

Embracing the Term Physical Health Literacy: Mini Review

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 📅 July 29, 2021

Published: 📅 August 13, 2021

Citation: Andrew Sortwell, Kevin Trimble. Embracing the Term Physical Health Literacy: Mini Review. Biomed J Sci & Tech Res 38(1)-2021. BJSTR. MS.ID.006101.

Keywords: Physical Education; Physical Activity; Motor Performance Skills; Fitness

ABSTRACT

Declining physical health practices of children and youth in Australia drive teachers of Health Physical Education (HPE) and school administrators to enhance HPE curriculum and its delivery to youth in Australia. However, there are obstacles that can hinder teachers in their design of HPE programs that are based on students' experience, skills, age, and maturity level. One of these obstacles is a lack of clarity regarding what physical literacy is, the semantic content of this concept, and how it can improve health physical education curriculum and its subsequent delivery. There are currently different definitions and understandings of physical literacy in the literature, which may stem from the current naming of the concept, and the lack of clear context and intended objective in the body of literature. In this paper, the authors propose and justify replacing the name with 'physical health literacy'. In support of the name extension, this paper briefly examines the core elements of the concept, the flexible nature of the concept within specific contexts, and promotes a vision of a physical health literate HPE graduate. Using the term physical health literacy will assist in providing clarity, a central purpose of the concept and the intended objective of promoting HPE processes that are essentially more student-centric.

Introduction

Historically, the term literacy was associated with learning, reading and writing. In the past, an individual who could read and write at an adequate level for their age was considered literate [1]. More recently, literacy is depicted as a learning process throughout life that occurs within and outside formal education, consisting of many contexts [2]. Some examples of these contexts are digital, scientific, financial, mental health and physical. Whilst the term physical literacy appears to be a modern term, it was used over 80 years ago. In 1938 an article in the Journal of Health and Physical Education used the terms physical literacy and mental literacy [3]. The concept of physical literacy has attracted increasing attention in research [4], focusing on promoting high-quality Health Physical Education and youth development. Even though physical literacy

is regarded as a crucial component for the healthy development of children in both research literature and Government policies, the concept remains elusive primarily due to the term being a misnomer, and it being used in different theoretical perspectives [4,5]. This lack of clarity can undermine the meaningful development of physical literacy objectives within HPE and undermine the interpretation of research findings which may provide new knowledge [6]. This mini review offers a brief justification for creating the term physical health literacy.

Problem Statement

The term physical literacy has many interpretations (in both scientific and professional literature) that reflect either a philosophical viewpoint or separate points of view of specialists

[7]. Specialist viewpoints emerge from various branches of scientific knowledge such as physical education, medicine, exercise science, and health sciences. This diversity of interpretation of the term physical literacy creates many dilemmas. In examining this problem, one must explore the nature of physical literacy and the appropriateness of using the term. This exploration encompasses its foundation, the medical and biological bases, the intended purpose, and its context. This mini review endeavors to remedy this by proposing and justifying the use of the term physical health literacy.

Focus Questions

This mini review aims to ignite a conversation over the suitability of the term physical literacy by briefly discussing the core attributes of the physical literacy construct, as reflected in the contemporary literature. This paper also explores and briefly discusses four focus questions: What are the (a) guiding principles; (b) educational, health and biological bases; (c) purposes and contexts for using the term of physical literacy; and (d) justification for using the term physical health literacy?

Research Methods

Scientific and professional literature was retrieved from the following:

1. Education Research Complete;
2. MEDLINE (via PubMed);
3. ScienceDirect;
4. Scopus; and
5. Sport Discus.

No particular start date was adopted, and the last search was conducted on 20 December 2020. These education, sport and health databases were found to be relevant to the topic and increased the probability that all relevant papers have been located [8]. The search strategy included the following terms: physical literacy, motor performance skills, health physical education, movement literacy, and fundamental movement skills. The criteria for inclusion in this review were publications in the English language until the date last searched, i.e., 20 December 2020. The following exclusion criteria were adopted:

- a) Papers not including the definition.
- b) Papers that made no reference to physical literacy in the full body of text.

Findings

In considering the numerous definitions of physical literacy, it becomes clear that this concept is usually presented syncretic

ally by academic scholars. While the interpretation of physical literacy varies in literature, it tends to have some alignment with the definition offered by Whitehead [9] notes, “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life”. This definition has evolved through the lens of physical education with the underlying core purpose to improve health-related quality of life and wellbeing [9,10]. In addition, health-related quality of life and wellbeing are multi-dimensional terms that are holistic and include physical, cognitive, emotional, and social functioning [11].

Over the last ten years the definitions of physical literacy have been frequently debated in published papers to develop some clarity [4,6,8,12], however the term itself also poses challenges [4,5]. The word ‘physical’ within the term provides little insight into the specific context since the word ‘physical’ has many meanings across branches of scientific knowledge. The term or name of a concept should disclose or provide insight into what the concept determines or reflect its underlying core basis. By extension, we coin the term “physical health literacy”. The addition of the word ‘health’ provides the area of scientific knowledge and domain in which the word physical relates. Additionally, the word ‘healthy’ also reflects the underlying purpose, to improve health-related quality of life and wellbeing. The extension of the term using the word ‘health’ also implies that physical health literacy is a relative concept [13]. The relative nature of health provides flexibility which allows the expression of the term in relation to the uniqueness of the potentialities within the environment in which the population live. Using this relevant and agile term, physical health literacy, also future proofs the term as individual needs and their environment may change into the future.

Whilst defining physical health literacy is not technically within the scope of this review, we briefly propose a new definition that encapsulates Whitehead’s (2001) [9] definition and allows adaptability to a range of current and future contexts. We offer the following definition: physical health literacy is the multifaceted foundation of lifelong engagement in physical activity (see Figure 1). It’s about knowing the importance of physical activity for health and wellbeing; possessing the being competent and confident in a range of movement skills; possessing the motor performance skills and cognitive skills to be creative movers to adapt to changing conditions of the external environment and life challenges; attitudes and communication skills that promote engagement and appropriate help-seeking.

The articulated definition and the proposed term physical health literacy may lead to greater clarity of the concept, whilst gaining greater acceptance by scholars of developing local, regional, or national visions of what it means to be physical health literate. If

adopted, also it is hoped that it will support educational authorities developing relevant standards for physical health development and physical fitness across various stages and groups of the population. Moreover, it is also hoped that there will be an equitable appraisal

of physical health characteristics parameters that are determined within context, which will ensure the development of a student-based approach in health and physical education across K-12 [14].

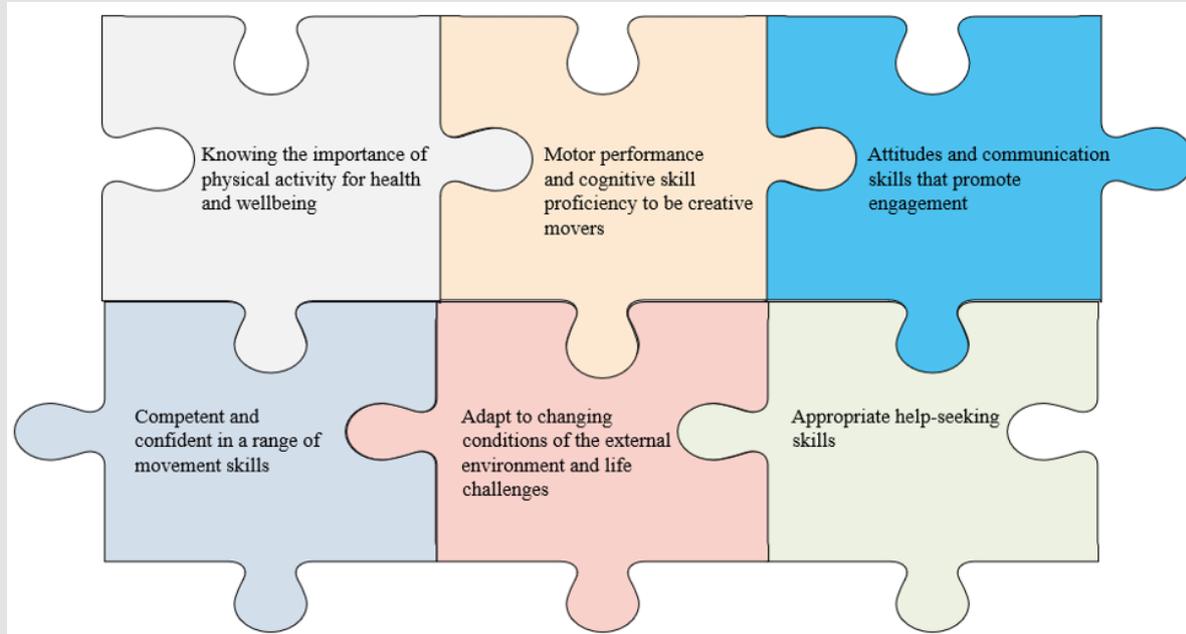


Figure 1: Physical health literacy - the multifaceted foundation of lifelong engagement in physical activity.

Conclusion

Based on the exploration of the literature, the term physical health literacy is a more appropriate global term which is flexible and can be adapted to different contexts and population groups. Furthermore, our review reinforces the importance of the need for the concept physical health literacy to be viewed through the needs of the individual or population, the context of the setting, whilst acknowledging these change throughout life.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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ISSN: 2574-1241

DOI: 10.26717/BJSTR.2021.38.006101

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