it mean to be fit? Why is fitness important? What happens to your body when you exercise? Why is food important to fitness?	<b>ELEMENTARY LEVEL</b> How do you feel after you have done a PACE? When might be a good time to use a PACE? How do I learn best? What kind of things can help me learn easier?	<b>ELEMENTARY LEVEL</b> What do you like about playing with others? What makes for a good group/team member? If you could choose a favorite activity, what would it be? What do you like about playing alone?	<b>ELEMENTARY LEVEL</b> Which hand and foot do you like to throw/kick with? What skills do you need to play your favorite game? What are fundamental motor skills? What does a good mover look like?
<b>MIDDLE LEVEL</b> What do rules have to do with caring for others? What makes a good leader? What makes a good follower? What does self respect mean?	<b>MIDDLE LEVEL</b> How do I know I am fit? How can I improve my own fitness levels? What changes in my body affect my fitness? What can I do outside of school to stay fit?	<b>MIDDLE LEVEL</b> What kind of things distract you from learning? How does stress impact your learning? What can you do to control outside influencers?	<b>MIDDLE LEVEL</b> What can I do outside of school to stay active? How do I set a goal for myself that is attainable? How do I evaluate outside programs as to whether it meets my needs or not? How do I make decisions for myself?	<b>MIDDLE LEVEL</b> How well must I be able to perform a skill to play outside of school? How can I apply movement concepts to improve my performances? How can game strategies improve my performances?
<b>SECONDARY LEVEL</b> How do you deal with a group made up of different skill levels? For what should you be accountable for? What is the difference between commitment and responsibility?	<b>SECONDARY LEVEL</b> Why is it important to know the connection between my age and fitness levels? What fundamental concepts do I need to know to manage my own fitness throughout my lifetime?	<b>SECONDARY LEVEL</b> How do I manage my own learning? What types of careers might best fit my learning style? Why is knowing how you learn important to me now and as I get older?	<b>SECONDARY LEVEL</b> What activities will best fit a healthy lifestyle for me once I graduate? Where can I find places to continue a healthy lifestyle once I graduate? How might my lifestyle goals need to change as I get older?	<b>SECONDARY LEVEL</b> What opportunities can become open to me through participation in physical activity? How do I continue to advance my skills and knowledges of movement as an adult?

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are used by classroom teachers as a tool for student placement; middle-level students are using relaxation techniques in pre-test situations; high school teachers are using Challenge by Choice and full-value contracts for at-risk students.

The CHILDSPlay program has unleashed the “secrets of physical education” to the rest of the school community. The diagrams and assessments paint a clear picture not only of what we want our students to know, but how that knowledge can help other classrooms. We are making assessment information available to all teachers and helping them see where we can contribute. PE teachers are becoming active and confident members of the school improvement teams. Our notion of big-picture literacy has taken conversations that occurred only in the gym and placed them in faculty rooms and classrooms. In our own classrooms, physical educators are now spending more time showing students how skills they have learned in PE can be used in other rooms, at home, and in the world.

The advent of brain research and its support for movement and learning continue to promote the importance of physical activity for all children. Though in its infancy, this research is believed to hold the future of learning theory and strategies for the future.

In our district we have begun to embrace this research through Brain Gym at the elementary level, and a teaching style that all middle-level teachers are embracing, based on metacognitive research of the adolescent brain.

We were so convinced that physical education was an important part of how a child learns that in 2005-06 we applied for a U.S. Department of Education Physical Education Program grant to help us develop CHILDSPlay. We were awarded almost \$400,000 over three years to develop and implement this program. This grant allowed us to update and introduce activities and programs that are consistent with our beliefs and support all the elements of the program. It included more than 200 hours of professional development for staff. We developed a turnkey network to insure that all new programs can be sustained over time. In addition to providing inservice for our physical educators, we have expanded it to all teachers and staff with an interest in learning more about movement and learning. Perhaps one of the biggest initiatives is that physical education staff can now extend their resources and activities beyond just the gym walls. Physical activity is becoming a part of everyone’s day — not just on “Gym Day.”

A good friend once told me that the difference between an academic class and a physical education class is that in an academic class you are taught a lesson and then given a test. In physical education class you are often given a test that teaches you a lesson. Both of these styles appear to be complementary. The road to literacy truly runs through every classroom, whether it has desks and chairs, or merely lines on the floor.

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