



Physical Literacy Module
Foundation Level

Factsheet

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Introduction

This **Factsheet** has been developed by Sport Ireland Coaching in partnership with Stranmillis University College. It aims to consolidate the **knowledge** and **understanding** participants' gained through completing the **Physical Literacy Module – Foundation Level**, which provides a personal and professional development opportunity for those interested in developing their own physical literacy and/or helping others develop their physical literacy throughout the life course. The Factsheet is structured around **9 Key Questions** which were explored through the Physical Literacy Module. Readers are encouraged to interact with the content by considering some additional questions at the end of each Key Question.

Remember: Knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the theory underpinning physical literacy is required before we try to develop it in practical settings – how can we promote a concept if we do not know what it is?

1. Where did the term physical literacy originate?

- Physical literacy is nothing new – it is neither a discovery nor an innovation ([Jurbala 2015](#))
- References to the term physical literacy have been traced ([Jurbala \(2015\)](#)) to educational journals dating back to the 1930s which was a time characterised by the fast pace of industrial modernity which necessitated physical literacy equally as intellectual literacy
- Despite earlier references to physical literacy in these journals, Dr Margaret Whitehead is accredited with popularising physical literacy by developing the concept in the early 1990s ([Whitehead 2001](#))
- The term is often **misused** as used interchangeably with physical activity; exercise; sport; physical education (PE); motor skill development; fundamental movement skills; and fundamentals of movement - although related to these other terms, physical literacy is not the same as defined differently
- Physical literacy is an inclusive and universal concept, i.e., everyone can develop their physical literacy irrespective of their ability, age, gender, culture, religion, etc.

Something to think about ...

*When and where did you first **hear** the term physical literacy?*

*When and where did you first **use** the term physical literacy?*

Does the term physical literacy translate into all languages?

2. How has physical literacy been defined?

- Physical literacy is an **evolving** and **debated** concept, therefore **multiple definitions** have been created by different countries, for example:
 - [Australian Sport Commission \(2016\)](#) – “Physical literacy is lifelong holistic learning acquired and applied in movement and physical activity contexts. It reflects ongoing changes integrating physical, psychological, cognitive and social capabilities. It is vital in helping us lead healthy and fulfilling lives through movement and physical activity.”
- A common and probably the most **widely accepted definition** is the one forwarded by the [International Physical Literacy Association \(IPLA\)](#) (2017) of which Dr Margaret Whitehead is the president:

“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.”



Something to think about ...

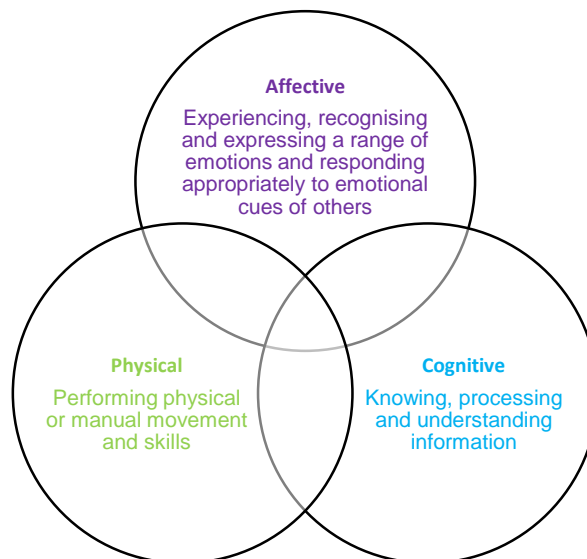
Should **different** definitions be encouraged?

Or should there be **one** universal definition for all countries?

If so, how should a **universal definition** be defined?

3. What are the elements of physical literacy?

- Although the various definitions have differences between them most usually agree physical literacy comprises 3 **essential, equally-important** and **inter-connected** elements:



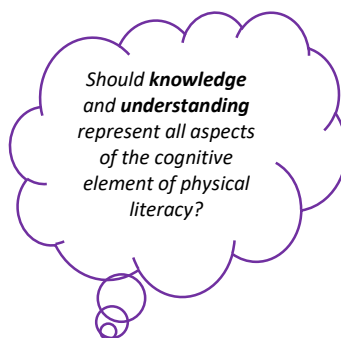
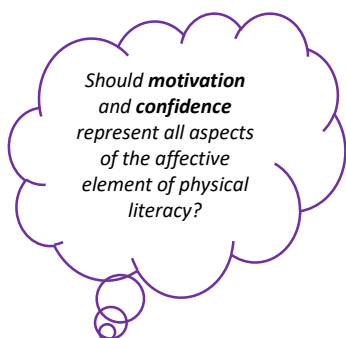
- Within the IPLA definition the:
 - **Affective** element is denoted by “**motivation**” and “**confidence**”
 - **Physical** element is denoted by “**physical competence**”
 - **Cognitive** element is denoted by “**knowledge**” and “**understanding**”

*“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.”*



- Physical literacy involves the development of all 3 elements - therefore physical literacy entails **holistic development** or development of the whole person, i.e., their feelings (affective); movements (physical); and thoughts (cognitive)
- Physical literacy is about **person development** rather than player or athlete development - players and athletes may emerge but that is not the objective or priority
- All 3 elements are:
 - ✓ **Essential** to realise progress
 - ✓ **Equally important**, however their relative importance may change throughout life
 - Be aware of focusing on physical competence - although physical development is important it is only 1 of 3 essential elements
 - ✓ **Inter-connected** as physical literacy is characterised by the belief that the body and mind are inter-related, inseparable and inter-dependent
 - Accordingly the 3 elements are inter-connected, however the relationship between the elements is complex and yet to be determined
 - It is likely the relationship between the elements is fluid, subject to the context and stage of life
 - There are many emerging and challenging questions about the relationship to be explored

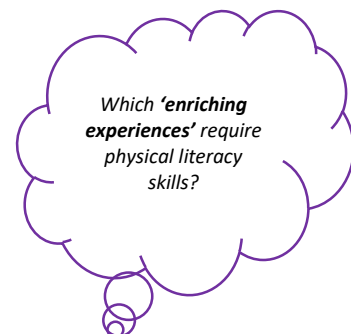
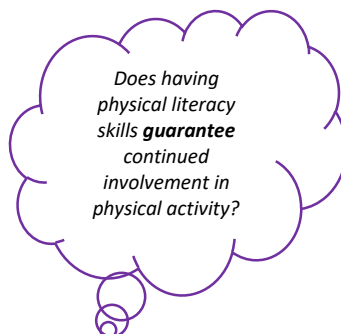
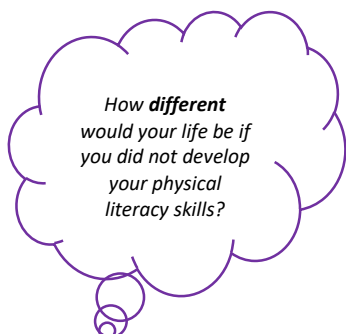
Something to think about ...



4. Why is physical literacy important?

- Physical literacy is important because it contributes to:
 - The development of the whole person, e.g., affectively, physically and cognitively
 - Human development as it increases the likelihood of lifelong involvement in physical activity which improves long-term health and wellbeing
- Choosing to **be** and **stay** physically active throughout life can depend on an individual's physical literacy which is why it is important for it to be fostered throughout the life course, i.e., from birth to older adulthood
- The **consequence** of under-developing physical literacy is withdrawal from physical activity leading to an inactive and unhealthy lifestyle
- Some advocates argue physical literacy is of **equal importance** to literacy and numeracy as it also empowers and enables individuals to access a wider range of enriching experiences and fulfil their potential

Something to think about ...



5. Can a person be described as **'physically literate'**?

- Yes but the term **'physically literate'** should not be used to imply an individual has attained an ideal and/or end 'state' in which they have attained ALL physical literacy skills
- This interpretation is contrary to physical literacy as each individual is on their own unique **physical literacy journey**
- This journey is **continuous** throughout life and there is no final 'state' or end destination
- However, it may be appropriate if 'physically literate' is used in the same way the word **'literate'** is used in relation to proficiency in the English language as normally when a person is described as 'literate' it is not suggested they know and understand every single word in the English dictionary
- Physical literacy should be developed **throughout the life course**, i.e., it is not restricted to infancy and childhood, however these phases are critical for establishing a strong foundation for the development of physical literacy
- Ideally the physical literacy journey is continuous throughout life, however **progress** may fluctuate over the life span
- As advised by [Whitehead \(2010\)](#) many journeys feature "twists and turns ... and setbacks ... however with determination, individuals can re-start and indeed flourish."

Something to think about ...

When did your physical literacy **begin**?

How **early** can a physical journey begin – in the womb?

Select 3 words to **describe** your physical literacy to date?

6. Can physical literacy be assessed?

- In accordance with the idea of a physical literacy journey which is unique and continuous it is preferable to refer to **charting progress** rather than assessment
- Accordingly the benchmark against which any change in progress is charted is the **person's own performance** (ipsative-reference and person-centred approach) and not against standardised criteria (criterion-referenced and activity-centred approach) or the performance of others (norm-reference and group-centred approach)
 - E.g., a swimmer may wish to chart their progress by observing personal changes in their swimming rather than comparing themselves to other swimmers
- It is essential that progress in all **3 elements** (affective, physical and cognitive) should be charted
- Focusing on **personal progress** rather than performance; encouraging **participation** rather than competition; and equating success with **personal achievement** rather than winning can positively affect a person's physical literacy journey

Something to think about ...

Should progress be chartered?

If yes, **why** should progress be chartered?

Who should chart progress?

7. *Where can physical literacy be developed?*

- Physical literacy needs to be **proactively** developed through a range of physical activities as it cannot be assumed it will occur naturally as part of normal growth
- Physical literacy can be developed through physically active experiences in **many** different places, e.g., home, work, school, sport club, crèche, etc.
- As there is no one activity which can develop all 3 elements of physical literacy it is critical that a **broad and balanced range** of physical activities are provided

- Remember there are countless opportunities for developing physical literacy provided by nature in the **outdoors**
- Also physical literacy can be developed in 4 different environments ([Canadian Sport for Life 2016](#)):
 - On the **ground** – most games, sport, dance and physical activities
 - In the **water** – all aquatic activities
 - On **snow and ice** – all winter sliding activities
 - In the **air** – gymnastics, diving and other aerial activities

Something to think about ...

*Have you experienced a **broad and balanced range** of physical activities?*

*Did or do you develop your physical literacy mostly **indoors** or **outdoors**?*

*Do you feel 'physically literate' in all **4 environments**?*

8. *Who is responsible for developing physical literacy?*

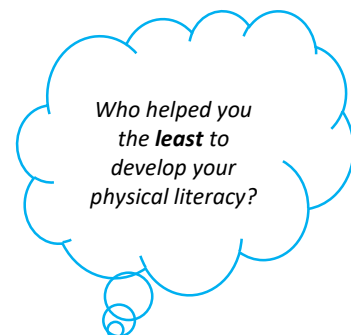
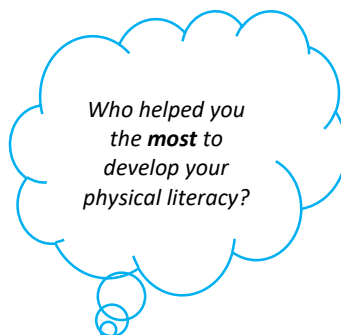
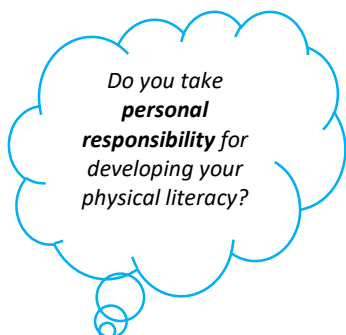
- The IPLA definition implies an expectation on the individual to take **personal responsibility** for developing their physical literacy

*“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.”*



- However, as the development of physical literacy is not confined to one setting, it is likely that many individuals and organisations will be involved in **helping others** foster their sense of personal responsibility
- For example, in relation to children - **significant others** could include:
 - ✓ Parents/guardians & other family members
 - ✓ Peers & friends
 - ✓ Health, leisure industry and childcare professionals
 - ✓ Teachers & teaching assistants
 - ✓ Coaches from national governing bodies of sport
 - ✓ Instructors/leaders from outdoor education & uniformed organisations

Something to think about ...



9. *How can physical literacy be developed?*

- Although this list is not definitive, physical literacy can be developed by participating in a broad and balanced range of physically active experiences which are:
- **Person-centred** – activities should focus on the individual’s needs and expectations rather than the instructor’s or organisation’s objectives
- **Inclusive** – activities should be accessible, accommodate everyone’s requirements and reflect the diversity of contemporary society
- **Positive** – activities should be enjoyable, motivational, gratifying and celebrate personal progress
- **Challenging** – activities should be progressive and stimulating, and allow individuals to experience a sense of mastery, personal success and achievement

Something to think about ...

*Would you participate in physical activity if it never made you feel **included**?*

*Would you participate in physical activity if it was never **enjoyable**?*

*Would you participate in physical activity if you never experienced **success**?*

References

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Further Reading

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Ireland

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Canada

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Wales

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