

Original Article

Future directions for physical literacy education: community perspectives

KYOUNG JUNE YI¹, ERIN CAMERON², MATTHEW PATEY³, ANGELA LOUCKS-ATKINSON⁴, TA LOEFFLER⁵, ANNE-MARIE SULLIVAN⁶, ERIN MCGOWAN⁷, CHRISTOPHER BORDUAS⁸, RICHARD BUOTE⁹

¹Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, University of Manitoba, CANADA

²Human Science, Northern Ontario School of Medicine, CANADA

³Department of Physical Education, University of South Carolina, USA

^{4,5,6,7}School of Human Kinetics and Recreation, Memorial University, CANADA

⁸Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, CANADA

⁹Faculty of Medicine, Memorial University, St. John's, CANADA

Published online: January 31, 2020

(Accepted for publication: January 05, 2020)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2020.01016

Abstract

The preventative role of physical activity is well documented. Physical literacy education (PLE) (i.e., teaching and learning of the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that enhance the responsibility for engagement in lifelong active lifestyles) thus is a critical aspect of health promotion. However, the perspectives of communities have not been fully incorporated in understanding PLE. We examined the ways in which communities perceive PLE by asking two main questions: (1) How does your community understand and operate your PLE program? and (2) What are your visions for your PLE program? Twenty-four community practitioners and stakeholders in the field of PLE participated in this study, which employed a grounded theory approach. Data were collected mainly via focus group interview and analyzed following open, selective, and theoretical coding process. Five themes emerged from the community perspectives on PLE. According to participants, PLE (1) is not just for children, (2) is not just teaching movement skills, (3) should be a collaborative community effort, (4) should incorporate parent/family education, and (5) should ensure accessibility and choices. We have provided empirical knowledge regarding the future directions for health promotion through PLE from the perspectives of communities for further cross-cultural comparisons of the perspectives of communities and those of experts.

Keywords: physical literacy, physical education, health education, health promotion

Introduction

Physical activity as preventive medicine is well established in the literature (Pate, Pratt, Blair, & Haskell, 1995). Active lifestyles promote physical, social, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing (Reiner, Niermann, Jekauc, & Woll, 2013; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). Early exposure to quality physical activity can improve one's functional development, overall health, and likelihood of a lifelong active lifestyle (Janssen & Leblanc, 2010; Sallis, Prochaska, & Taylor, 2000). *Physical literacy education* (PLE)—that is, teaching and learning of “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life” (<http://physicalliteracy.ca/physical-literacy/consensus-statement/>)—has become a critical aspect of health promotion (Edwards, Bryant, Keegan, Morgan, & Jones, 2017). The concept of physical literacy has been employed widely in various physical activity contexts (e.g., as physical/health education curricula, athletic development models, and life-long healthy active living approaches) (Dowling, 2015; Hastie & Wallhead, 2015; Lundvall, 2015), organizational settings (e.g., schools, private or public physical activity clubs) (Castelli, Centeio, Beighle, Carson, & Nicksic, 2014; Lloyd, 2016), and with diverse individual groups (e.g., toddlers/children, youth, people with disabilities) (Coates, 2011; MacDonald, 2015). Research literature in PLE has mainly focused on topics such as the underpinning philosophies and definitions of the concept (Edwards et al., 2017; Giblin, Collins, & Button, 2014; Jurbala, 2015), best practices, and outcomes of the educational programs (Longmuir et al., 2015; Mitchell & Le Masurier, 2014) from the perspectives of experts (e.g., scholars and researchers) (Longmuir & Tremblay, 2016). However, the perspectives of community practitioners and stakeholders (i.e., the current knowledge users in day-to-day practices) have not been fully incorporated in understanding PLE. This could undermine “the meaningful measurement of physical literacy, interpretation of findings, and prevents any meaningful accrual/agglomeration of research findings” (Edwards et al., 2017, p. 114). In this study, we examined the ways in which community practitioners and stakeholders perceive PLE by asking two main questions: (1) How does your community understand and operationalize your PLE program? and (2) What are your visions for your PLE program? To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to explore the future directions for health promotion through PLE from the perspectives of communities. It is expected that the findings of our study will be used for cross-cultural comparisons of the perspectives of communities and those of experts.

Materials and Methods

We employed a grounded theory approach. This inductive, systematic, and comparative approach focuses on explaining phenomena by analysing specific contexts from the grounded field data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin, 2008). This methodology is suitable for identifying issues and solutions from the perspectives of the field (Creswell, 2017). Through this methodology, we theorized how community practitioners and stakeholders in the field of PLE perceive their day-to-day operations and future directions.

We recruited participants from the city of St. John's and suburban towns in Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada using a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2015). This strategy helped us to purposefully sample a wide range of community practitioners and stakeholders in the field of PLE, which ensured the transferability of our research findings to other PLE contexts (Patton, 2015). We included participants who were (a) involved in PLE programs directly or indirectly (e.g., service professionals or stakeholders) and (b) holding professional positions in the related fields (e.g., active living experts). Overall, 24 participants were recruited for the study, and detailed descriptions of their demographics are presented in Table 1. The participants signed consent forms prior to participating. All identifiable information has been removed to protect their confidentiality.

Table 1. Description of Participants ($n = 24$)

Characteristics	No. (%)
Age Group	
18 – 30	6 (25.0)
31 – 40	6 (25.0)
41 – 50	6 (25.0)
51 – and over	5 (20.8)
Unspecified	1 (4.2)
Gender	
Male	8 (33.3)
Female	16 (66.7)
Duration of Employment	
0 – 5	8 (34.8)
6 – 10	4 (17.4)
11 – 20	6 (26.1)
21 – and over	5 (21.7)
Work Sector	
Private	2 (8.3)
Public	7 (29.2)
Government / public	8 (33.3)
Not-for-profit and/or voluntary	7 (29.2)
Job Description	
Practitioner	12 (50.0)
Manager / director	7 (29.2)
Stakeholder	5 (20.8)

We collected data using focus group interviews, selective one-on-one follow-up interviews, participants' writings and email correspondence, and field notes. We organized four focus groups (seven to eight people in each group) based on the types/contexts of PLE program they represented, namely: (1) school/sport-related programs, (2) neighbourhood-community programs, (3) leisure/outdoor/recreation-related programs, and (4) programs for groups with disability/diversity. Four moderators with a doctoral degree in related fields (e.g., health and physical education, leisure, recreation) facilitated focus group discussions (approximately 90 minutes in length), and four trained students took detailed field notes (Greenbaum, 1998; Morgan, 1998). Participants were also provided with the opportunity to guide the discussion and present information important to them during the interview (Greenbaum, 1998; Morgan, 1998). Three information-rich participants were selected for one-on-one follow-up interviews. During these telephone interviews, they had opportunities to further discuss their opinions on the focus group interview agenda (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). We audio-recorded all interviews and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were sent to all participants to verify accuracy, and to provide feedback and make changes, corrections, and/or clarifications (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). We also kept written documents as evidence supplementary to the interview data (e.g., participants' writings such as the feedback/additional comments form used after the focus group interview and email correspondence with participants) (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). Note-takers kept detailed field notes to capture the atmosphere of the focus group interviews (e.g., observations about participants' responses) (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). We conducted repeated readings of data and then employed three phases of *open*, *selective*, and *theoretical coding* (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin, 2008; Creswell, 2017). We first labelled and assigned meanings through line-by-line reading of the transcripts (i.e., *open coding*), identified central concepts by selecting the most commonly occurring codes (i.e., *selective coding*), and organized concepts into theme categories (i.e.,

theoretical coding)(Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin, 2008; Creswell, 2017). We continued this process until we reached a stage where no further concepts and theories were emerged (i.e., *theoretical saturation*)(Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin, 2008; Creswell, 2017). We used multiple data sources and engaged multiple analysts *triangulation* methods to establish trustworthiness (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). We also conducted *peer debriefing* amongst the researchers, obtained an external review from a qualitative research expert (i.e., *expert audit review*), and acquired consent on research data and findings from the research participants (i.e., *respondent validation*)(Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin, 2008; Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). Verbatim transcripts are also presented in the results and discussion section.

Results and Discussion

Five themes emerged as community perspectives on PLE and presented in Table 2. According to participants, PLE (1) is not just for children, (2) is not just teaching movement skills, (3) should be a collaborative community effort, (4) should incorporate parent/family education, and (5) should ensure accessibility and choices.

Table 2. Community Perspectives on Physical Literacy Education (PLE)

Theme	Concepts	Supporting Quotes	Future Directions
PLE is not just for children.	Beneficial for senior	"...valuable resources...in terms of falls prevention."	Consider inclusive programming (e.g., develop programs that provide PLE opportunities for various age groups, individuals with various abilities, needs, and interests)
	Beneficial for individuals experiencing disabilities	"It is basically what rehab is like, if you have a brain injury, and you have to relearn how to walk and pick up things."	
	Beneficial for individuals experiencing life/cultural transitions	"...from the refugee perspective—you are working on survival, you are not working on those other things."	
	Beneficial for individuals who are marginalized or overlooked in PLE	"If they experience weight-based teasing..., they are used to sitting on the side-lines now."	
PLE is not just teaching movement skills.	Existential learning in and through movement	"Physical literacy fundamental movement skills are not sport-based, it is about moving."	Incorporate outdoor activities, traditional neighbourhood activities, and across-curricular education opportunities (e.g., music and drama), as varied repertoires
	New ways of experiencing movement	"...just bringing back old activities, getting out and going berry picking."	
	Learning of day-to-day movement skills	"When we were young..., you didn't have to learn about it, because you learned your fundamental movement skills, when you were outside playing hop-scotch or whatever."	
PLE should be a collaborative community effort.	Overcoming and reducing barriers collaboratively	"We talk about capacity all the time.... Everybody does a bit makes everything a little easier."	Form partnerships/alliances to utilize existing resources Create collective communication venues to share information (e.g., websites)
	Identifying gaps and reducing duplications of programming	"There is so many 'duplicated efforts,' as opposed to putting all our resources into one area...and coming up with a strategy as a whole."	
	Sharing resources and information	"Have all the links, and all the great stuff that is out there, and put it in one place for parents and us."	
PLE should incorporate parent/family education.	Parent/guardian's over-emphasis on skill development and competition	"They have the hard-core ball drills in the program, and that is what parents are expecting from their five-year old."	Educate parent/guardian about physical literacy Invite family members in the programs as participants or volunteers
	Parent/guardian's safety concerns	"When children want to jump off something, and parents freak out."	
	Parent/guardian being a role model	"If you see your parents are never participating in a physical activity, you are learning that I don't have to be physically active."	
PLE should ensure accessibility and choices.	Needs for increased accessibility	"Going to the schools," or "designated neighbourhood playgrounds," "We reach out to community centres. We partner a lot with outdoor programs."	Consider partnership /outreach model, individualized programming, and increased program options to ensure accessibility
	Needs for flexibility in goal setting and delivery	"We have an intake form where they identify their personal goals and what they like to work on."	
	Needs for increased choices/options in participation	"...have options so that they can attend any session of their choice' or have 'diverse offerings, delivery in multiple settings, and with a high degree of choice built-in."	

Physical literacy education is not just for children

PLE can provide novel experiences which may increase participants' intrinsic motivation to lifelong active lifestyles (Iso-Ahola, 1980). According to one participant, PLE has been viewed "as providing the essential opportunities for children to move, engage in movement activity, that is going to prepare them for early childhood." However, the participant perceived that PLE should not be "just for early childhood, but for life," highlighting it as a "lifelong journey" to facilitate active living. Other participants echoed this participant arguing that PLE should be offered to a variety of age groups. For example, several participants argued that seniors should also be a target group for PLE: "A lot of times, seniors unfortunately are given the short end of the stick, and some people don't see the value in, [PLE] is one of our most valuable resources that we have...in terms of falls prevention." Some participants stressed that PLE should also target youth groups, emphasizing the aspects of socialization and mental health promotion within PLE.

Participants suggested that PLE would also benefit diverse individual groups such as individuals experiencing disabilities. For example, one participant stressed that many fundamental movement skills need to be re-learned upon acquiring a medical condition and that PLE would be a beneficial rehabilitation strategy:

They can gain those skills or learn those skills or relearn those skills...and then they can hone in on those skills before they go participate in the community. When we think of physical literacy sometimes a lot of people think of young kids and learning those fundamental skills of throwing and that type of thing. But, it is basically what rehab is like, if you have a brain injury, and you have to relearn how to walk and pick up things.

Participants indicated that PLE should also be a focus for people experiencing life and cultural transitions and people who are marginalized or overlooked within PLE contexts. One participant provided an example, highlighting cultural differences experienced by refugees as a deterring factor for PLE participation, "culturally, [PLE is] not something that is very typical especially from the refugee perspective—you are working on survival, you are not working on those other things." Another participant also identified that there should be an effort for PLE programs to be appealing to those who have felt "psychological barriers such as social anxiety" in participating PLE: "If they experience weight-based teasing, there is a huge barrier there to them wanting to engage again, like the enjoyment is being taken out of it, and they are used to sitting on the side-lines now." As other studies also have reported, social anxiety can greatly reduce enjoyment of leisure and physical activity and thus participation in physical activity (Brunet & Sabiston, 2009).

Overall, participants highlighted that PLE should be a "lifespan" approach. As a practical suggestion to this approach, an inclusive PLE programming (e.g., for various age groups and groups with various abilities) was identified to be effective: "We also target some grandparents and parents who are mobility impaired, so I always tell my staff, 'You have to make something that 8-80 rule, so if you are in a walker or a wheelchair, you will be able to do it.'" Another participant also suggested to have a variety in PLE programming to include individuals with various needs and interests:

Our family programs can be for age 0 to 100.... When we do a big special event, there is something for a person who is in a wheelchair or a grandparent with a child. We try to have different opportunities for all of them to be physically active there.

Physical literacy education is not just teaching movement skills

Participants highlighted that PLE is more than just teaching sport skills; instead, they argued, it is about learning in and through movement. This is clearly stated by one participant:

Physical literacy fundamental movement skills are not sport-based. It is about moving...getting everybody moving, it's not sport specific, and need to go back to just getting out and having time in the gym and playing something, whether its running around chasing a ball, it doesn't have to be structured, and here it works at any age.

This notion, that physical literacy is more than just sport skills, is well established in the literature. In fact, the term physical literacy was first conceptualized by Margaret Whitehead and was grounded in existential philosophy where movement was thought to be the interrelation between one's sense of self, connection with others, and the context. This view extended approaching human movement beyond mastery, effectiveness, and efficiency, and included expressive and visceral experience of moving (Whitehead, 2007, 2010).

As an extension of this existential approach, the participants described PLE as promoting whole person development to achieve health and wellness (e.g., psychosocial development and mental health). One participant described this as an education approach that engages the mind, body, and spirit, and sees people and their environment as interconnected and relational. Framed this way, participants discussed how PLE could create new ways of experiencing movement. For example, participants highlighted that music and drama (as cross-curricular education opportunity), as well as outdoor activities (e.g., geocaching and snowshoeing) can be

incorporated in PLE.

Participants described how “everyday life” can be a valuable focus for PLE—a curriculum that brings to life activities that could be done in a local context; a curriculum that pays attention to the changing seasons and environments; a curriculum that brings to life the community; and a curriculum that brings back the enjoyment of play. As one participant poignantly said, “So again just bringing back old activities, getting out and going berry picking.” Another participant echoed this sentiment, arguing for the value of neighbourhood activities:

They do not go out in the neighbourhood as much. When we were young, we went outside and came back in when the street lights came on. You didn’t have to learn about it, because you learned your fundamental movement skills, when you were outside playing hop-scotch or whatever. But those traditional games are being lost, and they are being lost in favour of organized specific skills. It would be great, if there was a physical literacy program that taught those kinds of games they could then transfer back to the community, rather than the one hour a week doing this.

Physical literacy education should be a collaborative community effort

Participants identified several barriers, such as financial (e.g., cost of equipment), transportation, partnerships and resources that impacted their ability to offer sustainable PLE programming. Although several barriers were highlighted, they were proactive in highlighting that collaboration is the key to overcoming and reducing these barriers. One participant explained:

It is collaborative, which I think is so essential in our province because of the way we are structured, because we talk about capacity all the time, so the best way to address capacity in the beginning is to have collaboration and partnerships. Everybody does a bit makes everything a little easier.

Collaboration in PLE reflects a gap in the current literature, however knowledge can be gained through community-based participatory research (CBPR) in health promotion. CBPR is recognized by health scholars as an effective approach to studying and addressing health, and health disparities in a collaborative fashion with researchers, practitioners and community partners to address community-based needs (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003; Puma, Bennett, Cutforth, Tombari, & Stein, 2009). In the manner of this approach, several participants suggested that one way of creating collaborations and partnerships could be the formation of a PLE alliance. This approach could identify gaps in current programming, as well as reduce duplications of programming, as was highlighted:

I felt that a barrier might be that we aren’t as a city getting the best bang for our buck, as there is so many duplicated efforts, as opposed to putting all our resources into one area and identifying those gaps and coming up with a plan for each of those demographics. I think that there is more of a focus on looking at gaps and coming up with a strategy as a whole.

This was particularly important, as it was clearly identified by participants that there were many programs being offered already in the community, but that a venue to share this information was lacking. As highlighted by one participant, websites that provide collective information would be an effective future strategy:

We have to work collectively to make it easier for parents and us. Parents know about our program, and they know about your program and your program. They can see what is in my neighbourhood, and we could try and look for gaps. Have all the links, and all the great stuff that is out there, and put it in one place for parents and us.

Finally, it was emphasized that along with establishing collaborations, a key focus should be utilizing existing resources and enhancing networks in the community such as existing partnerships among community organizations, infrastructure (e.g., schools and community centres), natural environments, and human resources (e.g., newly retired individuals, students, and volunteers) to enable sustainable PLE programming.

Physical literacy education should incorporate parent/family education

Participants reported that the experiences and perceptions of parents influenced children’s participation in PLE. According to several participants, parents tend to value their children’s sport participation or “some of [parents’] love in the chosen sport or activity.” One participant said: “Society values more the sport, so when you are promoting, it you are trying to use the word to get people to come.” Furthermore, the competitive nature of sports was a concern in early childhood physical activity participation. One participant commented, “They have the hard-core ball drills in the program, and that is what parents are expecting from their five-year old.” However,

as other studies also have reported, overemphasis on competition and performance could be a major factor contributing to children's inactivity (Côté & Hay, 2002).

Parents' lack of knowledge and experience, as well as current participation in physical activity was also identified as an influencing factor for children's engagement in PLE. One participant stated, "We have to be honest and say how much exercise did we do and how much learning and teaching did we do with our children this week." Additionally, safety concerns were identified as a deterrent to the PLE participation. One participant observed, "when children want to jump off something, and parents freak out." For this reason, participants highlighted the importance of parent/guardian education in PLE. According to a participant, "We role-model, and if you see your parents are never participating in a physical activity, you are learning that I don't have to be physically active, because that's what my parents do."

Another area that was discussed by the participants was the need to involve family in PLE. According to previous studies, children who come from families who are physically active together tend to be more physically active overall (Jago, Fox, Page, Brockman, & Thompson, 2010). Participants also suggested that it is important to provide educational sessions for parents and family members while children are participating in PLE. According to participants, such sessions could introduce games and activities that families could try together as well as help parents to better understand how to incorporate teachable moments in daily family activities. If separate sessions cannot be delivered for family members, an alternate may be to include these individuals as volunteers in the sessions.

Physical literacy education should ensure accessibility and choices

Participants identified that being inclusive and providing options are key in PLE. Several barriers to participating in PLE were noted and then participants made suggestions for overcoming these barriers. One community organization had success diversifying their program by "going to the schools to deliver the program." This reduces barriers for parents related to transportation and "creates that sense of buy in and accessibility for everyone." Besides programming in schools, another participant from a community organization that offers language instruction for new immigrants suggested that PLE be offered in diverse locations in "an outreach perspective." This would enable a whole family approach towards multiple literacies and improve accessibility to PLE for their participants' children. Similarly, another community program suggested that PLE could be delivered "in designated neighbourhood playgrounds" or directly in community centres. This partnership/outreach model was described by another participant, "We reach out to community centres. We partner a lot with outdoor programs. So, we are on the go all the time."

Along with delivering PLE with accessibility in mind, participants highlighted the need for choices in many aspects of program planning. For example, one organization working with participants with various abilities designs individual PLE programs for each participant,

We have an intake form where they identify their personal goals and what they like to work on whether it is wheelchair skills, using their walker in a freer space, or hoping, jumping, whatever their goal is. Then in the gym, we address what their goal is and how they can meet that goal in the program.

Another participant suggested that it was important that families be offered choice in which PLE session that they attend (i.e., a general inclusive session or a specific session for participants with various abilities) suggesting that parents would "much rather have a specific session like that where they don't feel like they are being judged or their child is being judged because of their abilities. They have options so that they can attend any session of their choice." Additionally, another participant observed that there was a tendency within some of PLE programs where their programs were "geared towards already-active-kids and families," instead of balancing their focus towards less active children and families. This was echoed by other participants who stressed that when planning PLE, participants with various backgrounds, individualities, abilities, and aspirations should be welcomed and included through "diverse offerings, delivery in multiple settings, and with a high degree of choice built-in."

Conclusion

According to the participants, PLE should not only be targeted towards children but would also be beneficial to "all" (e.g., seniors, youth, individuals experiencing disabilities, individuals experiencing life and cultural transitions, and individuals who are marginalized and overlooked within the PLE contexts). A lifespan approach to PLE is thus required. As participants perceived, PLE might not merely be teaching skills for movement. Considering the holistic view of PLE, more efforts will be required to bring "everyday life" to the content area of PLE. Additionally, PLE should be a collaborative community effort that draws upon existing resources in the community. This type of approach will provide the opportunity to overcome the potential barriers to offering sustainable PLE programming. Furthermore, PLE needs to be extended to involve parents and family members in a meaningful way. One approach may be to recruit family members as volunteers for these programs or to provide parent education regarding physical literacy. As Ladda (2014) firmly concludes, "physical literacy is a

social justice issue”(p. 3) and that local initiatives should be organized in such a way that PLE contribute to socially just ends by being accessible and by offering programmatic choices to families. Lastly, training and technical assistance are crucial for supporting community organizations in delivering inclusive PLE(Scholl, Smith, & Davison, 2005).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics Approval

This study obtained an institutional review board approval from the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at the Memorial University.

Funding

This work was supported by the Memorial University Public Engagement Quick Start Fund and the RBC Learn to Play Leadership Grants.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express sincere thanks to community practitioners and stakeholders who have played an essential role in the Physical Literacy for All Youth (PLAY) Project. The authors also gratefully acknowledge Dr. YeonkyungJin who reviewed the manuscript and offered critical comments.

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