A Report on How Is Physical Literacy Defined?—A Contemporary Update

Wen-Mei DONG
Minzu University of China, Beijing, China
dongwenm@163.com

Keywords: Physical education; Physical literacy; Physical activity.

Abstract. The concept of physical literacy has stimulated increased research attention in recent years—being deployed in physical education, sport participation, and the promotion of physical activity. Independent research groups currently operationalize the construct differently. The purpose of this report was to conduct an analysis on the definition of physical literacy, as reflected in Cara Shearer and Hannah R. Goss’s article How Is Physical Literacy Defined? A Contemporary Update. One of my reactions to the article was that I had a clearer understanding of the physical literacy and knew physical literacy that within the United Kingdom, Canada, United States, New Zealand, and Australia, the term “physical literacy” has recently been cited within national policies. “Physical literacy” has become the key word in physical education in the future in China.

Introduction

Cara Shearer and Hannah R. Goss’s article; How Is Physical Literacy Defined? A Contemporary Update (Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 2018, 37,237-245) not only focused research on physical literacy which is a concept to integrate sport reforms and developments in Contemporary Era but also clarified the definition of physical literacy and promoted the operationalization of physical literacy. The paper considered the various definitions of physical literacy that are currently adopted internationally. Using the methods of contacting via e-mail and searching available material through websites and publicly from each organization/group, the paper identified seven prominent groups currently working to promote and develop physical literacy, each operating with at least one identifiable definition. This paper has endeavored to collate, compare, and critically review the current understandings of physical literacy internationally. Although each group is unified in using the term physical literacy, there are contrasting definitions and interpretations of the concept. The paper identified the common themes, including the (a) influence of physical literacy philosophy, (b) core elements of physical literacy, (c) lifelong nature of physical literacy, and (d) the need to scientifically pursue a robust operationalization of the concept. Through the analysis on physical literacy of these seven prominent groups, the paper show a recommending that programs relating to physical literacy should provide a definition, a clear philosophical approach, and transparency with how their actions align with this approach.

Know the Definition of Physical Literacy

One of my reactions to the article was that I had a clearer understanding of the physical literacy and knew physical literacy that within the United Kingdom, Canada, United States, New Zealand, and Australia, the term “physical literacy” has recently been cited within national policies.

From Table 1, In the United Kingdom, physical literacy was defined as the “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding that provides children with the movement foundation for lifelong participation in physical activity”. In Wales, the physical literacy definition adopted by Sport Wales displayed similarities to the definition put forward by the IPLA, but instead it was articulated in the form of an equation: “Physical Skills + Confidence + Motivation + Lots of opportunities = Physical Literacy.” The IPLA definition (IPLA, 2017) informed by Whitehead (2013a) (the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value
and engage in physical activity for life) was endorsed within the consensus statement as the definition of physical literacy. In 2013, SHAPE America defined physical literacy as “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.” In Australia, central to these defining statements was the clarification that whole-person, holistic development spans four key learning domains: the physical, affective, cognitive, and social.

All in all, we know the philosophy of Monism, Existentialism, Phenomenology underpinned the physical literacy concept. Second, the core elements of physical literacy included the confidence, physical competence, motivation, and knowledge and understanding. Third, physical literacy represented a lifelong journey. Fourth, for the development of physical literacy, robust evidence-based research is needed. Within such research, a level of clarity and transparency is needed, and through such clarity and clear evidence, consensus may be pursued.

Table 1. International Definitions of Physical Literacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Adopted Definition of Physical Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Wales</td>
<td>Wales (United Kingdom)</td>
<td>Physical Skills + Confidence + Motivation + Lots of opportunities = Physical Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada</td>
<td>Canada (Montreal)</td>
<td>Individuals who are physically literate move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L)</td>
<td>Canada (Toronto)</td>
<td>Physical literacy is the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE)</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Physical literacy is 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</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport New Zealand</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>The motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding required by participants that allows them to value and take responsibility for engaging in physical activity and sport for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Sport Commission</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1. Core/process: Physical literacy is lifelong holistic learning acquired and applied in movement and physical activity contexts. 2. Components/constructs: It reflects ongoing changes integrating physical, affective (subsequently renamed “psychological”), cognitive, and social capabilities 3. Importance: It is vital in helping us lead healthy and fulfilling lives through movement and physical activity 4. Aspiration/product: A physically literate person is able to draw on their integrated physical, affective, cognitive, and social capacities to support health promoting and fulfilling movement and physical activity—relative to their situation and context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Inspiration of the New Concept of Physical Literacy

Being an influential concept, physical literacy has been a widely used around the world in the areas of physical education, recreational sports and high-performance sports both academically and practically in recent years. I think that the clear definition from Cara Shearer and Hannah R. Goss’s analysis to some extent solved the problem about definition concept of physical literacy contested in both research and practice. The definition of physical literacy and expression in policies from the seven prominent groups made policies clarity and made us establish the concept of cultivating students’ physical literacy in physical education. The understanding of the concept of physical literacy in China's academic circles is not deep enough and unified. There is still no clear conclusion
on the basic theoretical issues of sports literacy. At present, only scholar Ren Hai and Chen Sicheng have studied the concept and value of physical literacy. The newly-developed “13th Five-Year Plan for School Physical Education in Shanghai” published by The Shanghai Education Commission clearly put forward the guidelines for “a comprehensive evaluation of the level of student physical literacy,” which is the first reference in China about physical literacy. We have benefited a lot from this paper, but the exploration of physical literacy in the Chinese physical education community still needs systematic and in-depth research to provide a solid theoretical foundation for later research.

“Physical Literacy” has become the Key Word in Physical Education in China

In September 2019, the General Office of the State Council of China recently issued the “Outline for the Construction of Sports Powers” and deployed to promote the construction of a strong country. In the “Outline,” the target requirements for developing adolescent physical literacy are specifically proposed. Promoting adolescents to improve their physical literacy and develop a healthy lifestyle is an important part of school physical education. Therefore, the “Outline” clearly states “physical literacy.” In the view of Zhong Bingshu, “it is a kind of concept leading, and it is the way of promoting the fitness of the whole nation and promoting the development of youth sports in the future.” From the perspective of “literacy,” it will no longer simply stay at the level of “physique” and “skills.” “This reminds us that we must really improve the health of our citizens and build a strong country in sports. What we should pay more attention to is the people’s perception of sports.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would strongly recommend Cara Shearer and Hannah R. Goss’s article to persons who formulate relevant policies for physical education and researches on physical education. Being an influential concept, physical literacy has been a widely used around the world in the areas of physical education, recreational sports and high-performances ports both academically and practically in recent years.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission in China “Young talent development program project.” (2015-); Teaching Project funded by Minzu University of China “Invitation to the health.”

References


