

Embracing Physical Literacy

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At the most recent SHAPE America National Convention held in St. Louis, MO, an international perspective of the term “physical literacy” was introduced. Experts representing North America, Europe, and Asia provided insight into the increased acceptance and implementation of the term. Countries such as England and Canada have for several years embraced and extolled the value of the concept of physical literacy.

So what does that mean for the United States? The terms “physical education” and “physical activity” are widely used and recognized in our country. Is the introduction of another term such as physical literacy just a fad, or does it help to elevate our profession, explain what we do more clearly and accurately, and bring us in line with all the other “literacies,” such as health literacy, computer literacy, and so on? The physical literacy symposium at our National Convention featured some excellent presentations that led to great discussions and feedback from the audience. The purpose of this article is to provide some background, which we hope will spark further professional discussion about the potential greater adoption of physical literacy as a key component in our field.

What Is Physical Literacy?

In general terms, the word “literacy” includes components of knowledge, understanding, thinking, communication, and application. The term is certainly not new to the field of education. In fact, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Education Sector released a position paper (UNESCO, 2004) that provides a background and definition of literacy. UNESCO identifies literacy as

being more than just reading and writing. It is about how we communicate in society, and it includes social practices and relationships as well as knowledge, language, and culture. Margaret Whitehead (2013b), recognized by many as the leading authority in the field of physical literacy, provided an expanded view of UNESCO’s literacy definition, including physical literacy, by describing it as

The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, respond effectively and communicate, using the embodied human dimension, within a wide range of situations and contexts. Physical Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. (p. 26)

This statement describes our nature as human beings in the world. Physical literacy affords us an essential avenue of interaction without which we could not realize our potential as humans. Whitehead (2013b) outlined the major trends and concerns in our field that relate to physical education and lifetime engagement in physical activity:

- Fewer people are continuing physical activity after leaving school
- Sedentary leisure pursuits are on the rise
- Cases of obesity- and stress-related conditions are increasing
- In many schools and other physical activity settings there was, and remains, a subtle move toward high-level performance as the principal focus of the subject

The last point specifically relates to the increased focus on sport performance, which Shilling (2008) described as an era of “performative” sport. Although the word “sport” is often used in a broader context outside of the United States, the

four trends outlined above are clearly evident in our country as well.

These concerns have provoked much academic debate and have played a significant role in the interest in and role of physical literacy in a variety of countries, particularly following Whitehead’s (2001) paper on the concept of physical literacy. As Higgs (2010) indicated, the concept of physical literacy is rooted in both academic writing and in the day-to-day activities of physical educators, recreation practitioners, and coaches. Different authors have embraced their own variations of a definition of physical literacy. One of the original definitions as proposed by Morrison (1969) introduced a holistic approach by stating that physically literate individuals not only move efficiently but also move creatively, competently, and with enthusiasm. Whitehead (2013a) also modified her own definition over the years and most recently described physical literacy as a disposition to capitalize on our human-embodied capability wherein the individual has the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for maintaining purposeful physical pursuits and activities throughout the life course.

Mandigo, Francis, Lodewyk, and Lopez (2012) recognized that competent movers do not move in isolation of their social environment, which suggests that individuals who are physically literate have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to live a healthy lifestyle for themselves while also assisting others to acquire these skills. In fact, Mandigo et al.’s (2012) definition was embraced by SHAPE America (2014) in the most recent publication of its *National Standards and Grade-Level Outcomes for K–12 Physical Education*:

Physical Literacy – The ability to move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person. (p. 4)

Clearly, each of these definitions indicates that the acquisition of physical literacy is the result of a lifelong process, in which the mind and body continuously adapt to the changes that come as a result of the human development and aging cycle (Higgs, 2010).

Physical Literacy across the Globe

The term “physical literacy” is not new to our organization or to the country in general. In fact, in the Fall 2011 issue of NASPE News, Charlene Burgeson addressed the topic and wondered whether the term should be embraced and whether rebranding our craft as developing physical literacy could lead us to greater things. More recently, the earlier-mentioned SHAPE America National Standards highlight the incorporation of physical literacy in K–12 physical education.

A forum at the SHAPE America National Convention in St. Louis, moderated by Hans van der Mars, drew attention to the increased use of the physical literacy concept and questioned whether this concept should be introduced more formally to U.S. K–12 physical and health educators. Guest presenters Margaret Talbot (England), Dean Krielaars (Canada), Ang Chen (China), and Darla Castelli (United States) provided perspectives on the topic focused specifically on how the concept was being adopted around the world. Several key themes emerged from the presentations:

- The debate on physical literacy has progressed significantly in the past five to 10 years.
- Physical literacy is crucial to the acquisition of essential life skills for active participation in society.
- Physical education should be recognized as the foundation of an inclusive participation continuum over the lifespan.

- The outcome of a quality physical education program is a physically literate young person, who has the skills, knowledge, habits, confidence, and desire to continue participation in physical activity throughout the lifespan.

- Physical literacy could potentially serve as a unifying term to describe the overall outcome of quality physical education, physical activity, sport, and recreation programs. Around the world, the concept of physical literacy has been embraced, albeit with different national interpretations. England, as well as Wales and Northern Ireland, have embraced physical

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literacy. Other European countries such as Sweden, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands have adopted their own versions and adaptations of physical literacy. Chinese schools are using a centralized approach to integrating knowledge, skill, and motivation to build a physical activity culture. In essence, Chinese students become physically literate without knowing it. Several countries in Africa link physical literacy with body cultures and national/cultural identities, while Australia has aligned physical literacy with health literacy. Canada shows probably the most comprehensive adoption and has incorporated the concept

into schools, national federations, and its long-term athlete development programs.

Taking this a step further, Whitehead (2010) has proposed that physical literacy should not be viewed simply as a state of being but rather as a capability that has to be developed and maintained throughout the course of a person's life. She further stated that physically literate individuals will achieve an enhanced quality of life related to the development of self-esteem, self-confidence, healthier lifestyles, and more positive relationships with others. Most importantly, however, is the belief that physical literacy can be achieved by all and that, in doing so, the support offered by others such as teachers, coaches, parents, and peers is of paramount importance.

What does this all mean for the United States? We believe that our country and, more specifically, our physical and health educators would be wise to embrace the concept of physical literacy as we move into the future. SHAPE America has decided to incorporate physical literacy into its National Standards and to recognize it as an outcome of quality physical education. Embracing physical literacy as an outcome will not only align our goals with those of many other countries but will also help us to enhance physical education, physical activity, and sport programs throughout the country.

Conclusion: Convention Forum Statements

Physical education develops physical competence so that all children can move efficiently, effectively, and safely and understand what they are doing. The outcome — physical literacy — is an essential basis for their full development and achievement. It is endorsed, with support statements from UNESCO, the United Nations Sport for Development and Peace, the International Olympic Committee, and the International Paralympic Committee. As stated by UNESCO,

The outcome of physical education is a physically literate young person, who has the skills, confidence and understanding

to continue participation in physical activity throughout the life span...physical education should be recognized as the basis of an inclusive civic participation continuum over the full life span. (Margaret Talbot)

Becoming physically literate requires learning by doing physical activity. Thus, PreK-12 physical education must be aligned with the kinesiology knowledge base, link knowledge and behavior change, and most importantly, we must advocate drastic changes in school policy and curriculum (including PETE programs) to change the perception that "Everyone can teach PE." (Ang Chen)

Evaluate existing programs in the United States when considering the adoption of physical literacy. Currently a paucity of research exists regarding programs such as the comprehensive school physical activity program and physical activity leader program. (Darla Castelli)

Physical literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth, and adult, of

essential life skills, which is an indispensable means for active participation in the societies and economies of the 21st century. (Dean Kriellaars)

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