Phenomenology and Physical Education

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Abstract

Physical education is often justified within the curriculum as academic study, as a worthwhile activity on a par with other academic subjects on offer and easy to assess. Part of the problem has been that movement studies in physical education are looked upon as disembodied and disconnected from its central concerns which are associated with employing physical means to develop the whole person. But this, Merleau-Ponty would say, is to ignore the nature of experience and to consider the cognitive aspects of our perceptual experience in isolation from the personal meaning gained when looked at from the ‘inside’ or participatory perspective of the moving agent. In this sense, physical education has lost meaning for some students because our embodied relationship with the world is not an external or contemplative one. Phenomenology, according to Merleau-Ponty, is significant for physical education because it highlights what it is like to be embodied and recognises the role corporeal movement and embodiment plays in learning, in, by and through physical education. What makes this account educationally significant for physical education is that the whole person should benefit by the experience, as it includes an emphasis on all three educational domains (the psychomotor, the cognitive and the affective), rather than as separate physical and mental qualities that bear no relation to each other.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, embodiment, phenomenology, experience, meaning, physical education

Introduction

Physical education is often justified within the curriculum as academic study.¹ This is evident in the growth of examinable physical education (Carroll, 1998; Green, 2001, 2005) and the widespread acceptance of physical education in educational institutions as an academic subject, particularly in senior schooling and tertiary institutions (Brooker & Macdonald, 1995; Macdonald, Kirk, & Braiuka, 1999). This, in turn, has inadvertently led to a greater emphasis being placed upon the mastery of the theoretical knowledge component of school physical education as a means of gaining entry into the educational mainstream (Reid, 1996). The problem with such an approach is that teaching and learning experiences in physical education have become...
disproportionally theoretical and academic in nature and disconnected from the central tenets of physical education, which are concerned with employing physical means to develop each person’s whole being. More importantly, it neglects the important role the body plays in how I perceive myself, other persons and other things in the world. Put simply, without my ‘lived body’ I cease to consciously experience the world. For example, without eyes, we could not see, without limbs we could not act, and so on. But this is not enough as we also need the brain in order to have any experience at all. It follows, then, that if every experience embodies reaction and interaction of the whole organism to and with his or her environment, the experience cannot be just ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ because such views continue to perpetuate unaltered dualistic views and prejudices that are detrimental to the place of physical education in education. Because the educational benefits of the physical experience are not limited to just the traditional understanding of the term ‘physical’, a broader understanding is sought that integrates the mind with the body, including such areas as the cognitive and affective domains. Such an approach is significant to physical education because each student is treated as a whole being, permitting the person to experience him- or herself as a holistic and synthesised acting, feeling, thinking being-in-the-world, rather than as separate physical and mental qualities that bear no relation to each other.

Phenomenology, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. vi–viii), is a ‘manner or style of thinking’ about ‘space, time and the world’ as we ‘live’ in it rather than theorising about it. To Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. ix), central to what it is to be a human being is the idea that ‘I am the absolute source … of my existence … for I alone bring into being for myself …’ my own personal engagement with the world rather than as a detached subject or consciousness advanced by Descartes’ Cartesian point of view. Phenomenology from this point of view implies ‘a new cogito’ between the thinking self and what it is like to experience ourselves from the first person perspective, not as distinct ‘minds’ and ‘bodies’ but as unified persons who form intentions and act in the world because our bodies function in certain ways (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 58). Human experience is, according to Merleau-Ponty’s view, not something that we contemplate from some position outside the world, but itself part of that world. This in general terms is what Merleau-Ponty means when he argues that as experiencing subjects our being is unavoidably ‘being-in-the-world’. Since our engagement with the world is not just limited to the cognitive domain we need to recognise that a large part of our interest in the world is emotional, practical, aesthetic, imaginative and so on. Take, for example, the case of Bannister (1955) running on the beach. To Bannister, running means more to him perhaps because of the sheer joy derived from the experience. As such, it has individual meaning. It is not just efficient movement for the sake of moving from point A to B, but a specific experience which he emotionally values as a significant part of his life. It is important to note that an experience can take on many different meanings at the same time. Some of these meanings may be personal, as in the case of Bannister, but in general these same experiences can be shared with others and these are not necessarily expressible in words. Even though movement is one of the most fundamental features of a human being’s existence, it is only in, by and through movement experiences that it can be and often is meaning-
fully felt. Consequently, within the context of the hermeneutic–phenomenological framework, physical education should be treated as a necessary and vital part of education primarily because the diversity of these experiences offers opportunities to explore alternative modes of awareness, and develop insights into and new modes of being and possibilities perhaps not readily available elsewhere in the curriculum.

According to Thorburn (2008), physical education has lost its connection with practical learning environments and in the process a way of grasping subject knowledge that is significance for the students’ learning in question that is not purely intellectual or cognitive. Part of the problem has been that movement activities of physical education are looked upon as objects of disembodied academic study. But this, Merleau-Ponty would say, is to ignore the nature of experience and to consider the cognitive aspects of our perceptual experience in isolation from the personal meaning gained when looked at from the ‘inside’ or participatory perspective of the moving agent. In this sense, this is why physical education has lost meaning for some of these students because our embodied relationship with the world is not an external or a contemplative one. Rather, our bodies are the means by which we are ‘in the world’. There is no suggestion in this account that there are ‘minds’ and ‘bodies’ being developed, but only human beings. The implications for physical education are significant because a Merleau-Pontian account of phenomenology highlights what it is like to be embodied. If we accept this we shall see that we do not, except in special circumstances, experience our own bodies as objects at all because our embodiment is a sine qua non of our existence and consciousness. Embodiment also allows students to learn about themselves and the world in which they live. What makes this account educationally significant for physical education is that the whole person should benefit by the experience, as it includes an emphasis on all three educational domains: the psychomotor, the cognitive and the affective. Somewhat paradoxically, these benefits cannot be formally planned for, but are invaluable by-products that naturally arise out of engaging students in, by and through movement in physical education.

For the purposes of this article I will be concerned with the critical discussion of two issues: first, I outline the significant conceptual approaches made by Arnold (1979, 1988) and O'Loughlin (1998, 2006) to ascertain whether physical education could benefit from these understandings within the curriculum and what form this may take; and, secondly, I present a case for a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology in physical education discourse because it places the body as the central focal point in the production of the lived experience and provides the means to capture the phenomenon of the non-verbal characteristics of movement and their meanings in the human condition. It is to this critical discussion that I now turn.

(Re)conceptualising the Idea of Physical Education: What Does it Mean to be ‘Physically Educated’?

As with any philosophical thesis of education, one may challenge the liberal education paradigm by searching for inconsistencies or incoherence within it. Alternatively, one could totally abandon the paradigm all together and in doing so (re)conceptualise an
approach to physical education more conducive to its educational claims. Postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of traditional epistemology in education raise significant questions about the nature and meaning of knowledge and truth. The significance of embodied understanding in its various ways of ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ provides a strong basis for credible philosophical conceptions and justifications for the inclusion of physical education within educational institutions. Whitehead’s (1990) work challenges Peters’ and Hirst’s claims that education should transmit and initiate the unlearned into intrinsically worthwhile forms of knowledge that are considered to be constitutive of the rational mind. Whitehead (1990, 2001, 2010) argues that a person’s essential being is not just confined to his or her rationality, but involves an embodied dimension that should be given equal significance in education to the intellectual or cognitive. She goes on to argue that the aim of physical education should be to develop both embodied and intellectual capacities in such a way as to enhance our understanding of the world in which we interact.4

I now wish to focus on two philosophical conceptual approaches to meaning that are applicable to physical education discourse: Arnold’s (1979, 1988) three dimensions of movement in education and O’Loughlin’s (1998, 2006) embodied intelligence and practice in education.

Three Conceptual Dimensions of Movement in Education

Arnold (1979, 1988) proposes three conceptual dimensions of movement as a justification for its legitimate place within general education. He legitimates physical education as a stand-alone subject to be studied within the curriculum based on three overlapping and interdependent concepts: education ‘about’, ‘through’ and ‘in’ movement.5 Unfortunately, the problem with Arnold’s (1979, 1988) three dimensions of movement in education is that the ‘about’ and ‘through’ dimensions have tended to dominate at the expense of the ‘in’ dimension in school physical education programmes. This, in turn, has led physical education to be treated as just a theoretical subject to be studied. Kretchmar (2000) confirms this point when he argues that theorists of physical education have long agreed that meaning has a significant role to play, but there exists considerable scholarly disagreement over which model is perceived to provide the most successful pedagogical methods in practice. Thorburn (1999, 2008) confirms that most school-based physical education programmes characteristically lack the integration of practical activity with subject knowledge. He goes on to add that this has basically resulted in students’ being disengaged from the learning process owing to the limited number of practical opportunities to learn from personalised experience. To overcome these problems, Thorburn (2008) argues that a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological framework could improve what he refers to as ‘authenticity’ issues surrounding students’ learning in physical education by integrating more effectively students’ lived body experiences with experiential learning. It would appear that the benefits of the phenomenological route have educational potential. What makes phenomenology educationally desirable in this case is its capacity to take an explicitly body-linked subject such as physical education and describe how our embodiment has a significant role to play in student learning.
Bodies in Education: Practical Consciousness and Multisensorial Education

According to O'Loughlin (1998, 2006), there has been a tendency in postmodern conceptualisations first to view the subject of the body as a conceptual object of discourse and secondly to misunderstand the significance of the social dimension of embodiment. She adds that if we want the body to be taken seriously within education we need to shift its focus within research, practice and curriculum by helping individuals to access the realm of ‘practical consciousness’ and in the process assist agents to understand how it is they react ‘soma-tically’ in the world. To O'Loughlin (1998, p. 291), practical consciousness refers to the complex, but usually ignored aspects of situation involving awareness of the ‘… embodied subject’s attention to the habituated space …’ of themselves and others. For agents to come to an awareness of this realm requires an understanding of a ‘myriad of bodily positioning, gestures, orientations and verbal and non-verbal expressions’ which are not explicitly part of discourses (O'Loughlin, 1998, p. 291). At the moment, education seems to ignore the body altogether or render the body problematic, leaving a ‘disembodied/embodied’ divide in the curriculum. O'Loughlin (1998) acknowledges that sport (which I take to include physical education as well) is often assumed to provide the best opportunity for realising a practical consciousness owing to its being one of the most corporeal of the curriculum areas. Furthermore, the body in physical education seems to be confined within a relatively narrow set of disciplinary parameters that seems to focus exclusively on the body as an object that must be managed, maintained, conditioned, repaired and controlled in order to improve performance. To redress the imbalance of knowledge as disembodied, she argues that an embodied and multisensorial approach needs to be taken to the curriculum and to pedagogy by providing a diverse array of opportunities for exploring the multiplicity of experiences and behaviours through different spaces and environments. Embodiment in education has tended to be relegated to the margins of educational research, particularly surrounding what it means to become educated. Why this is the case has more to do with the body being ignored altogether or considered to be problematic, particularly in accounts of how we come to understand knowledge.

The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and its Significance for Physical Education

In direct contrast to the Platonic–Cartesian tradition, Merleau-Ponty does not view the body as a special kind of object separate from the mind, but views the body as ‘being-in-the-world’ in the sense that our embodiment precedes reflective thought. Anderson (2002, p. 94) reinforces this point by arguing that the ‘… experience of movement is thus humanising, just as is the reading of Shakespeare or Willa Cather—and just as are Cather’s and Shakespeare’s acts of writing’. He also argues that to denigrate our experiences of movement is to misunderstand the important of non-theoretical knowledge. The implications here are significant because such a position implies that there no longer exists a philosophical division between the object and subject because the world begins from the body and provides the means in which we can develop a sense of our own identity and at the same time come to know the world via physical action. This is confirmed by Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 140), who emphasises that our
body is a ‘meaningful core’ which actively engages with the world in a meaningful way, which in turn provides the ‘link between here and a yonder, a now and a future’.

The body has posed a significant problem and challenge for educational theorists, particularly with explicitly body-linked subjects such as physical education. According to O’Loughlin (2006), embodiment has been for the most part absent from educational research specifically in those areas which focus on the process of ‘becoming educated’ mainly because we have tended to accept that the body does not play a part in the construction of knowledge. She goes on to argue that to fully understand what is really involved in the making of different types of epistemic subjects requires a concentrated focus on the body as a multidimensional locus of all possible action. Unfortunately, past practice in the social sciences and regrettably to some point even in physical education discourse has focused on the discursively constructed body as an object of scrutiny. While there is some recognition of the socially constructed nature of experience, what is missing in this case is how pre-reflective experience of our corporeal nature enables meaning to develop. As we have seen, on Merleau-Ponty’s view of phenomenology human experience is essentially meaningful. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, we are ‘condemned to meaning’ and as a result everything in our involvement with our natural and human milieu is not value or meaning free.

To say that physical education is inextricably linked to the body to some is perhaps stating the obvious, but the philosophical position of the body and our concept of human nature will have a direct bearing on how we think human beings should behave, how they should be educated and particularly in this case how we think they should be educated physically. In much of contemporary sport and physical education theory and practice, there appears to be an almost implicit form of Cartesian dualism, despite occasional claims to the contrary. This is evident in the way the body is treated as a disembodied object of study in most physical education programmes within schools. This is further reinforced by McKay, Gore, and Kirk (1990, p. 60), who argue that the human body is seldom portrayed as a ‘... pleasurable site for ecstatic, aesthetic, vertiginous, autotelic, sensuous and holistic experiences ...’, but portrayed as a biomechanical object that must be managed, maintained, conditioned and repaired for instrumental reasons such as improving performance or physical appearance. Subsequently, the performer is regarded as an instrument or reduced into parts to be studied from a biological–scientific perspective with the express purpose of altering or controlling his or her corporeal aspects.

Rejecting the Cartesian conception of personhood which depicts the body as a machine or instrument that needs to be mastered permits human beings the opportunity to experience the depth and richness of our humanness (that being a ‘lived body’) and in a sense creates a ‘new truth’ about our active corporeal existence. Anderson (2002) makes the pertinent point that movement to physical education is analogous to the practice of music in the study of music, and so physical education without engagement in movement is like a music programme without musical instruments. Consequently, human movement is the place where we can both find meaning and express our own particular identity because the body is actively involved in the world and is also the locus of expression and meaning producing acts.
Embodiment should not be taken lightly because the experience of movement is humanising, providing a meaningful way of making sense of being-in-the-world. These meaningful movement experiences can be captured by our actions in physical education and in short represent, express and confirm our capabilities, intentions and ways of being. Physical education activities can have a serious educational function in that they provide human beings with an insight into the depth of their basic existence, an avenue of discovery and self-expression, and an awareness of their capabilities and limitations so they become conscious of what they are and what they are not. The power of this kind of knowing is in harmony with important principles commonly pursued in education: freedom to explore, freedom to discover, freedom to express, freedom to invent and freedom to create (Kretchmar, 1995). Whitehead (1990) reinforces this point further when she argues that our embodiment affords us two almost inseparable modes of engagement with the world: our body responds through movement according to the demands of our environment; it is also perceptually sensitive to the nature of this environment.9

If education is to be of the whole person it needs to be concerned with all of a person’s faculties and capacities. Merleau-Ponty’s view of phenomenology complements this view because it is the whole human being that experiences the world, not just the mind or the brain, even though I need a functioning mind or brain in order to experience at all. Unless human beings were embodied, we could not experience the world. As Merleau-Ponty reveals, perceptual capacities underpin all intellectual capacities, for as he says:

… we can only think the world because we have already experienced it; it is through this experience that we have the idea of being, and it is through experience that the words ‘rational’ and ‘real’ receive a meaning simultaneously. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 17)

At the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s account of phenomenology is a description of ‘perception’ or the world perceived from our experiences of being-in-the-world. In this context, to have being-in-the-world necessarily involves the unified whole in which the elements have no separate existence from each other, but contribute to a whole in a meaningful way. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), if we understand perception properly as the experience of an embodied subject, we assign meaning or value to objects perceived based on our practical and emotional relation to them, which is just as real as the objects’ properties. For instance, to a frightened child who has been burned, the light of a candle changes its ‘appearance’ and he or she becomes ‘literally repulsed’ by it, just as the candle is ‘bright’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 60).

The educational implications of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of human experiences connect strongly with the notion that learning involves the exploration of the world from where one is and a clear understanding of how things relate to each other and to ourselves in the world. It is an ongoing process. The key here is that we ‘come to’ understand something (if successful) from our own point of view as a result of experiencing it. To use Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, p. x) own analogy, we come to know ‘what a forest, a prairie or a river is’ because we have already
experienced the countryside as a place in which we have explored, not because of the abstract symbols of the geographer’s map.

Hughson and Inglis (2002) attempt to understand and capture the corporeal experiences of soccer players’ movements through language while recognising that the phenomenon of corporeal movement is essentially non-verbal in character. They go on to add that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of corporeal movement makes a ‘profound contribution to a very vexing problem, both within the philosophy of sport and philosophy in general’ because it captures the ‘evanescent qualities’ of corporeal experience in concepts and of language (p. 2). According to Hughson and Inglis (2002), Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy presents a more nuanced account of particular modes of corporeal experience that seems to grasp the uniqueness of experience in a concrete way rather than discredit it under other less phenomenological sympathetic philosophies. Subsequently, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy makes a significant two-fold contribution: first, it grasps the nature of experience in general and locates the body as the focal point in the production of the lived experience; and secondly, it captures the uniqueness of embodied experience in the language of the philosopher (Hughson & Inglis, 2002). Hughson and Inglis (2002), after an extensive and complex critique of Merleau-Ponty’s terminology of ‘body-subjects’, go on to apply this approach with the view of demonstrating how the ‘player-body-subject’s’ experience of soccer play might be reconstructed through philosophical analysis. On the basis of their critique they proceed to outline a phenomenological model for exploring the relationship that holds for, and underpins, forms of soccer play in general. This relationship is framed by three fundamental components in which each part is interdependent upon the other and represents a totality: (1) body-subject; (2) practical knowledge and actions; and (3) spatial form of the activity (Hughson & Inglis, 2002, p. 8). Although the triadic relationship was originally intended for soccer play, its structure has considerable application in other areas such as physical education discourse. The important point to take away from this framework is how the performer makes sense of his or her embodiment from a phenomenological perspective. For instance, an expert or proficient tennis player has a greater affinity with his or her swing than a novice or beginner as he or she has already achieved maximum grip and is able to understand kinaesthetic feedback more efficiently and adjust more quickly in a refined way. In this case, incorporating the educational aspects of teaching tennis with the phenomenological perspective for learning has more to do with providing experiences with the phenomenon such as the tennis swing (spatial form) with the overarching aim of increasing the body-subjects’ (students’) skilful understanding (knowledge and action) of the situation. These experiences enable the student to become familiar with the spatial form of the activity and at the same time to understand how kinaesthetic feedback is crucial in obtaining maximal grip in his or her situation. Merleau-Pontian phenomenology places the body as the central focal point in the production of the lived experience and provides the means to capture the phenomenon of the non-verbal characteristics of movement and their meanings in, by and through physical education.
Van Manen’s (1997) approach to the ‘lived experience’ shares similarities with Arnold’s third dimension of education ‘in’ movement owing to the emphasis he places on understanding something ‘from the inside’ as a means to gain a deeper appreciation of our everyday experiences from the first person perspective. In Van Manen’s approach, we have a good example of phenomenological study of human experience because he provides, on the one hand, a description of the quality of human experience, and on the other hand, a description of meaning as a being-in-the-world. For instance, phenomenology asks: What is this or that kind of experience like? It is important to realise that the basic idea of the lived experience could take two forms. The first attempts to describe and interpret an immediate description of the agent’s lifeworld as a being-in-the-world, whereas the second offers an intermediate description of the agent’s lifeworld involving a more active element of interpretation. Van Manen (1997) goes on to emphasise that the nature of the lived experience has a temporal structure which can never be grasped introspectively, but only retrospectively, and thereby has an interpretative element that relates the particular to the universal, part to whole, episode to totality. According to Van Manen (1997, p. 101), our lived experience can be described and interpreted by four fundamental ‘lifeworld’ themes or ‘existentials’ useful as guides in the reflective process: spatiality (lived space), corporeality (lived body), temporality (lived time) and relationality (lived other) by which all human beings experience the world, although not all in the same modality. He goes on to provide an example of a father and son going for a bike ride to highlight his point that the significance of the lived experience gathers meaning when the father assigns memory to the experience and interprets the quality of the space, mood and shared world associated with ‘going for a bike ride with my son’ as something special and unique, and in the reflective act determinates it as a meaningful aspect of his life. Investigating experience as we live it aims at establishing a connection with the original experience.

Thorburn (2008, pp. 272–273) argues that the first step in implementing a phenomenological approach in physical education is to recognise the distinguishing characteristics of the lived experience using an ‘… autobiographical writing approach, and then analyse the criteria by which students’ learning can be measured following practice’. Likewise, for Connolly (1995, p. 27), the lived experience is a place where we can conceptualise ‘… a praxis that celebrates subjective lived experience, and that places the body as the centre of things’ in which the body, body-subject, lived experiencer provides us with a method ‘… for feeling, seeing, knowing, and understanding our lived experiences and the meaning(s) of those experiences’. According to Connolly (1995), phenomenology and physical education share a ‘common ground’ through three sensitising concepts: lived experience, intersubjectivity and ‘insiders’ stories (or lived experience descriptions). She goes on to outline three ways in which phenomenology can be used effectively in physical education: (1) when the body does something in physical education we create opportunities for narrative descriptions (insiders’ stories) which can generate a ‘voice of the body’ that has a unifying potential about what the body does, or how it feels to do something; (2) eidetic features
give significant meaning to the experience which when made explicit can be used heu-
ristically as a pedagogical method in physical education; and (3) shifting the focus to
the body as the integrating centre of things forces us to refute dualism and to realise
that as humans we are at our best when we are consciously aware of our embodiment.
It is important to note that neither physical education nor phenomenology on its own
can do this, but it is only through making the connection between physical education
and phenomenology explicitly clear that we can begin to see the value of using physi-
cal means to educate in physical education. After all, physical education offers us a
means to discover the corporeal movement of the body and phenomenology offers us
a means of articulating our relation to our own bodies, particularly from a Merleau-
Pontian point of view. This is further confirmed by Connolly, who states:

If we are to make the wisdom of the body intelligible, we must find ways of
telling our stories, listening to our stories, and making our own stories
meaningful for ourselves and others. (Connolly, 1995, p. 39)

To ignore this dimension is to close off those embodied experiences of the world
that arise naturally through bodily movement, which Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 121)
calls the ‘phenomenal body’ and refers to what ‘I’ experience as a natural system of
one’s own body taking place in the domain of the phenomenal. An example of this
occurs when my hand moves around the object it touches, anticipating the stimuli
and tracing out its form which I am about to perceive. Our perception ends in objects
because our own body as experienced by us ‘from the inside’ makes contact with the
object through touch, stimuli and tracing out its form from the first person point of
view. Simply put, we cannot come to understand our embodiment if we do not
engage in the world as a being-in-the-world. The phenomenal body is what we experi-
ence as a first person subject of experience and as a result we can only exist in con-
nection with a lived body. We can make contact with the world not just by thinking
about it, but through experiencing it with senses, acting in it, in ways that range from
the most complex to the most primitive unreflective movements. The student experi-
ences and apprehends his or her body neither as an abstract object nor as an instru-
ment, but as a ‘lived body’ subject that senses and does the sensing in a meaningful
way. Subsequently, movement becomes significant not by knowledge about the body
or what it does in a disembodied way, but it is through doing and being on the
‘inside’ of physical education that we become aware of our embodiment. The educa-
tional implications are that because we have experienced our embodiment through a
family of physical activities in physical education we can come to know or learn about
the various scientific (biomechanics, physiology and so on) analyses of the body and
make sense of them in a meaningful way. Consequently, one of the primary roles of
physical education is about making movement experiences as significant as possible
by exploring different physical learning environments from the students’ perspective
so that students gradually come to understand how things relate to each other and to
themselves. To do this we need to locate the body as the focal point in the production
of the lived experience, and also recognise the role that corporeal movement and
embodiment plays in learning, in, by and through physical education.
Conclusion

I have argued that embodiment in education should be taken seriously because movement experiences in and through physical education can provide opportunities that are humanising and that provide authentic opportunities to concretely reinforce the point that a person’s essential being is more than just his or her rationality—he or she is a being-in-the-world. In the words of Arnold (1979, p. 179), to deny ‘... bodily action and meaning because of prejudice or neglect is to deny the possibility of becoming more fully human’. Greater recognition, then, needs to be given to the role that embodiment and corporeal movement plays in student learning. This can only be achieved through physical education which provides a multiplicity of experiences and behaviours in different spaces and environments by physical means, in contrast to learning about movement in a theoretical, disembodied way. It follows that if we are serious about education, we need to be interested in physical education. It is a necessary part of the curriculum because it is the whole person—not just the mind—that goes to school. The thinking, feeling and acting facets of a person are combined to give a person an experience of what it is to be a moving being that goes further than other forms of education that have a particular focus on propositional forms of knowledge. In essence, physical education is vital to a meaningful curriculum because the primacy of perception illuminates that the basis for our cognition is through bodily experience.

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Notes

1. A case in point is the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Study Design for Physical Education (Victoria, Australia), which has an external end-of-year examination worth 50% and two prescribed school-based pieces of assessment worth 25% each. Contrary to what is claimed in the rationale (‘integration of theoretical knowledge with practical application through participation in physical activity’), it is not until much later in the prescription of ‘School-based Coursework (Units 3 & 4)’ do we see that practical activities are only used as a means to an end, such as collecting data to be used in laboratory reports, data analysis and so on in written assessment tasks.

2. In Bannister’s words (1955, pp. 11–12): ‘In this supreme moment I leapt for joy. I was startled, and frightened, by the tremendous excitement that so few steps could create. I glanced around uneasily to see if anyone was watching. A few more steps—self consciously now and firmly gripping the original excitement. The earth seemed almost to move with me. I was running now, and a fresh rhythm entered my body. No longer conscious of my movement I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamt existed. From intense moments like this, love of running can grow. This attempt at explanation is of course inadequate, just like any analysis of the things we enjoy—the description of a rose to someone who has never seen one’.

3. For convenience I shall refer to supporters of some kind of forms of knowledge view as ‘the liberal education paradigm’. The central tenet of this paradigm views education as the
pursuit of knowledge in the development of the mind, whatever form that freely takes. Refer to Peters (1966), Hirst and Peters (1970) and Hirst (1974).

4. Whitehead’s (1990, 2001, 2010) work is influenced by continental philosophy and has strong themes of existentialism and phenomenology. Her conceptual account of ‘physical literacy’ is particularly apt for physical education (2001, 2010). The concept relies on the acceptance of a monist approach in which the lived body (embodied dimension) in the unending circle of perception and response of our physical dimension plays a central role in human existence and in the development of the individual. In her words (Whitehead, 2001, p. 136): ‘Physical Literacy requires a holistic engagement that encompasses physical capacities embedded in perception, experience, memory, anticipation and decision making.’

5. Arnold (1979, 1988) views physical education as an educational experience, in which we explore the possibilities and limitations of our bodies in the curriculum via three conceptual dimensions of education ‘about’, ‘through’ and ‘in’ movement. In a nutshell, education ‘about’ movement is best understood as a specific subject that draws upon a diverse array of discipline areas such as physiology, psychology, sociology, philosophy and so on, and as a result comprises its own theoretical body of knowledge and may be regarded as a serious area of research to be studied that can be applied in practical situations. Education ‘through’ movement can best be understood as a family of physical activities which are normally found and associated with the term physical education. In the third dimension, education ‘in’ movement brings together the view that physical activities when experienced from the ‘inside’ (or participatory perspective) permit the actualisation of themselves in a set of distinctive and bodily orientated contexts which ultimately provides opportunities for the agent to learn about themselves and the world in which they live, in a meaningful way.

6. Other significance sources of Merleau-Ponty’s work worth consulting are The structure of behaviour (1963) and The primacy of perception (1964).

7. Take, for example, Kirk (1998, see Chapter I), Tinning and Glasby (2002) and Webb, Quennerstedt, and Öhman (2008).

8. According to O’Loughlin (2006) the concept of a ‘discursively constructed body’ draws upon an understanding of corporeal inscription which has historically occurred through external power structures such as schools, but this notion of disciplining and regulating the body has taken on new meaning to also include overt consent to regulate and manage oneself.

9. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead (1990, p. 4) argues that our motility plays a significant part in giving meaning to objects (operative meaning) so that when the actual interaction occurs there is, ‘... at one and the same time, a reaffirmation of the operative meaning of the object, and an actualisation of a mode of the individual’s motile capacity...’. Since we are essentially a being-in-the-world our continuous engagement with the world is basically a form of ‘operative liaison’ that gives us an appreciation of our environment and a realisation of our embodied capacities. She argues that operative meaning and operative liaison have been neglected and ignored both in what contribution they can make to perception as a whole and in their potential for developing an enriched interaction with the world that could be nurtured and developed through and in physical education.

10. Hubert Dreyfus (2002) seeks to combine the insights brought forward by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology with dynamical approaches in neuroscience in the sporting context. Dreyfus (2002) provides an interpretative description of intentional arc and maximal grip by using the example of a tennis swing. In the novice performer much of the agent’s effort is on acquiring (pre-reflective thought) and laying down some of the finer aspects of the movements (intentional arc), whereas for the expert, prior experience has sculpted the agent’s swing to the point where pre-reflection is no longer required and the agent can be more absorbed in the game because maximum grip (muscular gestalt) has been achieved.
References


