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Margaret (2019) Human Flourishing and Physical Literacy. In:  
Physical Literacy Across the World. Routledge Studies in  
Physical Education and Youth Sport . Routledge, London. ISBN  
9781138571556**

Official URL: <https://www.crcpress.com/Physical-Literacy-across-the-World/Whitehead/p/book/9781138571556>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/7761>

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# **Human flourishing and physical literacy**

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## **Introduction**

Part I of this book focused on clarification of the definition of physical literacy, and the development of the thinking concerned with value, implications for practice and charting the physical literacy journey. Part II shared with readers how physical literacy has spread and is being interpreted across the world. Part III opened with the developing work on the notion of physical literacy as a journey, and how this metaphor can illuminate areas of personal experience and add to the understanding of individual journeys. This chapter extends the consideration of value as presented in Part I. This earlier discussion was concerned with the legitimacy of physical literacy, first as securely grounded in philosophy and second from a social justice perspective. This chapter aims to look more widely and to make a case for the value of physical literacy as having the potential to make a significant contribution to life as a whole, as a component of human flourishing.

There are four sections to this chapter. The first addresses the nature of human flourishing, while the second looks at whether the notion of human flourishing is in tune with the philosophical roots of physical literacy. The third section considers how far physical literacy shares the characteristics of human flourishing, and the fourth considers how far the constituent traits of human flourishing are comparable with those in physical literacy. It will be suggested that on account of the congruence of physical literacy with a range of aspects of human flourishing, fostering physical literacy has the potential to make a positive contribution to human flourishing.

## **What is human flourishing?**

Human flourishing is a term used to describe a disposition whereby individuals are thriving or living optimally (De Ruyter, 2004). This would also encompass the notions of wellness and living a good life. Each of these descriptions judge the quality of life from a slightly different perspective; however, VanderWeele (2017) argues that regardless of the different interpretations of well-being or human flourishing, most would concur that, ideally, this would include a positive experience in respect of five broad areas of human life: (1) happiness and life satisfaction; (2) health, both mental and physical; (3) meaning and purpose; (4) character and virtue; and (5) close social relationships. All these are arguably at least a part of what is

meant by flourishing. Each of these areas also satisfies two important criteria in the context of physical literacy: each is generally viewed as an end in itself, and each is, in most circumstances, universally desired. The nature of human flourishing or quality of life is complex, and relates both to the individual and the cultural context. However, to judge that someone has a good quality of life, it would be expected that most of the five areas of human flourishing cited above would be in evidence, with no overemphasis on, or omission of, a specific area that might threaten flourishing as a whole.

Rasmussen (1999) describes human flourishing as the ultimate end of human conduct. However, human flourishing is not purely focused on the end goal, but also includes an awareness of the value of the means to achieve these ends. A flourishing life is something that is seldom achieved at a stroke. Therefore, the means to foster, for example, happiness, health, meaning and purpose, and close social relationships (VanderWeele, 2017), should not be viewed only as stepping stones to human flourishing, but also as partial realisations or expressions of this human disposition (Rasmussen, 1999). Human flourishing therefore values equally the means and the ends of striving towards, and attaining, a life that thrives and flourishes. To flourish as humans is a desirable endeavour. It can be considered as the ultimate aim of life, which is not just simply to exist, but instead to flourish in existence. The notion of human flourishing encompasses many different aspects of human life, each of which can contribute towards flourishing. The question is, ‘What contribution can physical literacy play in promoting human flourishing?’

### **Shared philosophical basis of human flourishing and physical literacy**

Before looking in detail at the relationship between human flourishing and physical literacy, it is useful to consider how far, from a philosophical point of view, the two concepts share common ground. Physical literacy has roots in monism, existentialism and phenomenology (Whitehead, 2010), and it is suggested that these philosophical concepts also align with human flourishing.

The central tenet of monism is that a human is not comprised of separate aspects of being, such as the body and the mind, but is one intricately intra-dependant whole. It is evident in all discussions of human flourishing that this view is endorsed. As mentioned above, human flourishing is described as a disposition or a way of living. Wolbert et al. (2015) refer to human flourishing as a dynamic state, with no particular aspect of human nature singled out. Physical literacy is also described as a disposition that essentially draws on all areas of human nature.

Existentialists argue that human beings create themselves in interaction with the world of animate and inanimate features. Human flourishing embraces this view by

including reference to areas such as environmental mastery and positive relationships with others (Ryff and Keyes, 1995). Wilson-Strydom and Walker (2015) describe interaction as the seedbed of human flourishing and advocate involvement in a range of interaction avenues. This view is supported by Wolbert et al. (2015), who argue for the value of experiencing life in all spheres. In a similar way, effective fostering of physical literacy is best realised in involvement in wide and varied contexts, both in respect of the physical environment and interaction with other people.

Finally, there is congruence between human flourishing and physical literacy in the context of phenomenology. This philosophical position is concerned with highlighting the notion that each individual interprets and acts in the world from a unique standpoint. Past experiences are carried forward and frame future perceptions. On account of this situation, every individual is unique and should be respected as such. This position is integral to human flourishing as it is stressed that each individual should take responsibility for their particular preferences and lifestyle. Wolbert et al. (2015) propose that ‘Striving for a flourishing life is a lifelong journey in which one keeps asking what might bring out the best of oneself’ (p. 127). Agency, autonomy and having a purpose in life all feature in human flourishing, and this would seem to endorse a phenomenological view of the individual at the centre of the enterprise. Within physical literacy, there is also the clear indication that each person is a unique individual who should take responsibility for participation in physical activity.

It would seem that there is no dissonance between human flourishing and physical literacy in respect of philosophical foundations, and this augurs well for underwriting physical literacy as an acceptable component of, and contributor to, human flourishing.

## **Characteristics of human flourishing**

In order to articulate how physical literacy can contribute to human flourishing, it is useful to consider Rasmussen’s (1999) interrelated characteristics of human flourishing. These are identified as being objectively good, inclusive, individualised, agent-dependent, self-directed, and socially constructed. Each of these characteristics is explained briefly and then related to physical literacy.

### **Objectively good**

Objectively good as a characteristic of human flourishing is derived from the Greek word *eudemonia*, which translated into English means happiness (Annett, 2016).

However, human beings are inclined to seek a deeper sense of happiness than mere attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Ryan and Deci (2001) and VanderWeele (2017) give particular attention to aspects of human flourishing that could promote flourishing on account of their being objectively 'good' and contributing to 'the good life'. In addition, human beings are inclined to seek not only the good life for themselves, but the good life for and with others. This sense of mutual flourishing is embedded in the notion of the common good (Etzioni, 2015). In short, happiness should be sought after by working from 'good' motives and intentions rather than selfish and unethical intentions.

Physical literacy similarly incorporates the notions of being 'objectively good'. The physical activities promoted in nurturing physical literacy are generally viewed as enhancing the good life, being intrinsically worthwhile and maximising potential. It would be seen as unacceptable if participation in a physical activity was entered into knowing that this could possibly cause distress to others or put them in any danger. In most cases, in respect of physical activity, the participation of an individual in physical activity offers the opportunity for others to be involved in and benefit from this engagement. In this way, participation is very much in the common good (Ryan and Deci, 2001; VanderWeele, 2017). Physical literacy and engagement in physical activity would seem to play a significant role in human flourishing in being intrinsically 'good' and providing opportunities for meaningful activity.

### **Inclusive**

Human flourishing is inclusive in that it is accessible and obtainable for all, regardless of endowment or personal circumstances. Individuals can flourish by striving to live optimally and by maximising their personal human potential (Durden-Myers et al., 2018). Inclusion, more broadly, can be fostered in environments in which individuals with a whole host of unique (often marginalised or minoritised) identities can find opportunities to succeed and belong. Such an inclusive environment can contribute to the establishment of close social relationships.

Physical literacy embraces this foundational notion of inclusivity in the sense that all individuals, irrespective of their knowledge, skills and endowment, are encouraged to explore and develop a broad movement repertoire. When experiences are offered in a wide variety of environments, this maximises engagement in physical activity, and thus can capitalise on particular human potential.

### **Individualised**

Human flourishing is individualised because it is dependent on who and what

constitutes that person (Rasmussen, 1999). This means that individuals will flourish in different ways and involve different means, which will be specific and unique to that person.

Physical literacy also shares this individualised view, and values the distinctive and unique nature of perception, development and aspirations as exhibited by each human being. Physical literacy aims to embrace this by suggesting that each individual is on a personalised and unique journey, with no two journeys being the same. Therefore, it is not appropriate to compare individuals with one another as this approach threatens the individualised nature of human flourishing, and indeed physical literacy. Instead, the creation of personal goals and aspirations that relate to the individual is recommended. This approach encourages individuals to find personal authentic meaning and purpose in life, which can promote both physical literacy and human flourishing.

### **Agent-dependent**

Human flourishing is agent-dependent. Flourishing does not merely happen or occur independently of the individual. In order for flourishing to be nurtured and expressed, it falls to the individual to be proactive in attributing meaning or value to particular circumstances. A person needs to have a hand in creating the conditions by which to flourish. There must be a synergy between these conditions and the individual.

In relation to physical literacy, the provision of physical activity experiences and environments are provided in ways that individuals can grow to value and find meaning in these activities. Individuals are provided with authentic opportunities to pursue movement and physical activities that are personally meaningful (see explanatory glossary), thus establishing a relationship between the individual, the activity and the environment.

### **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 be purely achieved in responding to external factors that are beyond an individual's control (Rasmussen, 1999). Each individual is on their own path to a flourishing life, and this path must be travelled as a result of that person's own volition following self-selected goals (Durden-Myers et al., 2018).

Within the definition of physical literacy, the notion of individuals taking responsibility for their own engagement in physical activity alludes to the self-directed nature of lifelong physical activity. Individuals are encouraged to exercise

independent decision-making and to take action in the interests of participation in physical activity. Providing individuals with the opportunity to be self-directed allows them to engage in movement tasks that are meaningful and purposeful. Thus, to foster physical literacy as a lifelong journey, an appropriate range of opportunities for physical activity should be provided for all age groups. The provision of choice encourages self-direction in decision-making, which not only recognises differences, but can help to nurture physical literacy in all.

### **Socially constructed**

Rasmussen (1999) also describes human flourishing as a socially constructed concept. Human beings are naturally social animals. Human flourishing therefore embraces this aspect of human nature, and incorporates the relationship between the individual, the environment and others. Flourishing in this context is realised through interaction with a wide range of cultural and/or context-specific factors, including the individual's social world. Understanding the interconnected nature between an individual and their environment is key in creating circumstances that support and further human flourishing. Flourishing is likely to be evident in communities that recognise the role they play in nurturing their population. Communities should appreciate that personal values, aims and effectiveness are both unique to the individual and developed in concert with the social milieu. Annett (2016) explains that this is a win-win situation as the flourishing of the individual is interlinked with the flourishing of the community.

Similarly, physical literacy is socially constructed and situated within social community, whether this is a school, a local community or a state/country. Engagement in physical activities that are established within a community should feature in programmes that foster physical literacy. These experiences in recognised forms of activity are likely to be more readily meaningful to an individual. This promotion of physical activity and physical literacy not only creates opportunities for individual development, but also helps to foster and establish communities that value physical activity. This is again a win-win situation.

The characteristics of human flourishing identified above provide an outline of the nature of flourishing. These refer to being objectively good, inclusive, individualised, agent-dependent, self-directed and socially constructed. It is argued that all these features readily align with characteristics of physical literacy, and this synergy would suggest that the promotion of physical literacy has the potential to enhance human flourishing.

## Constituent traits of human flourishing

A second area of congruence that needs to be considered is the alignment of the constituent traits associated with human flourishing with those of physical literacy. This section sets out some of these traits, which have been proposed by writers such as Ryff and Keyes (1995), Kekes (2002) and Seligman (2011). There is considerable common ground covered by these analyses; however, the description drawn up by Ryff and Keyes (1995) is seen as representing the major aspects of human flourishing. They list human traits of autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, a purpose in life, environmental mastery, and positive relationship with others. Ryff and Keyes (1995) also identify vitality and optimism in their writing, but do not include them specifically among their constituents; however, as these are very apposite to physical literacy, they have been included in the following discussion. It is suggested that to describe an individual as flourishing, there should be evidence of each of these constituent traits. In brief, it might be expected that an individual evidences:

- *autonomy* in exercising independence, self-determination and agency, taking responsibility for shaping their life;
- *personal growth* in a proactive interest in learning, accomplishment, and a wide-ranging and enquiring attitude to new opportunities;
- *self-acceptance* in realistic self-perception, positive self-esteem and acceptance of personal potential;
- *a purpose in life* in having a clear sense of direction, commitment and perseverance regarding the task at hand, and a sound vision of the future (i.e. personal clarity relating to values by which to live);
- *environmental mastery* in the ability to effect productive relationships with a wide range of environments (this is achieved through perceptive understanding and imaginative, apposite response);
- *positive relationships* with others in showing good interpersonal skills of listening, understanding and empathizing, as well as advising with sensitivity;
- *optimism* in being positive about the future, displaying a robust confidence and showing resilience in the face of challenges; and
- *vitality* in having energy, drive, commitment and enthusiasm.

Table 18.1 sets out the ways in which physical literacy can foster each of these constituent traits. The table is created with reference to the definition and the attributes of physical literacy, which can be found in Chapter 2. It is useful to refer to these earlier sections in reading the table. For example, the ‘autonomy’ listed among



the constituent traits of human flourishing can be furthered by those aspects of physical literacy that indicate the individual should take responsibility for participation in physical activity. The ‘personal growth’ constituent of human flourishing can be supported in the development of physical competence and effective interaction with the environment. The motivation and confidence identified in the definition of physical literacy can be seen as having the potential to contribute to the traits of human flourishing relating to ‘self-acceptance’, ‘optimism’ and ‘vitality’.

There seems little doubt from the discussion above that physical literacy can contribute to human flourishing in respect of contributing to constituent traits as set out above. These are identified as autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, a purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, optimism and vitality. This congruence supports the claim that physical literacy has the potential to make a wide-ranging and significant contribution to human flourishing.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has set out a case for physical literacy to be acknowledged as making a valuable contribution to human flourishing. The two dispositions share some common philosophical roots and are closely aligned in respect of characteristics and constituent traits. The next chapter will discuss the relationship between human nature and human flourishing, as well as considering physical literacy as a key aspect of human nature, and thus an essential part of human flourishing.

**TABLE 18.1** Constituent traits of human flourishing and their exemplification/place in physical literacy

	<i>Nature of the constituent trait</i>	<i>Inclusion of the constituent in physical literacy</i>
<b>Autonomy</b>	Independence, self-determination, agency, responsibility, freedom and liberty.	Physical literacy aims to encourage individuals to be responsible for adopting a physically active lifestyle. Participants are encouraged to take ownership of their involvement in physical activities. Promoting individual <i>autonomy</i> is an aspiration embedded within physical literacy.
<b>Personal growth</b>	Proactive interest in learning and accomplishment. Wide-ranging and enquiring attitude to new opportunities. Ambitious and forward-thinking.	Physical literacy aims to develop confidence through progressive achievement appropriate to age and endowment. Growth and accomplishment are realised in effective interaction in physical activity in a wide variety of environments. This depends on individual perception and imagination, as well as application of movement patterns. <i>Personal growth</i> is a very significance aspect of all work to foster physical literacy.
<b>Self-acceptance</b>	Realistic and positive self-perception. Acceptance of, and contentment with, personal potential. Awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Sound self-esteem and self-concept.	Those advocating physical literacy strongly support showing respect for each person as unique with individual potential. Realistic self-perception is fostered through developing motivation and self-confidence. Assessment of physical literacy is ipsative (i.e. based on previous performance). Encouraging feedback on effort, progress and achievement is recommended. <i>Self-acceptance</i> permeates the work in physical literacy not least in celebrating steps individuals take in realising their individual potential and developing a positive sense of self.
<b>Purpose in life</b>	Clear sense of direction, commitment and perseverance. A sound vision of the future. Personal clarity relating to values by which to live.	Proponents of physical literacy see involvement in physical activity as opening the door to a rich range of opportunities that can play a part in defining life. Physical activity offers new horizons and can feature in mapping life experiences for the future. It can change lives. Engagement in physical activity in the context of physical literacy can add meaning and <i>purpose to life</i> . The valuing of physical activity in its own right is a priority.

<b>Environmental mastery</b>	Productive relationships within a wide range of environments. Astute perception, understanding, imagination and apposite responses. Productive use of previous experiences.	Physical literacy is grounded in existentialism, and thus meaningful involvement in a range of situations and environments is central to the concept. Effective interaction involves alert perception, imagination and creative ways to apply movement patterns. <i>Mastery of the environment</i> lies at the heart of physical literacy.
<b>Positive relationships with others</b>	Good interpersonal skills of listening, understanding and empathising. Establishment of mutual trust. Caring and responsive attitude. Adds positively to group enterprises.	Much engagement in physical activity takes place alongside others, and indeed relies on the actions of others. To achieve effective participation, individuals are guided to develop mutual respect, empathy and responsiveness in relation to others. The fostering of physical literacy includes the realisation of <i>positive relationships with others</i> so that experiences for all are meaningful and rewarding.
<b>Optimism</b>	Positive attitude towards the future. Robust confidence and resilience in the face of challenges.	The fostering of physical literacy depends on developing the motivation and confidence to look ahead to rewarding experiences in the field of physical activity. Realistic self-acceptance alongside support from others engenders resilient application in the expectation of progress. Physical literacy is imbued with <i>optimism</i> in the confidence and excitement of further meaningful experiences in the context of physical activity.
<b>Vitality</b>	Energy, drive, commitment, zest for life, enthusiasm, and sound embodied health and well-being.	Founded on the intricate complexities and extensive abilities of human embodied life, physical literacy has the capacity to enliven and enhance life (Almond, 2015). The effort required for participation, and the quality of subsequent experiences, engenders a thirst for more active involvement. The <i>vitality</i> that is realised in involvement in physical activity is a distinguishing characteristic of physical literacy.

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Source: Adapted from Ryff and Keyes (1995)

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