

Review

Physically literate and physically educated: A rose by any other name?

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Abstract

In the 2013 release of the U.S. National Physical Education Standards the term “physically literate” replaced “physically educated”. Unfortunately, most discourse within the profession about the term physically literate occurred primarily after its adoption. While we agree with the spirit and intent of the term, we feel it is essential to discuss not only what has been potentially gained but also lost. In our paper, we illustrate the similarity of the terms physically educated and physically literate and essentially, from a definitional perspective, find little difference—but are these terms interchangeable? We provide a critical review of the standards and conclude that the change to physical literacy has produced a shift away from psychomotor outcomes to cognitive outcomes. Our concerns about this are many, but most importantly they are about the need to emphasize the “physical” in physical education (PE). It is our belief that the key to elevating the profession and maintaining and increasing support for PE is in its ability to promote and provide physical activity. Without physical activity and physical fitness as main outcomes, PE increases its vulnerability to extinction as a standard part of the U.S. K-12 education curriculum.

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1. Introduction

We are pleased to share our perspectives on the use of the term physical literacy as adopted in the 2013 release of the national K-12 physical education (PE) content standards.¹ From the outset, we want to make clear that we agree with the overall spirit and intent of the term, but we feel a sense of trepidation about the potential short- and long-term consequences of its use within the standards. Our perspectives herein are contextualized by our steadfast concerns about the marginalized status of PE in U.S. K-12 schools.^{2–4}

Our trepidation, in part, stems from the historical pattern of PE tending to follow general education trends.⁵ For example, in response to the general education movement to emphasize morals, values, responsibility, respect for self and others

(sometimes referred to as the hidden curriculum), PE responded with character education curriculum models. Similarly, when general education emphasized inquiry based learning, team building, and curriculum integration, PE followed with the movement education and sport education models and efforts to increase academic subject matter integration (e.g., math and reading) into PE. Efforts to keep up with educational trends, plus the profession’s own development, resulted in so many changes in emphases over a 50-year period (e.g., play education, developmental education, humanistic education, personal meaning, movement education, kinesiological studies) that PE has been referred to as the “chameleon of all curricula”.⁶ We believe that the zeal for PE to follow general educational trends has contributed to confusion both within and outside of the PE profession. This confusion has led to student outcomes for PE being ambiguous, lacking in priority among themselves, and to a large degree, estranged from real world concerns. We believe that this lack of clear, meaningful, and prioritized student outcomes contributes to the marginalization of PE programs,

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including reductions in both resource allocations and in time for PE during the school day. It is from this perspective that we share our views about the adoption of the term physical literacy in the national K-12 PE standards.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, literacy is identified primarily as the ability to read and write—but it is often used more broadly to refer to having knowledge or competence in an area (e.g., cultural or computer literacy). The broader use of the term is frequently applied to core subject matter areas such as math, science, social studies, and language arts. Literacy as applied therein confirms aspirational commitment toward developing deep subject matter content understanding by students that results in motivated learners capable of independent real-world application. In this vein, educational planning questions may take the form of how to ensure students understand, remember, and apply the content they read and are both able and motivated to scaffold information to build greater capacity to understand real-world complexities. Literacy in this sense moves what might be considered purely cognitive learning objectives to the affective domain and to a lesser extent, the psychomotor domain.

The term literacy is now also being applied to PE — “physical literacy”. The term originated in the UK and its adoption has spread to Canada and now appears in the U.S. K-12 national PE content standards.^{1,7} While the widespread global adoption of the term physical literacy has been espoused or implied, we found limited evidence of this in the peer reviewed literature. As of October 2014, we could not find physical literacy explicitly identified as the target goal of PE (i.e., producing a physically literate individual) in the national PE standards of any country other than USA. Canada may be an exception in that physical literacy is used frequently in their professional materials (<http://www.phecanada.ca/programs/physical-literacy>), but the term was not explicitly mentioned in the Physical & Health Education (PHE) Canada current mission statement (<http://www.phecanada.ca/about-us/vision/mission>).

Without widespread consultation within the profession (e.g., discussion and debate at national conferences) or extensive committee work or marketing research, the term physically literate replaced the term physically educated in the 2013 release of the U.S. national K-12 PE content standards. The lack of broad engagement in professional discourse and market research prior to this replacement is concerning given the extensive effort the profession previously undertook to define a physically educated person. Then again, perhaps the terms physically literate and physically educated mean the same thing. After all, a commonly listed synonym for literate is educated.

Exchanging the term “educated” to “literate” reminds us of William Shakespeare’s famous line from *Romeo and Juliet*, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” This line from Act II, Scene 2, “a rose by any other name” is frequently used in modern day language to imply that the name or label does not really affect what something is. But are physically educated and physically literate the same? If physically educated is a rose, then is physically literate

also a rose but of a different name—or is it another flower/concept all together? Additionally, with the adoption of the term physically literate, have the outcome expectations of PE changed and if so, in what ways? More importantly, what might be the broader implications of these changes?

In this paper we examine these questions. First, we compare and contrast the terms “physically educated” and “physically literate” and show that there are few differences—hence our proposition that physical literacy is a rose but by another name. Second, we provide a comparative analysis of the 2004 and 2013 U.S. national PE content standards to make explicit how the standards have changed and identify that there has been a major shift away from the physical—hence, our question, is physical literacy really a rose by another name? Lastly, we make the appeal that the “physical” in PE must become our priority in that it is the key to elevating the profession and to maintaining and increasing support for PE.

2. Physically literate and physically educated

In the newly released national K-12 PE content standards, a new term, “physically literate”, appeared and replaced the familiar term, “physically educated” (AAHPERD, 2013). As we consider the merits of adopting this term it seems logical to compare its definition with the older term to provide a clearer understanding of what potentially has been gained and lost.

Before doing this, however, we would like to point out that we could not find any published criticism of either the term “physically educated” or of the work of the 1986 Outcomes Committee. Additionally, we did not find any detailed explanation, substantiation, or rationale for why “physically educated” was replaced with “physically literate”. As well, the current SHAPE America public domain access materials for the 2013 national K-12 PE content standards do not define the term “physically literate” or explain why it was adopted. As far as we can find, it appears that “physically literate” simply replaced “physically educated” as if the words were interchangeable or synonymous, as the Merriam-Webster dictionary indicates.

2.1. Physically literate

Whitehead⁸ describes physical literacy as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life. As applied to PE, literacy in this sense might be interpreted as moving psychomotor learning objectives to the affective and cognitive domains. In a recent *JOPERD* publication, CEO of SHAPE America, Paul Roetert and President-Elect Steve Jeffries (2014), provide thoughtful insights into the merits of the adoption of the term physically literate. As they state, “United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Education Sector released a position paper⁹ that provides a background and definition of literacy. UNESCO identifies literacy as being more than just reading and writing. It is about how we

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