Physical literacy in Swedish physical education and health (PEH): what is (im)possible in becoming and being physically literate (educated)?

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Physical literacy (PL) has gained considerable attention and traction in the field of health and physical education (HPE) for some time now and can thus be seen as part of the HPE discourse. However, just as advocacy for PL has grown exponentially over the last decade(s), so have the critical voices raised over the universal adoption of this concept in HPE curricula and practices. The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the influence and constitution of the concept of PL in the Swedish school subject physical education and health (PEH) curriculum and practice can be understood through a Bernsteinian lens. We argue that although the influence of the concept PL on current Swedish PEH practice to date has been limited, such an influence within a neoliberal context, risk (re)producing idealised and limited notions of what is (im)possible in becoming and being a physically literate (educated) individual in Swedish PEH and beyond. We conclude by calling for the recognition of the plurality of physical literacies in the (re)constitution of HPE/PEH practices underpinned by inclusion, diversity, equity and social justice.

Introduction

The concept of physical literacy (PL) is meant to capture the holistic and multi-faceted nature of student learning in school health and physical education (HPE) (Whitehead, 2010). Using this concept is about highlighting that HPE is not just about student learning through the psychomotor domain, but also the cognitive and affective domains (Cothran, 2016). PL as articulated by Whitehead (2010) wants to foreground a holistic perspective of students’ lived experiences in and through HPE by, for instance, rejecting the mind–body dualism. She conceptualised PL as the embodiment of motivation, confidence, physical competence and the embodiment of the knowledge and understanding that enables individuals to realise their innate potential through embodied experiences (Whitehead, 2010).
PL has gained considerable attention and traction in the field of HPE for some time now and can thus be seen as part of the HPE discourse (Lundvall, 2015). One explanation for this is the use of the word ‘literacy’ which equates to the terminology typically used in other school subjects (Cothran, 2016) that can be considered as being positioned as having a higher status and greater importance in education. McCuaig, Enright, Rossi, Macdonald, and Hansen (2016), for instance, reminds us that fundamental movement skills were seen just as important as other academic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic in the early twentieth century British and Australian curricula.

An ever-growing body of literature has examined this concept from a multitude of perspectives (see e.g. Cairney, Dudley, Kwan, Bulten, & Kriellaars, 2019a; Durden-Myers, Whitehead, & Pot, 2018; Hyndman & Pill, 2018; Lundvall, 2015; Pot, Whitehead, & Durden-Myers, 2018; Robinson, Randall, & Barrett, 2018; Whitehead, Durden-Myers, & Pot, 2018; Young, O’Connor, & Alfrey, 2019). In their textual analysis of 49 international papers on PL, Hyndman and Pill (2018) highlight that ‘PL is strongly associated with physical domains of learning, yet there is less relevance and connection with cognitive, social and emotional domains of learning that are possible from PE’ (p. 308) … and that ‘PL in international studies appears to be conceptualised via a traditional understanding of PE’ (pp. 308-309). They conclude that PL seems to do little to address conceptual, pedagogical and curriculum concerns to ensure PE possesses a clear educative proposition (Hyndman & Pill, 2018). What particularly appears uncontested, is that PL involves various movement competencies and skills and that increased engagement in physical activity leads to improved health in terms of life-long safe engagement in physical activity (see Cairney et al., 2019a; Cairney, Kiez, Roetert, & Kriellaars, 2019b; Corbin, 2016; Dudley, 2018; Dudley, Cairney, Wainwright, Kriellaars, & Mitchell, 2017; Edwards et al., 2018; Johnson, McKenna, & Lévesque, 2016; Robinson et al., 2018; Young et al., 2019).

HPE, as part of the educational field, has always been searching for and open to the idea of identifying and articulating concepts or notions that can encapsulate both the unique and important contribution of this school subject compared others, thus (re)asserting its relevance and legitimacy. But, as Quennerstedt, McCuaig, and Mårdh (2020) claim, the HPE field has for (too) long ‘embraced practices that promise an idealised scenario in terms of, for example, moral and aesthetic development, the building of national identity, or the contribution of a healthy and fit population seeking to achieve national health objectives through exercise-oriented programs (p. 1).

Just as advocacy for PL has grown exponentially over the last decade(s), so have the critical voices raised over the universal adoption of this concept in HPE practice with Cairney et al. (2019b, p. 79) suggesting that we are in a ‘critical period for intellectualisation of the construct’. Quennerstedt et al. (2020) recently argued that the promotion of PL is ‘about encouraging children to move, move, move and all will be well’ and that ‘physical literacy is often presented as something inherently good and, if implemented in [H]PE, will bring numerous benefits to the individual and society’ (p. 11). Lundvall (2015) further raised concerns about the view of PL as an idealistic neutral concept or framework for HPE as it can also be interpreted as being synonymous with fundamental movement skills (see also Young, O’Connor, Alfrey, & Penney, 2020). Another concern is how the concept’s underlying philosophical foundations fits with the legitimacy and possibilities of assessing components of PL (within HPE) (Lundvall, 2015). Chen (2020) concludes that the function of an assessment system is to assess students’ learning achievement of curriculum
goals rather than assess PL itself (p. 151). This demands a critical examination of how PL fits into the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessments (see Chen, 2020; Evans & Penney, 2008; Lundvall & Tidén, 2013; Young et al., 2020). Bailey (2020) states in his article *Defining Physical literacy – making sense of a promiscuous concept*, that PL is an immature concept, with a diversity of definitions, based on philosophical foundations, and with a lack of empirical studies. He asks the rhetorical question: ‘So, perhaps the currently ambiguous situation with PL, might be aided by a change of language to “physical literacies”? ’ (Bailey, 2020, p. 9). Recognising the multiple constructs of PL would help encourage differences and diversity which could in particular be important for students who in different ways are marginalised due to the reproduction of narrow ideals of what it means to be a physically literate or educated individual (Bailey, 2020).

In spite of the current situation with several researchers pointing to the risk of misuse of the concept, several countries in the world such as the USA, Canada, UK and Australia have started to integrate PL as parts of their national HPE guidelines or curricula. This is also the scenario for fields of knowledge production beyond PEH (to use a Bernsteinian concept) like organised club sport, national sporting associations and commercial organisers of sports activities. For more than one and a half decade there has been an ongoing discussion about ability and ‘educability’ within the field of HPE which Sweden has also been a part of (see e.g. Larsson & Karlefors, 2015; Nyberg & Larsson, 2014; Quennerstedt, 2019a, 2019b). However, higher education in the form of physical education teacher education (PETE) programes and HPE practitioners, have been relatively slow and perhaps somewhat unwilling to engage with PL. There has been a kind of awaiting positioning in relation to the concept of PL (later on in this paper we will discuss why this might be the case). Hence, the specific aim of this paper is to illustrate how the influence and constitution of the concept of PL in the Swedish school subject physical education and health (PEH) curriculum and practice can be understood through a Bernsteinian lens. An additional aim is to discuss how different conceptualisations of PL can enable or constrain socially just and more equitable physical activity and health outcomes. Thus, the paper is based on the following research questions: *How has the concept of physical literacy been influential and constituted in Swedish PEH curriculum and practice over time?* (ii) *How can different conceptualisations of physical literacy enable or constrain socially just and more equitable physical activity and health outcomes?*

Building on Lundvall (2015), we will argue that although the influence of PL in Swedish PEH to date has been limited, such an influence on both practices and assessment within a neoliberal context, risk (re)producing idealised and limited notions of what is (im)possible in becoming and being physically literate (educated). We conclude by calling for the recognition of the plurality of physical literacies in the (re)constitution of HPE practices underpinned by inclusion, diversity, equity and social justice.

**Bernstein and modes of pedagogical discourses**

Bernstein’s (2000) theoretical framework of classification and framing has inspired our analysis of the influence and constitution of the concept of PL in the Swedish PEH curriculum and pedagogical discourse. The analysis includes curricula reforms over time, and the interrelated message system between privileged pedagogical discourses, and the repositioning of educational knowledge to be assessed (for a similar approach see
What is defined as a strongly or weakly framed curriculum depends on two types of curricula codes; the collection type represented by a strongly classified curriculum where the content and pedagogic practice is isolated and not open for discussion or shared, and the integrated type, representing a more open curriculum where the boundaries around subjects and practice are weaker and the focus is on commonalities. Bernstein proposes two modes of pedagogical practices the performance pedagogic discourse related to the collection code and the competence pedagogic discourse related to the integrated curriculum code. The pedagogic practice (what to be learned) is governed by the regulating principles, the social logic of the embedded rules for control and communication. Curricula produced by educational experts and politicians in the pedagogic recontextualizing field defines what counts as valid knowledge and appropriate discourses. Pedagogy produced in the field of knowledge production defines what will be the valid transmission of knowledge. The chosen assessment system at different points of time, defines the valid realisation of knowledge, and becomes the driver of curriculum and the reproduction of the pedagogical discourse (Bernstein, 1973, 2000; Evans & Penney, 2008; Young et al., 2020). Below we give an overview of important shifts of curriculum codes and message systems in Sweden related to PL and PEH pedagogic practice to highlight how different notions of a (physically) literate individual can enable or constrain socially just and more equitable physical activity and health outcomes.

The changing constitution of the Swedish PEH curriculum

The school subject PEH has been part of the Swedish school system for almost 200 years. In Sweden, the first 100 years of PEH were dominated by a system of bodily exercise called the ‘Linggymnastics’, created by Per-Henrik Ling. This system was based on certain ideas about the performance and a disciplined schooling of the body, closely linked to Lings’ ethical and aesthetic ideals, and to perspectives of health regarded as holistic, expressed through balance and symmetry, resting on knowledge gained from studies of the human body. Sport was not a part of the Swedish Linggymnastics (Lundvall & Schantz, 2013). Coming into the 1900s and the first half of the 1900s, sport with its focus on performance and competition became part of the bodily exercise culture and expanded for the ensuing decades.

After the Second World War the left-wing social democrat led governments had the ambition to secure a compensatory school system, as part of the building of a welfare state. The educational system, it was argued, should be based on equitable opportunities and outcomes for all children, no matter socio-economic status, cultural background or geographic location. The paragraph ‘an equal education for all’ is still withstanding in The Swedish Education Act which stipulates that the education provided in each school form and in school-age educare should be equivalent, regardless of where in the country it is provided (SNAE, 2011a). From the mid 1940s the overall curriculum changed from being based on a collection code to an integrated code (Bernstein, 1973, 2000). According to a Bernstein perspective, this represented a gradual change leaving a traditional view of society to a more modern one, built on a welfare model.

From the 1950s up to the 1970s comes a period in Swedish PEH referred to by Annerstedt (1991) as the ‘physiological phase’ which was established on the latest findings from exercise science and physiology. This scientific knowledge of the exercising body led to a
new framing and appropriate discourses of the subject, and a rapid shortfall of the Ling-gymnastics’ dominant position in the PEH curriculum (Lundvall & Schantz, 2013). The focus of curricula and teachers was from now on how to physically train the body, and sport could be a legitimate tool for this. Sport practices offered something different from the old forms of individual gymnastics on command, instead favouring benefits of exercising and ‘making an effort’ together. Though this did not result in advocated sport-based models for teaching. A citation from the curriculum in 1962 (Lgr 62) gives an indication of the retention of a holistic view of the human being but also an emerging view of the contribution of physical education as part of an individual’s development of (physical) literacy:

The contemporary view of physical education is determined by e.g. the knowledge of the intimate interplay between the individual’s bodily and spiritual qualities and the perception that man is a totality … The teaching of physical education should give the students opportunities to try and practice various gymnastics and sports … The teaching of physical education should aim to develop team spirit, self-discipline, helpfulness and leadership skills. (Lgr 62, p. 295, authors own translation)

The next shift in terms of privileged discourses that affected the recontextualization field of PEH was the societal and political development and the striving for equal rights between men and women. This led to a questioning of the organisation of gender-separated PETE and school PEH. Old ideals of the interplay between bodily and spiritual qualities became juxtaposed with new ones. The process of mixing the two different PEH cultures, the ongoing sportification process of bodily movement practices and the physiological discourse for training and exercise, led to a new gender order and a loss of the female PEH culture with a broader spectra of movement education and learning processes including aesthetical experiences and bodily awareness (Carli, 2004). This led to a subsequent marginalisation of its pedagogy. From several aspects the former pedagogic discourses for female PEH touched upon what we today would relate to PL. For corresponding changes in other countries, see, for instance, Vertinsky and Kirk (2016) and Kirk (2010).

The coeducation reform came in parallel with a revision of the overall curricula including PEH. This review did not lead to a revised goal of PEH. This was still, as during the 1960s and onwards, to satisfy and develop pupils’ need for an all-round (versatile) and harmonious bodily development. Related to this development was the acquiring of certain ethical/moral values:

The teaching of physical education shall satisfy the students’ need for recreational body movement and participation in their versatile and harmonious development. … The teaching shall aim to develop team spirit, self-discipline, helpfulness and leadership ability. It shall stimulate lasting interest and understanding of the need for physical activity as a means of recreation and health. (Lgr 80, p. 344, authors own translation)

The implementation of the co-education reform in the early 1980s turned out to have some unforeseen long-term consequences. What did happen after the coeducation reform was that girls as individuals and as a group had difficulties achieving the higher grades to the same extent as boys (Carli, 2004). Looking back, it is possible to state that the gender-neutral PEH curriculum would have benefited from some linking of educational practices to larger institutional, social cultural and historical factors. No
initiatives were taken in the recontextualization field in terms of a production of a revised curriculum, competence development for teachers or the production of materials for a repositioned educational knowledge to support a becoming of a gender-neutral school subject. Sport as it was known at that time, was heavily built on masculinised values and norms. This caused troubles for the assessments of girls’ knowledge and skills. It took until the mid-2010s (2016) before the gap between girls’ and boys’ PEH grades was closed and girls achieved to the same extent as boys the highest grades in PEH (Svennberg, 2017).

The next important shift of curriculum type and message system for Swedish curriculum was the overall transformation of the Swedish school system to a goal-oriented one during early 1990s. This shift was part of the neoliberal ideas of the time and had consequences for the pedagogical discourses of PEH, not the least for aspects of (physical) literacy and the conceptualisation of health and physical activity. From now on, the subject went from being mainly physical education, including outdoor education and dance, to encompassing a broader assignment, as mirrored in the new and current name ‘Physical Education and Health’ (’Idrott och hälsa’) (Lpo, 1994). Thereby it went from a ‘management by content to management by objectives’, with a strong emphasis on assessing defined knowledge and abilities with goals for students to strive for and to attain. The core content in Swedish PEH was formulated into three content areas: Movement, Health and lifestyle and Outdoor life and activities, leaving the former eight (activity) areas mainly formulated as to sports disciplines, gymnastics, dance and outdoors. Knowledge requirements or learning outcomes were defined for Years 6 and 9 and focused on what the students were expected to know and/or display. Skills and competences necessary to be evaluated was described for each grading step (pass with distinction, pass, not passed [fail]).

The now strongly classified goal-oriented PEH-curriculum challenged the former traditions of the fostering and educating of the whole child. For teachers this meant that former content that had been highlighted such as team spirit, fair play, leadership was mis-aligned with the new system. The learning of moral and ethical values in relation to PEH were to be downplayed, and not part of the assessment. The pedagogical practice was supposed to be outcome driven, going ‘from doing to knowing’, ‘from activities to knowledge’; in other words, from learning sports activities and social fostering to learning about health and physically active lifestyles. This shift contained a new different epistemological perspective on learning to be instigated, a competing reading as Evans and Penney (2008) formulates it. Suddenly there existed pre-given criteria of what kinds of physical abilities or literacies that were to be displayed. According to Larsson (2007, 2016) this induced a new focus on health and physical activity, viewing the learner from a more instrumental and objective perspective rather than from a hermeneutic perspective, that is, as a subject.

The neoliberal idea of active citizenship came to be represented in both the general and PEH curriculum; it presupposed individual responsibility and individuals as autonomous co-actors with the ability to make healthy (correct) choices. By adding ‘health’ to the name of the subject, different perspectives on health needed to be defined and articulated for pedagogical and didactical actions. Both the recontextualization field and the field of pedagogical reproduction where the pedagogical practices were to take place were now questioned: how to learn about health in PEH given its traditions of activity and former pedagogical practices: what could health be and how to experience and
assess health? (Quennerstedt & Öhman, 2014). The same question could be asked in relation to movement and physical activity: How could movement education be defined, and what movement abilities were to be foregrounded and why?

The shift from an integrated code representing a more open curriculum and a competence mode with a focus on togetherness/commonalities and practices ‘here and now’, to a performance mode, limited teachers’ freedom and placed emphasis on specific outputs of the acquirer (e.g. the learner/student) (Bernstein, 1973, 2000). Gone was the curricula text where students’ bodily experiences were seen as part of the learning process and in exchange came asked for measurable knowledges that the PEH teachers found hard to define and teach. Several new actors like for example public health scientists, physiotherapists, and physicians outside of education and PEH became active.

Larsson (2016) argues that this new view on health can clearly be linked to a natural science or medical perspective on physical activity and the body. Ability became (re)configured within this new mode of a performance discourse and became characterised by expectations of pedagogies of control with more or less fixed abilities to be displayed. The growing interest for children’s embodied capacity at that time can also be linked to the surrounding society’s fear of physical inactivity patterns and predicted increased health risks among groups of young people. Tests for assessments of movement ability were asked for and performed tests of fundamental movement skills and movement competence reported a surprisingly large number of schoolchildren that had not reached the standards for school year 5 and 9 (Nyberg & Tidén, 2006; Tidén, 2016).

A revision of the Swedish curriculum was implemented in 2011, a new grading scale with seven steps (A-F) and a specific PEH ‘commentary material’ (SNAE, 2011a) was produced to support teachers’ and students’ understandings of valid knowledge; what was meant to be learnt and how this was to be assessed. Through this revision the performance code grew even stronger. Almost ten years later, a slightly revised national PEH curriculum for compulsory schooling (age 7-15) based on the curriculum from 2011, is to be implemented. The current aim of the Swedish PEH for compulsory schooling reads as follows:

“Teaching in physical education and health should aim at pupils developing all-round movement capacity and an interest in being physically active and spending time outdoors in nature. Through teaching, pupils should encounter a range of different kinds of activities. Pupils should also be given the opportunity to develop knowledge about what factors affect their physical capacity, and how they can safeguard their health throughout their lives. Pupils should also be given the opportunities to develop a healthy lifestyle and also be given knowledge about how physical activity relates to mental and physical well-being. (SNAE, 2011a, p. 48)

/ ... Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills and respect for others. Teaching should create the conditions for all pupils throughout their schooling to regularly take part in physical activities at school, and contribute to the pupils developing good physical awareness and a belief in their own physical capacity/. (SNAE, 2011a, p. 48)

The teaching in PEH should give the students in compulsory school possibility to develop their ability to:
• move without restriction in different physical contexts,
• plan, implement and evaluate sports and other physical activities based on different views of health, movement and lifestyle,
• carry out and adapt time recreational and outdoor life to different conditions and environments, and
• prevent risks during physical activities, and manage emergency situations on land and in water (SNAE, 2011a, p. 48).

None of these abilities highlight social and/or self-competencies, such as cooperation, fair play, or self-reflection in relation to self and others. To ‘move without restriction in different physical contexts’, is in the commentary material (SNAE, 2011b) translated into ‘competence’ in movement, going from fundamental movement skills, to complex and combined movement skills or competences.

Although there is no direct link to PL in the Swedish PEH curriculum one of Whitehead’s definitions of PL can be seen to contain many similarities with the aim and scope of the Swedish PEH curriculum described above:

This individual moves with poise, economy and confidence in a wide variety of physically challenging situations. Furthermore, the individual is perceptive in ‘reading’ all aspects of the physical environment, anticipating movement needs or possibilities and responding appropriately to these, with intelligence and imagination. (Whitehead’s (2001, p. 131)

These similarities are also evident in the following example of knowledge requirements for the last year of compulsory schooling (Year 9) (SNAE, 2011a):

Pupils can participate in games and sports involving complex movements in different settings, and vary and adapt their movements well to activities and context. (p. 53)

The following criteria are set for the grade ‘A’:

• The student moves with good rhythm, precision and balance
• The student moves with established, relaxed and consistent movements with flow and stability in movement transitions
• The student is more determined and can repeat the movement with the same good results
• The student moves economically; a movement pattern with a well-balanced effort

All of these curriculum objectives focusing on the students’ ability to ‘vary and adapt their movements’ and move “with precision” ‘with flow’ and ‘economically’ thus resonate well with Whitehead’s conceptualisation of PL cited above.

The influence of (physical) literacy in Swedish PEH

The interrelated message system of curricula- pedagogy-assessment is important to reflect upon as the message system of learning outcomes in curricula is linked to requirements in terms of what knowledge and ability the student should be able to demonstrate. Indeed, several of the requirements in the Swedish PEH curriculum can be related to PL such as: to gain access to and acquire an embodied physical competence, which includes
the ability to read, understand, and critically reflect upon embodied experiences in relation to self and others (SNAE, 2011a).

Although, there are, as described above, similarities between the foundations of PL and the aim and scope of the current Swedish PEH curriculum, the term PL has never explicitly been used. However, this does not mean that (physical) ‘literacy’ viewed as (physical) competence has not been influential in the shaping of the constitution and development of the Swedish PEH curriculum. This can be understood through Bernstein’s analysis of forms of pedagogic practice and the use of ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ pedagogies. Invisible pedagogies are less concerned with producing stratifying differences between learners and instead focused on internal affective (‘non-gradeable’) procedures of acquisition. This fits well with the earlier versions of Swedish PEH curriculum and Whitehead’s original conceptualisation of PL (competence mode). Visible pedagogies, however, put emphasis on ‘gradeable’ performances that signal differences between learners and therefore their potential, as judged against a common set of procedures (performance mode). The Swedish PEH can thus be seen to have moved from invisible to more visible pedagogies where an emphasis on transmission – performance is now more desired.

From a Bernsteinian viewpoint, literacy represents the promoting of a pedagogical model of a competence mode or discourse; what people have in common, driven by a pedagogical device that allows learning situations based on desires, experiences, and intrinsic values and the building of relations to PEH subject matter content (Bernstein, 2000, 2003; Evans & Penney, 2008; Hay & Macdonald, 2010). This articulates well with the Swedish political compensatory and equity goal for schooling. Accordingly, one finding from the analysis of curricula reforms and message systems over time is that this may be due to a long period of an integrated curriculum code where a competence mode has been dominating the curricula and pedagogic practice. Literacy has so to speak been part of the development of ‘man as a totality’. The last two decades has been characterised by a more distinct performance mode, and here Whitehead’s definition of PL can be said to be represented to some extent, but not when it comes to, for instance, the affective-motivational aspects. This leads to another finding or reflection, that is, how ‘literacy’ has been defined in a similar but different way.

One concrete example of this is the first Swedish teaching material that brought up (physical) ‘literacy’ in relation to PEH. In 2000, two PEH teacher educators, Ekberg and Erberth’s (2000) published their book called ‘Physical Literacy – about the subject physical education and health. In their book, they unpack PL and highlight how this concept is/should be part of the underpinning educational idea and philosophy of PEH. They refer to the report ‘A school for literacy’, written by the official Curriculum Committee, appointed by the government in early 1990s. In the report it is stated how curriculum work is ultimately about questions about formal education and what a public school system can and should do, and that this is also about literacy in its deepest and widest sense (SoU, 1992:94, p. 9). Both the Curriculum Committee and Ekberg and Erberth relate their definition of literacy to the European continental tradition of ‘bildung’, (often translated into English as literacy). Bildung represents the education of a person’s personality in an embodied way, to grow as a human being and to be able to navigate in a broad sense in society with knowledge that can be used in different contexts (Burman, 2014). Bildung, as a term is related to a hermeneutic knowledge
tradition not to phenomenology and monism which Whitehead’s theorising of PL is based on. Bildung as a term is related to a hermeneutic knowledge tradition where to understand the reflective character of human experience is in focus. This is not part of phenomenology and monism, where focus is to describe the essence of human experience, to eliminate the dichotomy of body and soul. Though what is obvious is that later teaching materials used in Swedish PEH practice, do connect to Whitehead’s definition of PL (Larsson, 2007, 2016; Lundvall & Meckbach, 2007). Then the concept is related to children’s development of all-round movement ability/capacity, as part of pupils’ learning of body pedagogies and physical, psychological and social abilities. Hence, the current PEH curriculum’s formulation: ‘move without restriction in different physical contexts’ (SNAE, 2011a) could be seen as related to parts of Whitehead’s definition of PL. What the different uses of literacy as a concept have in common, at a macro level, is that literacy is founded on the idea of a broader competence than the acquiring of single, isolated skills. It advocates a field of pedagogical reproduction where modes of competence pedagogical discourses are taken place (Evans & Penney, 2008).

A third finding based on our analysis is that the concept of PL is derived from ideas of how to empower people with valuable competences for developing identity, social relations, and beliefs (Whitehead, 2001, 2007, 2010). It encompasses a person’s ability to read, understand, act, and react, where dimensions of literacy can add quality to life and contribute to the sense of self. Self-awareness is included in the concept as an aspect that involves both the sense of being able to self-reflect and a form of self-reflection that focuses on oneself as a learner. The latter deals with the construction of meaning making. But the ongoing struggle of making the Swedish PEH a ‘subject of knowledge’, with a stronger framing (Bernstein, 2000), and not a subject of practicing physical activities and the sharing of meanings and values, has created tensions and dis-orientations. As several researchers have pointed out, being ‘able’ in a culture of performativity mainly focuses on measurable performances, i.e. that which separates people, and on hierarchies (Evans & Davies, 2004; Evans & Penney, 2008). The current performance mode in Swedish PEH is based on the social logic of performance and draws upon more visible forms of pedagogy: what sets people apart. This articulates well with neoliberal logics.

But embodied experiences are culturally embedded, and teachers need to consider how to support their students’ reflective approach to ‘their own mastery’ and the meaning of movements (see, for example, Larsson & Quennerstedt, 2012; Whitehead, 2001, 2007). Larsson (2016) also notes that ‘literacy’ is related to a kind of practical knowledge, a bodily ability. This includes being conscious of the body in motion, how it feels, and what it means in a social, cultural and material context. PL is something one does, a competence or a process in a context. It is to develop a socio-cultural understanding of movement: what does movement mean? (Larsson, 2016). To become a learner in PEH is a challenge in itself and highlights the need for comprehensible and engaging learning objectives and tasks that support the process of lifelong learning and in a societal context. Today this is stated in a very narrow way as ‘Teaching should … contribute to the pupils developing of a good physical awareness and a belief in their own physical capacity’ (SNAE, 2011a, p. 48). A critique against PL is therefore that the physical literate individual has a very individual departure point – and too little attention is paid to the environment and the meaning of the meeting of individuals.
in and through movement (Larsson, 2016). That is, the sociocultural context and the meaning-making between individuals is downplayed or even ignored in this conceptualisation of PL. In the next section of this paper, we highlight how and if PL as a concept or model in its current form can enable a critical evaluation of body ideals, movement discourses and PEH education. And how learning as constituted by doing, thinking and feeling in a sociocultural context is at risk or bears the risk to become neglected in a system heavily driven by accountability from a narrow perspective (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007). This also draws attention to the difficulties of assessing components of PL in HPE/PEH (Chen, 2020).

Physical literacy, inclusion, diversity, equity and social justice?

In times of growing disparities between rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy, able and less abled we also find it pertinent to consider the concept of PL in relation to inclusion, diversity, equity and social justice. How can different conceptualizations of PL enable or constrain socially just and more equitable physical activity and health outcomes?

On the one hand, PL as originally proposed by Whitehead offers an opportunity and a holistic framework for all individuals to fulfil their human and bodily potential. On the other hand, how do students that from the outset are marginalised in different ways as positioned by discourses around sport, fitness and health construct and embody a physically literate identity? How can physical literacy as a concept or model help promote a social justice agenda in HPE rather than lead to further privileging and marginalising of certain bodies and identities? How can physical literacy contribute to Siedentop’s (1996) call for physically literate individuals being critical consumers of physical activity?

As recently argued by Landi, Lynch, and Walton-Fisette (2020), any HPE policy ‘that does not explicitly address socio-critical issues such as social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and power actively reproduce precarious settings and structures’ and ‘actually promote inequity through omission’ (p. 22). One summarising finding from our analysis of PL and curricula reforms and message systems in a Swedish context is that when using PL as a concept or theory, it needs to be firmly located in a socially-critical perspective and delivered through social justice pedagogies. Focus needs to move beyond the individual, individualised achievement objectives and measurements including more of the same and ideals of ‘healthism’ (Johns, 2005) where (any) physical activity = physically literate = healthy.

Taking a social justice approach to incorporating physical literacy in HPE involves asking the fundamental teaching and learning questions such as: Who are the privileged and marginalised students and perspectives on physical activity, bodies and health? How can HPE teaching practices that draw on physical literacy contribute to the ongoing challenge and transformation of marginalised students and (bodily) knowledge?

The opportunity to develop PL, as it relates to achieving individual potential, can be made available to all students in PE, regardless of body size, shape, ability or skill. Referring to people with disability, Barber (2018) for instance claims that: ‘If able and disabled students deserve the right to participate fully in PE classes, then multiple approaches to physical literacy should be available for differently abled students’ (p. 526). She therefore calls for HPE teachers to be ‘more open to understanding how a rich variety of movement experiences can open doors to accessibility and full participation’ (Barber, 2018, p. 530). However, going back to Whiteheads’ (2001) focus on the ‘embodied capacities to enable individuals to realize a...
wide range of aspects of their potential and thus enhance their quality of life’ (p. 127), there is still a need to move from individualistic notions of such embodied capacities and qualities of life to a recognition of the interconnected nature of human existence, bodies and health. This demands a weakening of the classification that signals a widening of possibilities for the types of movement experiences considered relevant and (im)possible in HPE practice. In particular, such an approach to HPE should put emphasis not only on the students’ own embodied learning but also their shared social responsibility when in movement and interaction with others (Thorburn & Stolz, 2017).

As Ladda (2014) states ‘for our profession to be socially just, we must not only offer opportunity in theory but also ensure a commitment to diversity and inclusion in practice’ (p. 3). Importantly, this needs to extend beyond the mantra of equality of opportunity for our students to a focus on greater equity and equality of outcomes for all students. If PL as a concept or model is to be used in a broader sense we need to ask new questions to go beyond diversity and inclusion in terms of students to also involve diversifying and reimagining the physical activity and movement cultures our students experience as part of HPE (Evans & Davies, 2004).

If PL should be part of this transformation, one way forward, as mentioned earlier in the paper, is to start more fully recognizing and focusing on the plurality of physical literacies (Bailey, 2020). Otherwise, we run the risk of reaffirming singular, medical-scientific and sport-based notions of PL instead of allowing for a multitude way of being/becoming a physically literate person. We cannot ignore prevailing discourses in HPE regardless of what term/concept or curriculum model is used to define the aim and scope of HPE and how these discourses help (re)construct what bodies and identities are (im)possible for a physical literate individual. That is, our way of enacting HPE policies make certain embodied identities matter (or not) (see. e.g. Gerdin & Larsson, 2018; Larsson, 2014).

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, this paper has examined the concept of PL and its links to the constitutions of the Swedish PEH subject through a Bernstein lens related to curricula codes and modes of pedagogical discourses. By drawing on specific links to the current Swedish PEH curriculum as in parts constituted by ideas similar to Whiteheads conceptualisations of PL, the paper has highlighted its potential for students’ learning in this subject but also the dangers of uncritically adopting this framework in both teaching and assessment practices, as curriculum is part of a wider message system. Finally, we want to reaffirm the need for allowing the plurality and perhaps even fluidity of physical literacies and its contribution to more inclusive, diverse and socially just PEH practices.

**Notes**

1. The Swedish Sports Confederation has established a physical literacy project called ‘movement richness and understanding’ in order to work against early specialisation in club sport and to stimulate physical activity during the school day.
2. Sweden and the other countries in Northern Europe are not the only countries that have had this as a political aim. Equality of opportunity and equitable outcomes has gradually become a prominent aim in welfare states around the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015, 2017).
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