

The National Academy of Health and Physical Literacy Why NAHPL?

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1. INTRODUCTION

The **National Academy of Health and Physical Literacy** (NAHPL; **The Academy**) is a diverse, inclusive, member-driven organization advancing the dimensions of health and physical literacy through professional development, advocacy, mentoring, and applied research in the areas of health, physical education, dance, and sport. **The Academy** was founded in 2020 by nine professional educators fueled by the desire to focus on health and physical literacy for the sole purpose of promoting the knowledge, health, productivity, and fulfillment of its members.

Literacy encompasses the integration of education and learning to assist individuals in accomplishing their goals, developing their knowledge and potential, and participating in their community and wider society (Montoya, 2018). To function well in contemporary society, all individuals must possess a wide range of skills and abilities referred to as "literacies." Health and Physical Literacy development is a shared responsibility. Disciplines that support health and physical literacy are responsible for developing, strengthening, and enhancing literacy, as each area has its own set of unique literacy demands (Cornish, et al., 2020; Lynch & Soukup, 2016).

Personal Health Literacy is the degree to which individuals can find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [ODPHP], n.d.). Being an informed consumer of health information is critical in the digital age where a plethora of sources exist, with varying quality. Physical literacy is the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and takes responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life (International Physical Literacy Association, n.d.). The purpose of this paper is to reflect the formation of the **National Academy of Health and Physical Literacy** in 2021 and to provide an overview of Health Literacy, Physical Literacy, the NAHPL mission, and reasons to consider joining NAHPL. As a mission and member centered organization, **The Academy** provides contributions to the fields of health, physical education, dance and sport; numerous member benefits; and addresses Health and Physical Literacy across the lifespan.

1.1 Health Literacy

The term health literacy was first used in 1974 to describe how health information impacts the educational system, the health care system, and mass communication. The concept of health literacy first appeared in academic peer-reviewed literature more than 35 years ago with regards to health education and the importance of developing minimum standards for

health literacy in the school setting. However, it was not until the mid-1990s that interest in the concept began to grow (Pleasant, 2011).

Early on, health literacy was not entirely supported in health education or other fields until the concept appeared in the field of health promotion in a paper written by Kickbusch (1997). Following the work by Kickbusch (1997), a glossary on health promotion was developed by Nutbeam (1998), where he contended that health literacy should be a key outcome of the health education activity, that it should be an essential part of the larger concept of health promotion, and that health promotion workers should be held accountable for developing health literacy.

The field of health literacy has grown far beyond the academic peer-reviewed literature that was present in the 1990s (Corbin, 2016). Since that time, there has been an increasing number of organizations that sponsor conferences with a specific focus on health literacy, as well as conferences with a more general focus on public health, also addressing health literacy. Both types of conferences have attracted a greater number of attendees as individuals are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of health literacy (Pleasant, 2011).

Health literacy was elevated in status when it was included in Healthy People 2030 (ODPHP, n.d.). The Healthy People initiative began in 1979 with Surgeon General Julius Richmond's report "Healthy People: The Surgeon General's Report on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention" (ODPHP, n.d.). Healthy People has been gathering information for four decades; the most recent version is the fifth iteration since its inception. The Healthy People 2030 definition of personal health literacy reflects changes from those used in Healthy People 2010 and Healthy People 2020 with an "increased focus on health equity, social determinants of health, and health literacy – with a new focus on well-being" (ODPHP, n.d.). For the first time in the history of the Healthy People national objectives, the workgroups specifically considered health literacy as a key focus. The emphasis on health literacy is displayed within the foundational principles and overarching goals of Healthy People 2030 (ODPHP, n.d.). The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Advisory Committee noted that with the increased amount of research and practice, there was a better understanding that the responsibility for health literacy should not fall solely on individuals (Issue Brief, 2018). Health literacy is a responsibility shared by organizations and professionals who develop and provide health services and information.

Health literacy requires professionals to work together to promote the idea

that health *and* literacy are critical for everyday living (Cornish, et al., 2020; Lynch & Soukup, 2016). An individual's literacy level impacts their ability to act on health information to make informed decisions and take control of their individual, family and community health (ODPHP, n. d.). The evolving definition of health literacy — with its emphasis on the use of health information and its public health perspective — may also prompt new ways of studying and promoting personal health literacy. In addition, health literacy encourages efforts to address the skills that help people move from understanding to action and from a focus on their own health to a focus on the health of their communities (ODPHP, n. d.).

1.2 Physical Literacy

In 1993, Margaret Whitehead presented a paper on physical literacy at the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women Congress in Melbourne, Australia. Since that time, there has been an increased awareness regarding the importance of physical literacy leading to the establishment of The International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA) in 2013. The IPLA aims to "promote the value of physical literacy worldwide, support and disseminate research and scholarly activity in all aspects of physical literacy, and encourage research activity and scholarly activity into policy and practice" (International Physical Literacy Association, n.d.). While the IPLA concentrates on research and improving the instruction of physical literacy, **The Academy** seeks to grow and advance professional leaders who will contribute to the body of research and scholarship that supports the dimensions of health and physical literacy in the areas of health, physical education, dance, sport, and all physical activity/leisure/recreational settings. The Journal of Health and Physical Literacy (JOHPL) features a combination of theoretical and practical articles, complemented by a wide range of case studies and regular features, identifying key implications for practitioners. JOHPL welcomes submissions of practitioner-based research, applied research, basic research, and research not involving practitioners, as well as scholarship from professionals at the regional, national, and global levels to expand the health and physical literacy of children and adults.

Although physical literacy is often considered a 21st-century concept, Whitehead acknowledged that the term physical literacy was already being used within the education profession, and within physical education, for some time prior to the 2001 paper entitled "The Concept of Physical Literacy" (Whitehead, 2001). The term physical literacy can be traced back as early as the late 1800s (Cairney, Kiez, Roetert, Kriellaars, 2019). As a result of Whitehead's work, the modern concept and definition of

physical literacy and its characteristics were created. Since 2001, a significant body of research has been conducted and presented globally to further develop the construct of physical literacy (Aspen Institute, 2015a; Aspen Institute 2015b; Corbin, 2016; Lundvall, 2015; Tremblay, 2012; Tremblay & Lloyd, 2010). Physical literacy is a highly pursued construct that values an individual's physical existence in order to improve physical movement for the purpose of achieving a particular goal (Lundvall, 2015). Whitehead's initial motivation for developing the concept of physical literacy was centered on the following four principles. First, Whitehead's interest in the philosophical concepts of monism, phenomenology, and existentialism. Monism is the belief that the mind and body are interdependent and indivisible, existentialism suggests that every person is an individual because of their interactions, and phenomenology proposes that individuals are formed by their interactions and experiences, and suggests that perceptions through their embodied nature forms how they view the world (Whitehead, 2007). Second, the notion that movement development was perceived to be inferior to language, numeracy, and social development within early childhood (Whitehead, 2010). Third, Physical Literacy could speak to the shift away from physical activity as part of everyday lifestyle and could potentially improve the value physical activity has on the lifespan (Whitehead, 2010). Finally, the growing concern regarding the trajectory of physical education within the schools, which, according to Whitehead, placed too much emphasis on high-level performance and elitism within physical education (Whitehead, 2010).

Physical literacy has become well known as a concept that depicts the desire to participate in physical activity while gaining significant and rewarding experiences when doing so. It redefines one's understanding of physical activity while focusing on the holistic development of one's physical ability (Whitehead, 2010). This approach has become quite common in many countries around the world that are now embracing physical literacy as a means for promoting health among their citizens (Jurbala, 2015; Tremblay & Lloyd, 2010). Although physical literacy continues to gain momentum, the definition and underlying concept of physical literacy continue to be questioned in both research and practice, often due to institutions having different purposes and philosophies (Tremblay & Lloyd, 2010). Therefore, various characteristics and descriptors have been used by a mixture of individuals and groups when defining physical literacy.

While the concept of physical literacy has evolved over time, the elements and attributes of physical literacy, motivation, confidence, and commitment as they relate to the physical domain, remain unchanged.

Although there have been several iterations of the definition of physical literacy since 2001 (Whitehead, 2010). Whitehead and colleagues at the IPLA have consistently maintained the characteristics of motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding, as well as the notion that the concept is applicable throughout the life course.

1.3 NAHPL: Mission and Member Centered

The mission of **The Academy** is an important place to start for answering the "why" of the new organization. As stated previously, **The Academy** is a diverse, inclusive, member-driven organization advancing the dimensions of health and physical literacy through professional development, advocacy, mentoring, and applied research in the areas of health, physical education, dance, and sport.

Given the changing landscape of education at all levels (PK-12 and post-secondary), **The Academy** founders recognized a need in the areas of leadership, mentoring, advocacy, and professional development, as it pertained to advancing health and physical literacy. In addition, the founders wanted to provide an outlet for the dissemination of research in the areas of health, physical education, dance, and sport, who support advancing health and physical literacy at all levels. Recognizing the interconnectedness of all professionals in allied health fields and their contributions to health and physical literacy across the lifespan, **The Academy** is committed to fostering member networking with other professionals working in these areas.

The Academy seeks to grow and advance professional leaders who will interact and network on national and global levels to expand the health and physical literacy of children and adults. As a member and mission-centered organization, **The Academy** encourages and facilitates active participation by all members, advocating for health and physical literacy.

Based on the definitions of health and physical literacy guiding its work (International Physical Literacy Association, n.d.; ODPHP, n.d,) **The Academy** recognizes the consanguinity of professionals in the fields of health, physical education, dance, and sport and their roles in advancing health and physical literacy for all individuals. Health professionals and health educators have a natural tie to expanding health literacy for all individuals. Physical educators in PK-12 support health and physical literacy through their work with students at every level of instruction. Kinesiology professionals in higher education extend this commitment as they prepare post-secondary students to enter the job market in a variety

of Kinesiology-related fields. Dance professionals are integral in promoting physical literacy for all individuals through the artistry and activity that dance and dance education provides (Jusslin, 2019). Physical activity and sport professionals, across multiple fields (e.g., physical activity, recreation/leisure, coaching, fitness, sport management, sport administration, sports medicine, etc.), also support the lifetime pursuit of improving health and physical literacy in a multicultural society.

1.4 Why Join NAHPL?

As a diverse, inclusive, member-driven professional organization, NAHPL seeks to engage, serve, and inspire members through transparent, responsible governance, high-quality programming, and other scholarly efforts. In **The Academy**, members make the decisions and have access to the decisions that have been made.

The Academy provides members with a contemporary professional organization for pre-professional and professional persons across the spectrum of health and physical literacy. Organized as a national structure, with four (4) geographical regions, members can be involved at the frontline nationally and/or regionally. With health and physical literacy at the heart of quality professional development, members will learn, share, and grow through face-to-face and virtual interactions with a wide variety of presenters and programs.

Within the national and regional structures, annual summits are offered whereby members can attend, participate, and present program sessions while gaining new perspectives in health and physical literacy. Not only will participation in a summit provide contemporary professional development, but the interaction with other professionals who share career experiences and challenges can also feel the spirit and positively impact success.

Membership in **The Academy** provides a wide range of services and opportunities. The *NAHPL Journal*, a peer-reviewed academic journal, reflects the latest perspectives and scholarship that support health and physical literacy in the areas of health, physical education, dance, and sport. *Synergies*, the official online newsletter of the Academy, provides members with timely information, thought-provoking ideas, interviews, and announcements. The *NAHPL Website* (nahpl.org) serves as the essential portal for member services, such as board meeting minutes, resource material, position papers, meeting dates, summit registration, award nominations, and program proposals submissions.

The Academy frames activities around the personal health literacy and physical literacy definitions provided previously. For example, summit program proposals require a designation of health literacy or physical literacy and must include three objectives connecting the content of the presentation to the dimensions of health literacy or physical literacy. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) support health and physical literacy through user-created networks for PLCs and special interest groups. NAHPL members have opportunities to connect and share through the platform where they can send private messages as well as comment and view the activity streams related to physical or health literacy. *Voices of the Academy* webinars are scheduled on a regular basis to engage and educate members on a variety of topics such as advocacy; promotion of equity, diversity, and inclusion; social-emotional learning (SEL); and more.

Among the strongest features of **The Academy** is the vast array of opportunities in which to participate, serve, lead, and engage with old friends and new colleagues. Leadership development and engagement are key components of NAHPL, evidenced by the over 450 member positions with boards, cabinets, committees, program councils, summit operations, mentorship, representative assemblies, advocacy initiatives, session presentations, and the selection and review panels. Leadership opportunities exist for persons in each of the membership categories: Professionals, Paraprofessionals, Future Professionals, and Retired Professionals. Leadership development within an organization is an effective way to nurture future leaders, engage emerging leaders, harness the expertise of seasoned leaders, and clarify organizational goals and vision. Advancing one's individual leadership skills can improve career prospects, build confidence, expand teamwork potential, and broaden networking opportunities. 2 by and for members to serve the professions within the realms of health and physical literacy!

2. CONCLUSION

This paper is the formative document of the newly created **National Academy of Health and Physical Literacy**. The objective of this paper was to provide an overview of Health Literacy and Physical Literacy; reflect the formation of **The Academy** in 2021; present an overview of the NAHPL mission; and offer reasons to consider joining NAHPL. As a mission and member centered organization, **The Academy** addresses Health and Physical Literacy across the lifespan and supports the professionals who advance this work in their careers. Providing contemporary professional development, networking opportunities, and resources to support each and every member, **The Academy** seeks to be the premier Health and Physical Literacy professional organization.

From the early physical literacy work of Margaret Whitehead (2001) to the new emphasis on health literacy in Healthy People 2030 (ODPHP, n.d.), the importance and relevance of health literacy and physical literacy in today's society are clear. The coronavirus pandemic changed the way people work, live, learn, and play. Because the healthy and physically literate individual has an advantage in navigating these changes, it is incumbent upon everyone to advance the health and physical literacy of all people.

Health and physical literacy are essential for individuals of all ages in all settings, from preschools and child care facilities to K-12 and post-secondary school buildings, from sports arenas and playing fields, to independent and assisted living centers. The end goal is for all citizens to make informed, healthy lifestyle choices across the lifespan. Because health literacy and physical literacy involve all the domains of human development – cognitive, physical, affective, and behavioral – health and physical literacy are relevant to the collective disciplines included in the NAHPL. Everyone in health, physical education, dance, sport, exercise, and the associated professions has the responsibility to do their part to increase the health literacy and physical literacy of their clients/students/constituents. **The Academy** is for everyone. Join us in advancing health and physical literacy!

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3.2 Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

3.3 Contribution of Authors

CB, CC, DJH, KJT, HN and SKS all contributed to the creation of the manuscript and editing.

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