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# Physical Literacy and Human Flourishing

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## Abstract

This article explores the relationship between physical literacy and human flourishing. Understanding the contribution physical literacy may have in nurturing human flourishing extends the philosophical rationale and importance of physical literacy in relation to maximizing human potential. This article proposes that the concept of physical literacy is being embraced worldwide, in part due to the contribution physical literacy may make in nurturing human flourishing. Therefore, this article discusses the relationship between physical literacy and human flourishing in detail, unveiling what value this connection may hold in promoting physical literacy as an element integral in enhancing quality of life. Aspects of human flourishing are presented and examined alongside physical literacy. Synergies between physical literacy and human flourishing are not hard to find, and this gives credence to the growing adoption of physical literacy as a valuable human capability.

Keywords: education, human potential, philosophical underpinnings

The concept of physical literacy is now being seriously considered across the world and is being accepted as a valuable concept in many countries worldwide. In particular, physical literacy has gained worldwide interest across most continents, including North America (Canada and the United States), South America (Brazil), Europe (United Kingdom, Denmark, The Netherlands, Malta, among others), Africa (Egypt), Asia (India, China, Japan, and Singapore), and the Australian and Oceanian states (Australia and New Zealand). This worldwide interest suggests that physical literacy is no longer only a U.K. concept, but instead transcends continents, culture, and many global populations. But what is it about physical literacy that gives it its worldwide appeal? This paper argues that the concept of physical literacy is being embraced worldwide in part due to the contribution physical literacy may have in nurturing human flourishing. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between physical literacy and human flourishing in detail, unveiling what value this

connection may hold in promoting physical literacy as an element integral in achieving a full and flourishing life.

Human flourishing is a term used to describe a disposition, whereby individuals are considered to be thriving or living optimally (De Ruyter, 2004). People who flourish or thrive are considered to live within an optimal range of human functioning. Fredrickson and Losada (2005) describe this optimal range of human functioning as activities that simultaneously connote goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience. Rasmussen (1999) goes further, describing human flourishing as the ultimate end of human conduct. However, human flourishing is not purely focused on the ends but also concerns itself with understanding and valuing the means to achieve this end. Human flourishing values equally the means and the ends of striving toward and attaining a life that thrives. That said, what are the characteristics of human flourishing or the characteristics of someone who is flourishing?

## Characteristics of Human Flourishing

Rasmussen (1999) suggests that human flourishing exhibits six interrelated characteristics. Each of these six characteristics is described in more detail in this section.

### Objectively Good

The term “human flourishing” originates from the Greek word “eudaimonia,” which traditionally translated means “happiness.” This traditional translation, however, loses some of the original word’s meaning, as “happiness” fails to communicate clearly that eudaimonia is considered to be objectively good (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In other words, happiness can be interpreted with hedonistic overtones, with a focus on pursuing happiness through pleasure attainment and pain avoidance, and places too narrow a focus on the particular feelings and states of a person unrelated to others (De Ruyter, 2004). Rasmussen (1999) asserts that human flourishing should move beyond mere happiness, only being sought and achieved through eudaimonic, objectively good, and virtuous means. However, considerable ethical debate surrounds what is, or can be considered, objectively good. From the beginnings of intellectual history, there has been wide debate about what defines “optimal experience” and what constitutes “the good life” (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

### Inclusive

Human flourishing is essentially inclusive. Human flourishing can be achieved by all. Each individual can flourish by striving to live optimally and through the means of acquiring and developing goods and virtues conducive to nurturing a flourishing life. Thus, human flourishing is relevant to every human being, maximizing individual potential, regardless of personal endowment, and as such is achievable by all.

### Individualized

Human flourishing is individualized because it is dependent on who and what one is (Rasmussen, 1999). This means to say that the conditions in which an individual may flourish will be individualized and unique to that person. No two cases or people will be the same. The actualization of an individual’s potentialities will be quite unique to that person and will be very different to others. For example, even between siblings, each person possesses different potentialities, goods, virtues, and interests; thus, each will express human flourishing differently, in accordance with that individual’s potential.

### Agent Dependent

Human flourishing is agent dependent; this means that flourishing does not merely happen or occur within some person's life as if a person was simply a placeholder for this ultimate value. Rather, the relationship between flourishing and a person's life is much more intimate (Rasmussen, 1999). This means to say that you cannot merely create the conditions for which a person may flourish, but instead there must be a relationship between these conditions and the agent. Therefore, for flourishing to be nurtured or expressed, the agent attributing meaning or value to the means (developing and pursuing conducive goods and virtues) must perceive themselves to be flourishing.

### Self-Directed

Human flourishing is self-directed; this means that human flourishing must be attained through the individual's own actions and efforts, and cannot therefore be purely achieved as a result of external factors that are beyond an individual's control (Rasmussen, 1999). Each individual is therefore on his or her own path to a flourishing life, and this path must be traveled as a result of that person's own volition and in the direction chosen by the individual.

### Socially Constructed

Rasmussen (1999) also describes human flourishing as a socially constructed concept. Human beings are naturally social animals, and human lives encounter multiple interactional encounters with others. Human flourishing therefore embraces this aspect of human nature and considers the acquisition of goods and virtues not only exclusively for oneself forsaking all others, but instead also appreciates the concern for others and the acquisition of goods and virtues for the sake of others as well as oneself. This means to say that a flourishing life may be achieved through nurturing others or through selfless acts; for example, a mother may flourish by providing a nurturing and supportive environment for her child.

The human flourishing characteristics identified above can provide guidance on what flourishing is and how it can be nurtured. A flourishing life is not necessarily achieved instantaneously; therefore, appreciation of the means (individual goods and virtues) such as knowledge and health are not just mere means to human flourishing but are partial realizations or expressions of it (Rasmussen, 1999). As such, these goods and virtues are valuable in their own right, which also contributing to human flourishing as a whole or as the ultimate end. To achieve human flourishing as the ultimate end, understanding and developing the means to achieve this end is essential. This will involve initiating the means to achieve human flourishing and developing an awareness of the way life's journey is being enhanced.

## Expressions of Human Flourishing and the Contribution of Physical Literacy

To flourish is a state of being, not a mere feeling or experience; it is not something that is static, but is instead found in action (Rasmussen, 1999). As mentioned earlier, partial expressions of human flourishing can be achieved in nurturing individual goods and virtues. These goods and virtues comprise inter alia, goods as knowledge, health, friendship, creativity, achievement, beauty, and pleasure, and such virtues as integrity, temperance, courage, and justice. These are valuable not as just mere means to human flourishing, but as partial realizations or expressions of this state of being. As such, these goods and virtues are valuable as both means and ends (Rasmussen, 1999). What contribution can physical literacy play in encouraging humans to enhance their potential to

flourish? One answer is to foster physical literacy that encompasses engagement in a wide range of physical activities. Engagement in physical activity provides abundant opportunities to develop an individual's embodied potential, and in doing so, also nurtures numerous individual goods and virtues. Herein lies the major contribution that physical literacy can make in promoting human flourishing.

Physical literacy has the potential to significantly contribute to human flourishing through the development of our humanembodied potential. Experiencing physical activity in a variety of challenging situations will expose individuals to the actualization of further potentialities (Rasmussen, 1999), thus encouraging the realization of latent or inherent ability not yet discovered or expose wider areas for growth and fulfillment. Therefore, encouraging individuals to move with poise, economy, and confidence within a variety of environments (Whitehead, 2010) has the potential to create opportunities for meaningful experiences that can ultimately contribute to an individual's ability to flourish. Physical literacy can contribute to human flourishing by developing and capitalizing on our embodied potential as an integral part of our human nature, the development of which may contribute to living a fulfilling and flourishing life.

The concept of physical literacy underwrites the key role that the embodied dimension plays in life as we know it. In the context of our nature as beings-in-the-world physical literacy affords us an essential avenue of interaction without which we could not realize our potential as humans. Physical literacy supports the view that we should celebrate our embodied capability, a capability that needs no justification beyond its unique and indispensable contribution to human life. (Whitehead, 2013, p. 27)

The concept opens the door to a realization of the importance of the embodied dimension as an integral part of human nature. This dimension needs sustained attention starting at birth and continuing into adulthood and through to older age (Whitehead, 2010).

Younkins (2010) states that there is an inextricable connection between human nature and human flourishing. This view is supported by Rasmussen (1999), who also highlights how much of what we take human flourishing to signify is a direct result of our understanding of human nature. Is the notion of human flourishing as a concept simply constructed by examination of our nature? Younkins (2010) would seem to answer in the affirmative in explaining that there are properties central to human nature that establish the general parameters as to what is included in any legitimate account of human flourishing. The debate surrounding what it is to be human has been contested by philosophers for centuries. The writing and teaching of Aristotle explained that the purpose of life is earthly flourishing, achieved via reason, and the acquisition of virtue. Aristotle suggested that all human beings should try to use their abilities to their fullest potential and should obtain fulfillment through the exercise of their realized capabilities. Arguably, if human flourishing involves the intentional use of human capabilities, then these could include what an individual, group, team, organization, and community may regard as their gifts, talents, abilities, and virtues to pursue their freely and democratically chosen values and goals. Flourishing, therefore, may be promoted by intentional action, whereby intentional action is considered as any appropriate action that develops human capabilities that ultimately lead to the flourishing of the person, or people, performing the action (Ghaye, 2010). If physical literacy can be considered a human capability, thus contributing to human flourishing, intentional action to develop embodied potential should be fostered.

Human capabilities are described by Nussbaum (2000, p. 18) as "what people are capable of doing and becoming." The human-embodied dimension is a significant mode of interaction and can be

viewed as a capability. There is little doubt that human embodiment plays a key role in coming to know ourselves as we relate to the world. Although similar capabilities are developed by each individual, on account of the person's unique range of experiences, the expression of a capability will also be particular to the individual. Physical literacy could be argued to contribute to developing our embodied capability, and therefore, in turn, nurturing this capability has the potential to promote human flourishing. On these grounds, a clear relationship can be argued between physical literacy and human flourishing.

## Similarities Between Human Flourishing and Physical Literacy

Physical literacy ultimately aims to develop the human-embodied potential and promote lifelong engagement in physical activity by developing the motivation, confidence, physical competence, and knowledge and understanding to be physically active for life (International Physical Literacy Association [IPLA], 2016). The theoretical foundations of the concept of physical literacy share many similarities to characteristics of human flourishing. These similarities are outlined in more detail below.

### Objectively Good

Physical literacy aims to “capitalize on innate movement/physical potential to make a significant contribution to the quality of life” (Whitehead, 2010, p. 12). Promoting well-being and quality of life is a goal pursued by physical literacy to enhance all aspects of life and aims to achieve more than just mere happiness. Physical literacy shares the same problem as human flourishing, in that capitalizing on human-embodied potential should be enacted in a way that is not indulgent and selfish, but in a manner and context that benefits both the participant and others involved in the activity.

### Inclusive

Similar to human flourishing, physical literacy is an inclusive concept and is recognized as a potential in all human beings (Whitehead, 2010). Physical literacy is a concept that is applicable to all throughout the course of life and aims to capitalize on movement potential regardless of an individual's age, capability, or endowment.

### Individualized

Human flourishing is individualized because it is dependent on the nature of the individual, who and what one is (Rasmussen, 1999). This holds true for physical literacy. Physical literacy embraces individuality as has been shown through its relationship with existentialism and phenomenology. These philosophies highlight how as humans we create ourselves as we live and interact with the world. As a result, these interactions inform our perception of the world around us. Therefore, physical literacy embraces the notion that all individuals are on a unique journey informed by their previous interaction and experiences in the world.

### Agent Dependent

Human flourishing is agent dependent; this means that flourishing does not merely happen or occur within some person's life as if a person were simply a placeholder for this ultimate value (Rasmussen, 1999). To flourish, therefore, an agent (individual) must seek out and experience situations that promote the development or realization of certain goods and virtues that are required as per the needs of that agent (individual). This is similar to physical literacy in that a holistic approach is taken, placing the individual at the center of his or her physical literacy journey

and nurturing the affective, cognitive, and physical domains in response to the needs of the individual (agent).

### Self-Directed

Human flourishing is self-directed; this means that human flourishing must be attained through the individual's own actions and efforts (Rasmussen, 1999). This is similar to physical literacy in that individuals are encouraged as they mature to take responsibility for their own engagement in physical activity (IPLA, 2016). Promoting autonomy and self-direction is integral to developing physical literacy.

### Socially Constructed

Social and cultural factors are highlighted within physical literacy. Whitehead (2010) argues that the expression of physical literacy will be particular to the culture or the environment within which an individual may live. Also, existentialists would argue that "we are, through and through, compounded of relationships with the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 166). Thoughts, ideas, and values are constructed as a result of this interaction with the world and the objects therein, both inanimate and animate.

## Physical Education, Physical Literacy, and Human Flourishing

Physical education when informed by physical literacy is more likely to provide a meaningful learning experience as an outcome of the nurturing of an individual's embodied capability. Through the intentional action to develop an individual's embodied capability, the maximization of human potential may be encouraged, thus nurturing certain goods and virtues that may lead to expressions or realizations of human flourishing.

## Conclusion

Physical literacy as a concept provides a conceptual basis for the intentional action to develop the human-embodied capability. In doing so, human potential can be nurtured and maximized, and human flourishing can be enhanced. There are similarities between the two concepts; in particular, the inclusive and individualized nature of human flourishing aligns very closely with physical literacy. Physical education, when informed by physical literacy, has the potential to encourage the promotion of human flourishing by nurturing an individual's embodied sense of self. More effective and sensitive interaction with the world encourages a well-developed and positive sense of being embodied. The intentional action to develop the embodied capability through physical literacy promotes human flourishing by capitalizing on an innate human capability that positivity influences "what people are capable of doing and becoming" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 18). Therefore, progressions in developing physical literacy (embodied interaction/ capability) could also be considered as realizations or expressions of human flourishing. Physical literacy has many contributions to make to human flourishing, and it is perhaps this rich opportunity to enhance the quality and potential of life that has enabled physical literacy to move beyond a concept of U.K. interest to that of global interest. Further research is required to understand fully the relationship between physical literacy, embodiment, and human flourishing. The exploration of these areas will be essential in uncovering the potential of physical literacy to contribute to holistic health, well-being, and maximizing human potential.

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