Chapter 7

Physical education in education – a means or an end in itself?

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Introduction

This chapter considers physical education as having intrinsic value in itself and as providing a means to achieve a wide range of goals – many not directly associated with working in the physical domain itself. In this chapter the notion of an 'end' describes a goal towards which an activity is practised. Characteristically this goal is viewed as closely related to the activity being conducted. An 'end' can, therefore, also be considered as being the intrinsic value of the activity itself. In contrast to an end, the notion of a 'means' identifies a purpose to which an activity can be seen to contribute which is not directly related to the activity itself. For example, the purpose or end of eating lunch is valuable in itself in satisfying hunger. However taking lunch with a prospective business associate to secure a contract would be classified as using this hospitality as a means to an end. It is suggested in this chapter that physical education is all too readily used as a means to ends beyond the specific nature and value of the subject area. This constitutes the area of the debate under discussion. The first section looks back at attitudes to the value of physical education in the past and also considers a range of current perceptions of its contribution to schooling. Some reasons for these scenarios are suggested. This will be followed by a reflection on the problems of physical education relying too heavily on making a wide variety of contributions to education. The second section starts with a consideration of the ways in which all teachers contribute to education as a whole. The concept of physical literacy will then be outlined and proposed as a valuable concept from which to build an argument to support physical education in the curriculum. The chapter will close with a challenge to all teachers of physical education to muster arguments to support the unique place of physical education in the school curriculum.

Some examples of ways in which physical education was valued in C19th and C20th

In the late C19th and the early C20th there were two types of physical activity in UK schools, each with their own rationale. One was in public schools and the other in government-run Board Schools. In public schools, which were

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officially recognised by the Clarendon Commission in 1868, games were the predominant form of activity and were championed as promoting 'Muscular Christianity'. Games were valued in that through the playing of games boys were to develop team spirit, loyalty, discipline and self-sacrifice. They were also seen as valuable to prevent unruly behaviour. In Board Schools, which were set up in 1870 by the Forster Act, sport did not feature; here gymnastic exercises were the norm. There were two types of gymnastics being promoted in England in the late C19th, one from Germany, led by Friedrick Jahn, which resembled military drill and demanded precision and obedience (Bailey and Vamplew, 1999, p. 4) and the other from Sweden, created by Per Henrick Ling, which was designed to be therapeutic and foster health and fitness (Bailey and Vamplew, 1999, p. 4). These examples show two characteristic ways that physical activity was perceived and indeed valued in schooling. Public schools and German gymnastics used movement to influence the development of what were seen as desirable personal traits, while Swedish Gymnastics used physical activity to enhance the bodily health of pupils. Particular interest was shown in using physical education to promote physical health when the country was at war or likely to be at war, to ensure that soldiers were fit for action. It is interesting to note that these two perspectives, behavioural and health related, are still evident in C21st physical education.

There are many twists and turns in the history of physical education, many of which related to the different views of men and women. This difference was perpetuated throughout most of the C20th by the segregated training of male and female teachers of physical education. Male teacher training focused on games, gymnastics and competition, and had a somewhat military approach. Female training covered a wide range of activities including dance, was less concerned with competition, was more pupil centred and displayed an interest in holistic health. Within this period it is important to highlight two particular perceptions of value. The first relates to the approach advocated by Rudolf Laban (Bailey and Vamplew, 1999, p. 77). From the 1940s physical education was influenced by Laban's advocacy of using movement as an expressive medium. This was principally taken up in primary schools and by women teachers. In Laban's view teachers should respect the whole person and give pupils opportunities to develop creative and imaginative powers and to exercise responsibility in the use of freedom. Here we see physical activity being used as a means to goals beyond the immediate involvement in the subject. In the last decades of the C20th there was a move away from Laban's approach and towards a games focus. This change was initiated first by men and women being trained together and second by the advent of mixed physical education in secondary schools, most often led by men. The development of physical-education-as-sport techniques (Kirk, 2010) gradually took centre stage. This was supported by government in it being seen as a way to develop the standing of the nation through success on the international competitive sport scene. These examples pick out first a further example of using physical education for personal development and then the fostering of

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sport techniques for purposes that could be seen as of benefit beyond value to the individual person.

These examples through history can be seen as using physical activity in the form of drill, physical training or physical education as a means to ends that might be viewed as outside the subject area. Cited above are the development of desirable personal characteristics, fitness for meeting the demands of battle and provision of high-level athletes to raise the profile of the country.

C21st value of physical education

Since the late C20th up to the present day there have been significant changes in the work carried out by schools in England. Schools no longer have the freedom to plan their own curricula with particular aims and values. The advent of the National Curriculum in the 1990s has resulted in numerous directives concerning the curriculum, which have been followed up in Her Majesty's Inspections. A huge amount of paperwork has been produced over the last 30 years, not least in respect of physical education. Changes and re-alignments to priorities associated with physical education have appeared regularly. The goals of the subject have seen a number of modifications and it is of interest to highlight a few of these here. The aspiration to improve physical skills and participate in a range of activities has been consistently cited in expectations in different versions of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE). However this focus has nearly always been accompanied by other goals. These goals are characteristically outside the specific domain of physical activity and could be seen as representing requests from those in authority that physical education should be a means to a range of broad educational ends. For example, in the first NCPE the following aims were included: coping with success and failure, developing problem-solving skills and interpersonal skills (Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office (DES/WO, 1992)). In 1995, NCPE documents referred to the value of physical education to, for example, 'train' pupils to respond readily to instructions and to observe conventions of fair play, honest competition and good sporting behaviour (Department for Education (DfE, 1995)). The 1999 document reminded physical educationalists of their broader responsibilities to foster spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (Department for Education and Employment/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (DfEE/QCA, 1999)). In 2003, a government strategy document included a reference to the role of physical education as improving pupil concentration leading to better behaviour and attainment (Department for Education and Skills/Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DfES/DCMS, 2003)). In 2007, the taking on of different roles and responsibilities was mentioned (QCA, 2007)) and physical education as contributing to building character and helping to embed values of fairness and respect was a focus in 2014 (DfE, 2013).

It is interesting to note that the changes outlined prior to the end of the C20th were made as a response to significant developments in national priorities and

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educational philosophy. The modifications made to the National Curriculum since the late C20th have been more subtle, but could be seen as responding to pressure from particular interest groups. Reference to moral development could be a response to the views of those responsible for law and order to counter the rise of anti-social behaviour. Inclusion of social development and taking responsibility could be the response to employers identifying the need for these skills in the work place. The specification of good behaviour and the need to concentrate could have been a response to concerns of those in education about the level of application and achievement realised across all areas of schooling.

In addition to guidance provided by the National Curriculum, teachers of physical education may well be subject to a variety of other pressures, often from beyond education.

It is suggested that interested parties in respect of physical activity in schools are many and various and that each of these parties has priorities to which they would like to persuade teachers of physical education to contribute. These are set out in Figure 7.1.

For example, National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) may lobby headteachers and teachers of physical education to include a particular activity in the curriculum. To that end NGBs may provide free equipment and material and perhaps even free coaching. NGBs are keen to see their activity in the curriculum

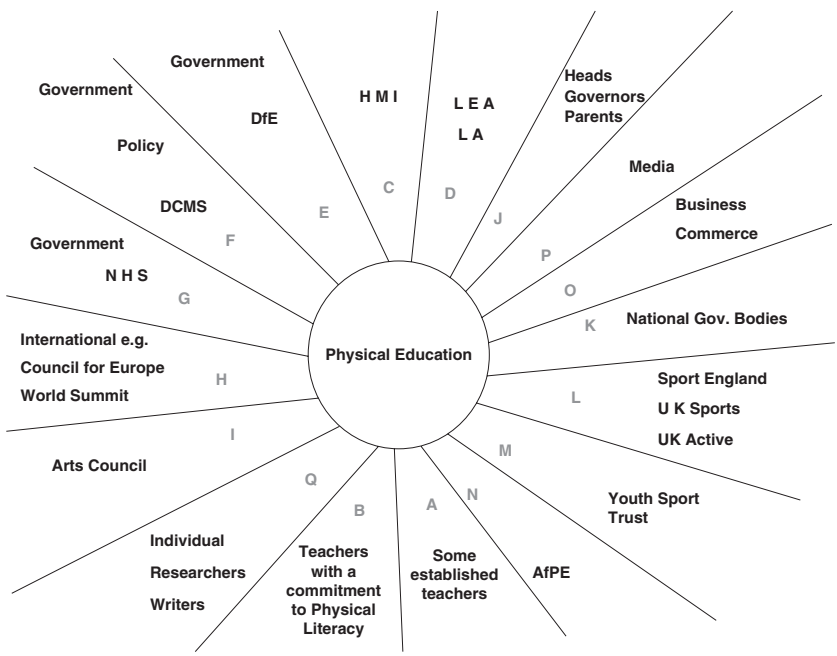

Figure 7.1 Influences on physical education.

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both so that talent can be identified and nurtured and so that their activity can thrive. The Arts Councils in the UK could well count among NGBs and put pressure on schools to include a range of forms of creative movement in the curriculum, including dance. Such are the demands made on schools, it is not uncommon for the Arts to see their time in the curriculum cut and those in this area of work may look for time within, and support from, other subject areas.

Those providing health care, such as the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, may well urge schools to develop a strong focus on exercise to promote cardio-vascular fitness and muscular-skeletal health. It is clearly in the interests of the NHS to lobby for activity that could lessen ill health and combat obesity. Lightening the load, financially, is very significant to the NHS – given the pressures that they are under, currently.

Alternatively, physical education in schools can be the target of commercial enterprises. For example companies are keen to promote their products, managers of social media want to encourage work to expand their 'take-up' and influence and large retailers may be involved in schemes to enhance their standing in the market place. These pressures can be tempting if accompanied by the offer of financial, or in kind, support. In the examples presented in the section above, it is suggested that interested parties outside the physical education profession are, in one way or another, intent on 'using' physical education as a means to their own end. There is a view that PE is being and has been used in a wide variety of ways – not always, perhaps, to the benefit of the subject.

Between 1970 and the present day there have been two authors who have addressed the issue of multiple aims of physical education. These authors, Arnold (1979) and Whitehead (2010, 2019), have both approached the issue from a philosophical standpoint and each has offered a solution to the problem. Arnold has created an approach to legitimise a wide range of aims, while Whitehead (2010, 2019) advocates a position that predominantly focuses on the unique nature of physical activity, the realisation of which provides the raison d'etre for physical education. Whitehead's views will be discussed later in the chapter.

Arnold (1979) proposes that, in the context of education, physical education can be seen as making three significant contributions. Arnold (1979) argues that work in physical education is educative in that it provides '*education about movement*', with physical education being a medium in which knowledge and understanding of principles of anatomy, physiology, biomechanics and psychology can be fostered. Second, he proposes that physical education is educative in that it provides '*education through movement*', with the subject serving as a vehicle to promote life skills such as communication, collaboration with others and creativity. Finally, he refers to the experience of movement as providing '*education in movement*'. Here he highlights meaningful movement experiences as educative and exemplifies these experiences in describing a range of 'peak experiences' of elite athletes. Arnold's work is discussed fully in Chapter 6. In that chapter doubt is expressed as to whether the amount of knowledge gained about disciplines of, for example, physiology and biomechanics is sufficient to be recognised as

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making a serious contribution to education. Concern is also expressed about the significance given to the contribution physical education can make to general education. Finally it is considered unfortunate that with respect to '*education in movement*', the focus is on the high-performing athlete rather than embracing all participants. In Arnold's terms '*education about movement*' and '*education through movement*' could be read as using the subject as means to ends beyond the subject area; however, his work on '*education in movement*' begins to home in on the unique value of physical education. These arguments are fully backed up with reference to philosophy.

Potential problems associated with using means to broader educational ends as justifying the place of physical education in the curriculum

There are at least three areas that need consideration here. These relate to credibility, feasibility and dispensability.

Is it credible to claim that physical education makes a significant contribution to broader educational goals? In other words can we prove, unequivocally, that we do make a difference to the development of life skills such as communication, social skills or ethical behaviour? It is suggested that it is either very difficult, or indeed impossible, to provide this evidence.

Looking at the situation from another perspective, is it feasible for teachers of physical education to adopt ways of teaching or specific pedagogy that will make the fostering of broader goals more likely to be achieved? It is suggested that pedagogy aligned closely with broader aims could threaten the very learning and experiences that are unique to the subject area. For example, stress on communication and group work could result in less time being spent on practical experiences and more time being spent on discussion and deliberation. Focus on moral issues might be best covered by observing recorded physical activities, with time spent debating examples of unethical behaviour. In addition to this aspect of feasibility it has often been remarked that the subject must be careful not to promise too much. For example, Penney and Chandler (2000, p. 75) 'question the degree to which physical education can legitimately continue to make varied claims and pursue multiple agendas'. They challenge the profession to consider if it is realistic to claim to offer so many benefits that can be accrued from physical education. It would seem to be very important in all planning and teaching to consider where the priorities of the subject area lie.

The dispensability of physical education is a further area of concern. It would seem the case that a wide variety of subjects will also be expected to contribute to broader educational goals. If this is a significant aspect of the work of teachers of physical education, the conclusion might be drawn that physical activity adds little that is distinctive to the curriculum. Could it be the case that if stress is laid too heavily in this direction in physical education, the subject area becomes dispensable, given that little would be lost if the subject was

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removed from the curriculum? This is a serious concern as physical education is an expensive subject to house and staff. There are also perceptions that if some form of exercise is all that is wanted, the freedom of movement provided at break times would suffice. In addition, it could be argued that those with particular interest and/or ability could be catered for in extra-curricular activity, maybe off-site in partnership with other schools.

It is salutary to reflect that the additional benefits that are perceived to be offered by experiences in physical education, beyond its intrinsic value, may have, in fact, kept the subject in the curriculum. Being a means may have been an asset. However, caution needs to be expressed in the way that physical education has, in a number of cases throughout history, realigned itself to the current educational priorities. It seems that the profession has been prepared to 'sell its soul' to join the latest 'educational bandwagon'. However this carries the danger of becoming outdated when an idea is no longer seen as the top priority. There has been considerable debate over the years as to the nature of the core goal of physical education. In a wide variety of publications different views have been expressed and this has generated disagreement, and, indeed on occasion, divided the profession. With this background of a variety of views it might be suggested that it has been easier for the profession to rely on being seen as a means to general educational ends rather than an end in itself.

Expectations of teachers regarding the goals of education and physical education

As can be seen from the observations set out in the chapter so far, teachers of physical education seem to expect that, over and above what might be their core responsibility to foster physical competence, it is their role to promote a wide range of broad educational goals, as well as respond to pressure from different interested groups. The second half of this chapter will consider this situation. The following areas will be covered:

- the responsibility of all teachers to contribute to broad educational goals;
- the role of the concept of physical literacy in identifying and advocating the intrinsic value of the subject;
- the importance of teachers' ability to articulate the unique value of the subject to ensure that physical education remains in the school curriculum.

The chapter so far has taken a somewhat negative stance in relation to expectations of physical education as making a contribution to broader educational goals. This view has been emphasised to alert teachers to the danger of over-reliance on these extrinsic goals. In fact there is absolutely no doubt that physical education should, can and does fulfil these expectations.

Pupils learn from many aspects of schooling including the example set by teachers, the way that subject areas are taught and the initiation into different

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subject areas. Teachers are role models in their practices, attitudes and self-presentation. The examples they set in relation to such characteristics as patience, reliability, fairness and mutual respect are very powerful aspects of the 'hidden curriculum' (Wren, 1999). The ways that teachers engage their pupils in learning can also make an impact on pupils. For example, teaching that involves pupils in discovery, problem solving and creativity fosters the development of imagination and initiative and teaching that devolves responsibility to individuals or groups fosters independence and self-confidence. In the context of contributing to the broad goals of education, it is teachers' responsibility to be aware of their wide-ranging impact on pupils. And it is important to remember that practitioners in school are teachers first and teachers of their subject area second. Teachers of physical education can make a significant contribution to education both as role models and as promoters of personal skills of learning.

Teachers of physical education also make a contribution to education in initiating pupils into the wide range of activities that comprise the subject area. In addition to the knowledge imparted in each subject area, its study entails particular features. For example mathematics will foster logic, English will promote communication skills and science will involve enquiry and experimentation. Physical education embraces a rich variety of such features. For example involvement in group activity involves communication skills and social skills. Taking part in activities such as sailing and rock climbing involves a perceptive appreciation of the situation and the ability to devise responses that match the challenges. Involvement in forms of dance will depend on imaginative and creative facility and participation in many forms of movement activity will need adept planning and systematically designed procedures. It is suggested that such is the nature of the range of activities undertaken in physical education that the subject provides a rich source of what might be called valuable educative attributes. Referring back to the earlier part of the chapter it needs to be clarified that the goal of physical education is not in itself to foster these attributes but to initiate pupils into forms of physical activity. Development of these attributes is the outcome of involvement in physical education, not the purpose of the activity.

The role of physical literacy in supporting the intrinsic value of physical education

In the debate so far it has been proposed that physical education has all too often relied on the contribution the subject can make to broad educational goals to justify its place in the curriculum. Nevertheless it has been suggested that, on account of the professionalism of teachers of physical education and as a result of the nature of the material of the subject, there is ample evidence that physical education can in fact contribute significantly to education. However there still remains the issue of on what grounds the subject area can make a case for a place in education. It is suggested that, without a well-founded argument, physical education could be in a precarious position regarding its place in the curriculum.

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As was referred to above, this challenge has been taken up by Whitehead (2010, 2019). Whitehead has developed the concept of physical literacy and advocates this as a legitimate and defensible aspiration of physical education. Put simply, physical literacy describes a situation in which an individual is committed to participation in physical activity throughout life. Whitehead suggests that this commitment will best be achieved via ensuring pupils have both the motivation, confidence and physical competence to engage in physical activity and the knowledge and understanding to appreciate the value of being physically active. The definition of physical literacy has developed from these views and reads:

> Physical literacy is a disposition wherein the individual has the motivation, confidence, physical competence and knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for maintaining physical activity for life.
>
> (International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA), 2017)

There is a great deal written about physical literacy (for example Whitehead, 2010, 2019); however what is of interest here are arguments to support the value of physical activity for life. Further reading will reveal that the concept is based on a view of the way that human embodiment is integrally involved in almost all of human life as we know it. As humans we are not made up of two separate parts, the mind and the body, with the body being inferior to the mind. We are essentially embodied. In addition it is argued that we develop into who we are by interacting with the world of people and things. Our embodiment is significant in this interaction, and in fact makes an important contribution to our unique human nature. The above beliefs, which highlight the view that human embodiment is an important and integral facet of humans being, are based on monist, existentialist and phenomenological philosophical views. There is also considerable support for human embodied potential from social theory, where the notion of human capabilities is developed (Nussbaum, 2000). In brief, this view is that we, as humans, have a right to develop all areas of human potential, and this includes those associated with our embodied nature.

From a more practical outlook, nurturing physical literacy not only develops human embodied potential but also fosters a realisation that being active can be rewarding and pleasurable, builds confidence for participation in a wide range of activities and furthers a commitment to develop and active life style. A life that embraces physical activity can be viewed as desirable in promoting well-being and providing a wide range of valuable and self-affirming experiences.

It is also suggested that fostering physical literacy can make a significant contribution to human flourishing. Components of human flourishing very often include autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, optimism, vitality, relating readily to different environments and having positive relationships with others (developed from Ryff and Keyes, 1995). This view can provide a third justification for the promotion of physical literacy. All three areas of justification outlined above are relevant to all pupils. Everyone, of whatever endowment, can benefit

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from participation in physical activity. It is suggested that physical education is not a subject area in which the predominant consideration is to identify talent and train potential international athletes. Physical literacy can be understood as a life-long journey through which all can make progress, gain satisfaction and celebrate their physical potential.

The role of teachers of physical education in setting out a case for the importance and unique nature of the subject

Against the background of the long and varied history of physical education and in the current situation of huge pressures on curriculum time, it often falls to the teacher of physical education to justify a place in school for this subject area. This may well require some discussion, reading and reflection (see, for example, Durden-Myers and Whitehead, 2018; Whitehead, 2010, 2019). Taking account of the concept of physical literacy and the three areas of justification set out above, it is suggested that the following positions could be useful.

Areas of advocacy could include:

- The importance of participation in physical activity for everyone throughout life. This is now recognised as of significant value to counteract more sedentary lifestyles and less than ideal eating habits. Work in schools can play a major part in realising personal commitment in maintaining physical activity.
- The contribution of participation in physical activity to the quality of life. Participation enriches life by broadening life choices and giving the opportunity for a balanced and varied life style. For example involvement in physical activities can provide environments that can counteract mental stress and social isolation.
- The need for education to foster human development in all its various forms. If education is for every pupil, and for the whole pupil, physical potential should be recognised alongside other areas such as the cognitive, the aesthetic and the social. Physical potential is an integral aspect of human life and all have the right to foster this aspect of their personhood.

Teachers are encouraged to consider, seriously, their perception of the unique value of physical activity for all, as the focus of physical education. It is claimed that physical literacy sets out a clear case for the educational validity of attention and time being given to the human embodied dimension. In other words it is suggested that the notion of physical literacy can provide a valid framework for arguing for the importance of physical activity and thus physical education. Teachers of physical education are encouraged to defend their subject with conviction using a range of arguments – maybe including those outlined above.

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Summary

Throughout this chapter readers have been asked to reflect on ways in which physical education in schools has been judged to make a wide range of contributions to education. While it has been proposed that there are clearly dangers in this situation, it is suggested that being seen as a valuable means in achieving broader educational goals may, at times, have supported the continued inclusion of the subject in the curriculum. However teachers of physical education must be clear about the fundamental end of the work and be able to identify the unique contribution of the subject to education. The concept of physical literacy can be valuable here, in its proposal that the end, or purpose, of physical education is the fostering of a commitment to physical activity for life. In this context it is suggested that, while being very alert to protecting the integrity of the subject area and careful not to promise too much, teachers of physical education can claim a valid place in education for their subject, predominantly as an end in itself – in realising unique educational goals – and as making a contribution alongside all teachers, to wider educational aspirations.

Questions for reflection

1. Critically consider the legitimacy of using physical education to be a means to the ends as illustrated in C19th and C20th physical education.
2. Can you identify particular pressures or expectations to which a teacher of physical education today might be subject?
3. Can you identify other pressures? Are their dangers in these and other influences being exerted on teachers of physical education?
4. In your view how serious are the three problems set out in relation to using means to broader educational ends as justifying the place of physical education in the curriculum?
5. Consider the proposal that, on account of the nature of the subject area, teachers of physical education are contributing to education as a whole.
6. Consider if it is the case that the promotion of physical literacy can contribute to human flourishing.

Further reading and resources

Capel, S. and Breckon, P. (eds.) (2014) *A Practical Guide to Teaching Physical Education in the Secondary School*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
Chapters 1 and 2 in this practical guide, both by Whitehead, set out a series of questions and tasks designed to stimulate consideration and debate about the nature of aims and values in physical education.

Kirk, D (2010) *Physical Education Futures*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
This is a short but insightful text in which the author presents a considered reflection on the history of physical education and then debates if physical education has a future.

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Nussbaum, M.C. (2000) *Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Chapter 1 'In defence of universal values' discusses the background to the concept of capabilities and includes a list of capabilities on pp. 78–80. While there is no capability specifically developed from our embodied potential, physical competence is cited in many of the capabilities. In many cases physical competence is seen as a means to realising other capabilities. However the accumulated references amount to a substantive case for physical literacy to be recognised as a capability in its own right.

Whitehead, M. (2013) 'What is physical literacy and how does it impact on physical education?' in S. Capel and M.E. Whitehead (eds.) *Debates in Physical Education*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 37–52.
This chapter considers the concept of physical literacy in some detail.

The following physical education journals should support further reading. There are also many education journals which contain articles related to relevant topics across education more generally, which are useful to extend debate further. They may also contain physical education specific articles.

- *European Physical Education Review*
- *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*
- *Physical Education Matters*
- *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*
- *Quest*
- *Sport, Education and Society*

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