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Nurturing physical literacy in India: A comprehensive study

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Abstract

The term "Physical Literacy" holds various interpretations around the world. Nevertheless, according to the comprehensive definition provided by the International Physical Literacy Association, it encompasses motivation, self-assurance, knowledge, and a deep appreciation for engaging in physical activities throughout one's entire lifetime. Physical literacy extends beyond the mere acquisition of fundamental movement and sports skills; it constitutes a holistic concept applicable to all individuals throughout their lifespans. In an educational context, this concept advocates for enriching and meaningful experiences for every child, enabling them to progress on their unique physical literacy journeys. Moreover, physical literacy encompasses the capacity to "comprehend" the dynamics of specific situations and environments and to respond appropriately as a complete individual.

The imperative to promote physical literacy arises from the growing prevalence of lifestyle related illnesses, declining levels of physical activity, a dearth of focus on personal experiences within physical activity settings, and a perceived exclusivity within such settings. Although the concept has garnered global attention for the past decade, it has gained significant traction in the past five years, largely due to the efforts of Pallela Gopichand and his team. Between 2016 and 2017, this team diligently pursued various initiatives aimed at advancing physical literacy. Numerous other organizations and entities have also joined in championing this cause. The Physical Literacy Movement holds profound benefits for all Indians, offering lifelong health and an improved quality of life.

Keywords: Motivation, physical activity, physical literacy

Introduction

The concept of "physical literacy" encapsulates the elements of motivation, self-assurance, physical prowess, knowledge, and comprehension that individuals develop over the course of their lifetimes. It transcends the limited scope of physical education in schools and sports coaching, offering a holistic and more comprehensive perspective on lifelong engagement in physical activities. It emphasizes the holistic growth of each person as they embark on their unique lifelong journeys.

While much of the existing literature predominantly focuses on physical competence and fundamental movements, physical literacy extends far beyond these narrow definitions. It represents a lifelong journey of self-improvement for every individual.

Physical literacy nurtures personal development through a diverse range of experiences in various environments. There is no fixed endpoint termed "physically literate"; instead, it is an ongoing voyage that spans from birth to death. This journey is marked by distinct experiences and milestones, with each individual journey being regarded as invaluable. The goal is not to reach a predefined destination but to continuously explore and engage in physical activities throughout life.

Childhood is regarded as the ideal stage for cultivating physical literacy. The meaningful and enriching experiences during early years profoundly influence an individual's connection with physical activities. Physical education classes represent a golden opportunity for students to develop their physical literacy components. The experiences in each class, for each student, significantly contribute to the individual physical literacy journeys of all students. Key stakeholders have a critical responsibility and opportunity to create an environment that fosters the physical literacy journeys of every student.

Unfortunately, in recent years, physical literacy has been overshadowed by an excessive focus on academics. Moreover, within the realm of physical education, an emphasis on elitism and champion development has gained prominence. Consequently, while the number of champions is on the rise, an increasing number of children are being excluded from physical activities. Unpleasant experiences in physical education and sports have led to a multitude of lifelong health issues within society at large.

This post aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of physical literacy and underscores its significance for children today. It also delves into the current landscape of physical literacy in India.

Physical Literacy in India

The concept of physical literacy is not new in India. India's profound cultural heritage and ancient writings on the union of body, mind, and soul bear testimony to the "monism" (oneness) concept, a fundamental pillar of physical literacy. As Indians, we have always embraced movement in our culture. Whether it's the act of visiting religious sites, showing respect to elders, or partaking in family celebrations, physical movement has been an integral part of our lives.

Nonetheless, in contemporary times, the culture of physical literacy is experiencing a decline. There are several factors contributing to this shift, such as industrialization, the nature of employment, and evolving lifestyles. These trends are a cause for concern, especially regarding the future of our children.

According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network's World Happiness Report, India ranks 140th out of 156 countries. Factors determining a country's happiness levels include life expectancy, social support, income, freedom, trust, health, and generosity, among others. Similarly, India is ranked 130th among 189 countries in the latest Human Development Index (HDI) released by the United Nations Development Programme. The HDI serves as a composite indicator for assessing long-term progress in three essential dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living.

The burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is on the rise in India due to changes in the population's lifestyle. According to research, NCDs account for 53% of all deaths in India, with a significant portion attributed to cardiovascular diseases (24%), followed by respiratory diseases (11%), other NCDs (10%), and injuries (10%). As a result, out-of-pocket expenditure related to acute and long-term effects of NCDs is substantial, leading to catastrophic health expenses for households. An Indian national survey found that NCDs constitute 5.17% of total household expenditure. A macroeconomic analysis estimates that every 10% increase in NCDs results in a 0.5% decline in annual economic growth. Hypertension leads to the highest income loss, followed by diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. NCDs have a profound macroeconomic impact, causing a reduction in productivity and a decrease in the gross domestic product.

The rise in NCDs is also affecting the genetic predisposition of future generations. A study in Canada suggests that this generation of children may live five years less than the current generation due to shifts in lifestyle. With changes in human lifestyles, health issues such as malnutrition, being underweight, lack of sanitation and quality healthcare, and limited immunization are increasing. Consequently, children are at a high risk of leading unhealthy lives.

Furthermore, mental health issues among young people are increasing, along with drug and alcohol abuse within this demographic.

In addition, the outcomes of education are not desirable. Much of the focus in today's educational system centers on memorization and rote learning, which, by design, promotes long-term inactivity in children. Elitism, where physical activity is perceived as only for the privileged, is gaining traction. Body image concerns further exacerbate this issue. While numerous training and fitness centers exist, it remains uncertain whether they genuinely impact the lifelong physical literacy journeys of their participants. Physical literacy goes beyond the short-term goal of losing a few kilograms. While initial motivation may revolve around weight loss, the fitness experience should be transformative, instilling internal motivation to remain active for life.

Before engaging in specific exercises, it is essential to understand individual capabilities, interests, and, most importantly, past experiences in various physical activity settings. In light of these considerations, every physical activity, along with the experiences it offers, contributes to individual physical literacy journeys.

Simultaneously, play areas and playing habits in schools and communities are diminishing. However, interest in physical activity is growing among the older population due to health concerns. A proactive approach from a young age is crucial to address this issue effectively.

Current habits, encompassing technology use, nutrition, socialization, and physical activity, are a reflection of what society deems important and perceives as having limited time available. This may be due to a lack of understanding of what truly contributes to a fulfilling and high-quality life. While data points provide evidence of the problem, the solutions currently prescribed, such as 30 minutes of daily activity and fitness benchmarks, remain insufficient.

To address the question of why people are not active, despite research confirming its benefits for happiness and health, we must examine the concept of physical literacy. It raises crucial questions and counter-questions: "Are physical activity sessions enjoyable and engaging?" "Do my past experiences motivate me to participate in physical activities?" "Do I recognize the value of physical activities for a high-quality life?" "Am I motivated to engage in physical activities daily?" "Do I feel confident in performing various physical activities?" Hidden within these questions are the answers that elucidate why people are not active.

Physical literacy, as a holistic concept, is defined by the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA):

"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."

In India, as per the book "Physical Literacy Across the World" by Margaret Whitehead, Pullela Gopichand and his team reached out to the IPLA in 2016. The IPLA documented this interaction. Subsequently, Gopichand and his team have been advocating and implementing physical literacy throughout India through various programs. Their primary focus is on integrating physical literacy as a core component of the educational system. The team also incorporated the concept of physical literacy into the sports policy of Andhra Pradesh. Furthermore, Gopichand organized physical literacy days at his academy in Hyderabad and advises the ELMS Sports Foundation to promote the vision of physical literacy. Olympic Channel has also covered Gopichand's work on physical literacy.

Simultaneously, several organizations in India are

championing physical literacy, including Tata Trusts, the Indian Physical Literacy Foundation, Sportz Village, and Zoomer, as indicated by internet searches.

Outcome and Recommendations

For a lifelong, happy, healthy, and flourishing population, there is an urgent need to embrace physical literacy in India. Current challenges and future aspirations must align with the principles of physical literacy. As a concept, physical literacy is applicable to all individuals, and they can embark on their physical literacy journey at any point in their lives. We must create a positive environment in which the participation of each individual in physical activities is not only valued but also promoted.

In grassroots and youth sports, we need to shift our focus from medals and talent toward recognizing the extraordinary potential of every individual for a high-quality life. Promoting physical literacy is a critically important goal in the current state of physical education.

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