Physical Literacy

What is physical literacy?

What are the benefits of being physically literate?

The term ‘physical literacy’ describes the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding that individuals develop in order to maintain physical activity at an appropriate level throughout their life. Physical literacy encompasses far more than physical education in schools or structured sporting activities, offering instead a broader conception of physical activity, unrelated to ability. Through the use of particular pedagogies and the adoption of new modes of thinking, physical literacy promises more realistic models of physical competence and physical activity for a wider population, offering opportunities for everyone to become active and motivated participants.

*Physical Literacy* is the first book to fully explore the meaning, significance and philosophical rationale behind this important and emerging concept, and the first to apply the concept to physical activity across the lifecourse, from infancy to old age. Including contributions from leading thinkers, educationalists and practitioners, this book is essential reading for all students and professionals working in physical education, sport, exercise and health.

**Margaret Whitehead** has spent her career in physical education, teaching and lecturing. Her study of existentialism and phenomenology confirmed her commitment to the value of physical activity for all. She has developed the concept of physical literacy over the past ten years and presented on the topic worldwide.
Routledge’s *International Studies in Physical Education and Youth Sport* series aims to stimulate discussion on the theory and practice of school physical education, youth sport, childhood physical activity and well-being. By drawing on international perspectives, both in terms of the background of the contributors and the selection of the subject matter, the series seeks to make a distinctive contribution to our understanding of issues that continue to attract attention from policy-makers, academics and practitioners.

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This book is the culmination of years of thought and reflection, grounded in Margaret Whitehead’s conviction that dualistic thinking about mind and body is both limiting and damaging. Her conviction threads through the entire book, and the challenge of researching and writing in language which stems from dualist thinking is again and again demonstrated, by the Editor and the various contributors.

As lifelong believers in and advocates for inclusive physical education, we believe that the concept of physical literacy encourages physical educators to place all learners at the heart of the processes of acquiring the levels and sophistication of physical competence and capability, required for effective and efficient engagement in everyday, individual and organised activities; and that teachers’ aspirations for pedagogy are enriched and extended by focus on physical literacy as the major outcome of physical education. As the various contributors to this book show, this aspiration is shared, whether learners represent a ‘normal’ range of abilities and capacities; whether there is a purpose of remediation, compensation or rehabilitation; and irrespective of cultural and social differences.

We witnessed others realising this, during Margaret Whitehead’s keynote presentation at the 2001 Congress of the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women, held in Alexandria, Egypt, six weeks after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Margaret’s careful, sensitive offer of the importance of physical literacy for physical educators was enthusiastically received and embraced by her audience, whose members came from all over the globe. It was a wonderful example of a universal concept, whose relevance to physical education pedagogy was immediately recognised by this culturally varied audience, despite language and conceptual differences, and variation of delivery systems. This international interest has been maintained by those practitioners and researchers from all over the world, who visit Margaret’s website (www.physical-literacy.org.uk).

Later that year, the importance of Margaret’s arguments was reinforced during the National Summit on Physical Education (UK) (see www.ccpr.org.uk), when researchers from a wide range of disciplines, including...
physical, social and human sciences, each emphasised the value of good quality physical education in developing self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem – all vital elements of physical literacy, as characterised in this book. Using the outcome of physical literacy as the central aspiration for physical education can liberate physical education from its common, rather limited role as mere servant of sports development, while at the same time improving its effectiveness as an agent of life-long engagement in healthy, enjoyable, meaningful physical activities, physical experience and learning. Such liberation will no doubt be threatening and scary for many physical educators; but it would provide a robust basis for justifying physical education’s place in children’s (and adults’) learning, and in school curricula. It is worth recording that, when discussing a definition for physical education, the use of physical literacy as an outcome is warmly supported by head teachers of primary schools, because it provides such a strong and meaningful analogy with oracy and numeracy as the outcomes of language and mathematics.

Margaret Whitehead, as author, has provided thoughtful, thorough explication of the concept of physical literacy; but she has not been satisfied with this. She has worked intensively with highly experienced practitioners and eminent researchers, to test her ideas and refine her thinking – acts of courage which are all too rare in academic and professional life! As editor, she has sought rigorous examination of the concept and its applicability, from talented contributors who use a wide range of disciplines, experience and interests, asking them to reflect and report on their views of its applicability and relevance. Hence, she seeks to demonstrate the universality of the concept, while ensuring that context and purpose are not ignored – rather, they are used to test physical literacy’s relevance to different human beings and different purposes, in different cultural contexts.

Margaret Whitehead and her contributors share with us, their philosophy and application of the concept of physical literacy. They show its relevance, for young persons; and throughout the whole life course, for all people. It becomes evident through the different contributions, that every individual will be on his or her own physical literacy journey, despite differences in ability, culture, gender or social background.

In the context of education, everyone involved is challenged to ensure that each individual is given the opportunity to become a physically literate individual: this includes the development of personal and inter-personal capacities. In this holistic approach, the focus is on learning to move and moving to learn, with confidence and capability. This is an essential and universal aim of teaching and it should be at the heart of every curriculum, in particular in physical education. Several contributors focus on inclusive physical education as an integral part of inclusive education. The education system needs to be designed to embrace and respect diversity. Such an inclusive approach in education enhances the possibility of an inclusive society.
However, as several contributors have discussed, there are problems and issues that need to be addressed. There is as yet, no universal understanding of the importance of physical literacy, and it is therefore essential to develop and implement strategies to promote its understanding and adoption. Margaret Whitehead provides, in her final chapter, an extensive list of recommendations for the way ahead, with identified needs and responsibilities. It is many years since she opened the debate on the concept of physical literacy. She and her contributors have taken us on an exciting journey, challenging readers to rethink their own philosophy and practices, to participate in a new way of thinking about the human being.

This book is an important contribution to thinking and practice (dualist terms, how can we escape them?) in education, therapy, physical education and childhood development. We look forward to seeing its influence on professional development and research in these areas; and most importantly for us, on the experiences of physical education for children across the world.

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I must start with an acknowledgement of the late Ray Elliott, my Ph.D. supervisor. Without his unfailing interest, challenge and support I would never have started down the road I am now travelling. Would that he was still with us to share in the fruits of his inspiration.

With respect to this text I would like to thank, most sincerely, all those who have worked with me in producing this book. All the co-authors have given most generously of their time. Their willingness to engage in endless debate and their patience in respect of my stream of requests has been remarkable. I would also like to thank all those who have provided case studies for some of the chapters: Claire Hale, Dave Stewart, Claudia Cockburn and Tansin Benn. These contributions are invaluable in bringing physical literacy to life. The support from Margaret Talbot and Gudrun Doll-Tepper in their co-writing of the foreword is much appreciated. I would also like to express my thanks to the Society of Educational Studies which provided funds for a national seminar and a series of workshops, all of which promoted the development of the concept of physical literacy. Sincere thanks are due to all those colleagues who have taken time to engage with me in debate concerning the concept. Their questioning has challenged me to clarify and develop my thinking. Particular thanks are due to Elizabeth Murdoch for her tremendous support throughout the conception and writing of this book. Without her encouragement I doubt if the text would have become a reality. Last but not least I must acknowledge the support of my husband. His enthusiasm for the project and patience have sustained me through the eighteen months of creating the book. I have relied on him totally to ensure that the computer did not swallow any of the scripts. His willingness to drop everything whenever modern technology was against me kept me sane – on more occasions than I would like to admit.
Part I

Philosophical background
1 Introduction

Margaret Whitehead

Motivation to develop the concept of physical literacy

There have been four principal influences that have motivated the development of the concept of physical literacy presented in this book. First and most importantly, the philosophical writings of existentialists and phenomenologists which give significant support for the centrality of embodiment in human existence. Arguing from their particular standpoints, these philosophers see embodiment as fundamental to human life as we know it. Embodiment, in their terms, affords us interaction with our environment and provides the foundation for the development of a wide range of human capabilities. These views were first expressed in the early twentieth century and, interestingly, there is now, some 75 years later, considerable evidence from different fields of science that endorses this view of the fundamental importance of our embodiment in human existence, not least in respect of development in the early years of life. This book provides an opportunity to share some of these more recent findings.

Second was the perception that, despite the views identified above, the importance of movement development in early childhood was being forgotten. The focus that predominated in the early years of education was directed principally towards the development of language, numeracy and social skills. That movement was the foundation for much of child development was not recognised and was not getting the attention it deserved. There is now a great deal of empirical research, for example, as in cognitive science, that supports the fundamental importance of movement development.

Third is the widespread unease about the growing drift away from physical activity as part of our lifestyle, particularly in developed countries. A decrease in physical activity can, unfortunately, exacerbate the problems of obesity and poor physical and mental health. Philosophical underpinning supports the view that physical activity can enrich life throughout the lifecourse. There had previously been a view that physical activity was most appropriate for younger people. Research has now shown that this is not the case, and that continued involvement in physical activity can have significantly beneficial effects for adults, including the older adult population.
Fourth, there was a growing unease with the general direction that physical education in school in many developed countries, including the UK, was taking – this being very much towards high-level performance and elitism. One result of this focus was the tendency to neglect those pupils who did not have outstanding ability. The notion of participation as valuable in itself was becoming less evident in much work in school, with the consequence that the non-gifted were becoming disillusioned with the subject and often looked for opportunities not to take part. The views of philosophers from the schools of existentialism and phenomenology were convincing in advocating the value of physical activity for all – not just the most talented in this area; hence the need to adopt a new perspective on physical education and to encourage the profession to review its priorities.

Why ‘physical literacy’: the need to develop the concept

Over the past ten years during which the concept of physical literacy presented in this book has been developed, discussed and shared with many interested parties, the need for developing an additional concept in the field of physical activity that identifies its core purpose and value has been questioned.2 The underlying reason for this need grew from coming to understand the work of certain philosophers who adopted a particular perspective on our embodied dimension. Looking at human life from a monist perspective they put forward a strong case for the centrality of our embodied nature in very many aspects of human existence. Embodiment influenced life not only as an instrument that can be used for overtly functional purposes but also as an underlying capability that contributes to, for example, cognitive and emotional development. Our embodiment therefore could not be, on their terms, dismissed as a somewhat inferior adjunct to human life. Taking this view of an essentially embodied existence, it was evident that there was no adequate word to describe the very broad potential that the embodied dimension has to contribute to enriching the lives of every individual throughout the whole of the lifecourse; hence the identification of the concept of physical literacy as a significant human capability.

Descriptions of effective deployment of our embodied dimension currently in use include such terms as physically able, strong, able-bodied, skilful, fit, healthy, good at sport, well coordinated and physically educated. All these terms focus on the ‘body’ as an object and on the deployment of the ‘body’ as object or instrument in functional situations such as manual work and in the sports context. None of these descriptions looks beyond our ‘body’ as a machine and most point to a specific group of talented people with the inference that others cannot match up to the description. Moreover, these descriptions seem to implicate that the responsibility for developing our embodied potential rests purely with practitioners in the fields of physical education and sports coaching. Attention to this aspect of our personhood
was, therefore, not of interest to, or the responsibility of, those outside these professions.

As a result of the terminology used, descriptions of embodied potential tended to be focused mainly on school-age children, young people and those with particular talent. That every individual was endowed with a valuable embodied capability was ignored. Indeed there was a sort of finality about reaching any of the above goals, such as ‘good at sport’ or ‘physically educated’. It appeared that these were end states that, if not achieved by a certain age or stage, were beyond an individual’s reach. In short, most terms used with reference to our embodied capability were dualistic, focused on the young, had a finality about them and were, to some extent, elitist. In contrast to these descriptions physical literacy is described as a capability all can develop. It is a universal concept applicable to every individual whatever their age or physical endowment. The short definition of physical literacy in this text explains:

As appropriate to each individual’s endowment, physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to maintain physical activity throughout the lifecourse.

Building from the definition above, with the underlying support of some schools of philosophy and scholars in other fields, the notion of physical literacy can:

• identify the intrinsic value of physical activity;
• overcome the need to justify physical activity as a means to other ends;
• provide a clear goal to be worked towards in all forms of physical activity;
• underwrite the importance and value of physical activity in the school curriculum;
• refute the notion that physical activity is an optional extra of only recreational value;
• justify the importance of physical activity for all, not just the most able in this field;
• spell out a case for lifelong participation in physical activity;
• identify the range of significant others who have a part to play in promoting physical activity.

Is ‘physical literacy’ an appropriate term?

The term ‘physical literacy’ was decided on as being the most appropriate for a number of reasons. First, there was nothing exclusive about the term. Every individual has, by nature, a physical or embodied dimension. Second, the notion of ‘literacy’ was also helpful as it is a concept commonly used to