

# The alignment of physical education with physical literacy across 40 European countries

## A policy brief to UNESCO developed by the EUROPLIT Group

**About the EUROPLIT Group:** The EUROPLIT Group is a collaborative network of over 70 researchers from 40 European countries. The group brings together expertise in education, sport, health, and public policy to advance understanding and implementation of physical literacy across Europe.

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**Disclaimer:** This policy brief is based on evidence generated by our group and follows UK NIHR's practical guide.

### Executive Summary

#### Why does this matter?



**Physical literacy** is increasingly recognised as a foundation for **taking responsibility, lifelong learning, inclusive education, long-term physical activity, and for wider health and social benefits.**



**Schools, and in particular physical education (PE),** are uniquely placed to develop and stimulate these capabilities for all children, regardless of background.



Yet, until now, there has been **no systematic analysis of how far national PE curricula across Europe align with physical literacy.** Understanding this alignment is vital for UNESCO and its Member States to identify strengths, address gaps, and ensure education systems support the global goals.

#### Key Findings:

- Across Europe, **national PE curricula show mixed alignment** with physical literacy.
- Countries with **stronger education, development, and innovation systems** show stronger alignment.
- Some countries face **barriers** including lack of consensus on how physical literacy is defined and translated.

#### Key Recommendations:

1. **Maintain and strengthen UNESCO's leadership**  
**Continue to explicitly highlight physical literacy across UNESCO strategies** (including updated Quality Physical Education guidelines).
2. **Support policy and curriculum implementation**
  - **Support curriculum reform** by providing assistance and resources for ministries of education.
  - Promote **teacher education** so PE teachers can deliver physical literacy in practice.
  - Facilitate **global and regional exchange** of best practices and translations of the PL concept.



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## Background



Physical fitness  
Movement skills



Motivation  
Confidence

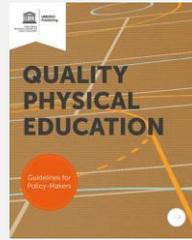


Collaboration  
Communication



Knowledge  
Understanding

Physical literacy **puts the learner at the centre**, recognizing the importance of **cognitive, affective and social development** alongside **physical competence**. This holistic approach directly supports UNESCO's vision for inclusive, equitable, and high-quality physical education, as outlined in UNESCO's QPE Guidelines and Fit4Life flagship initiative.



Physical literacy is prominently featured in UNESCO's 'Quality Physical Education (QPE) Guidelines for Policymakers' and Fit4Life flagship initiative.

Physical literacy is mentioned in WHO's *Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030* as well as OECD's *Making Physical Education Dynamic and Inclusive for 2030*.

## Our Goal

The goal was to examine how far **national physical education (PE) curricula across Europe align with UNESCO's policy vision for physical literacy** as the foundation for quality physical education.



## Our Analyses

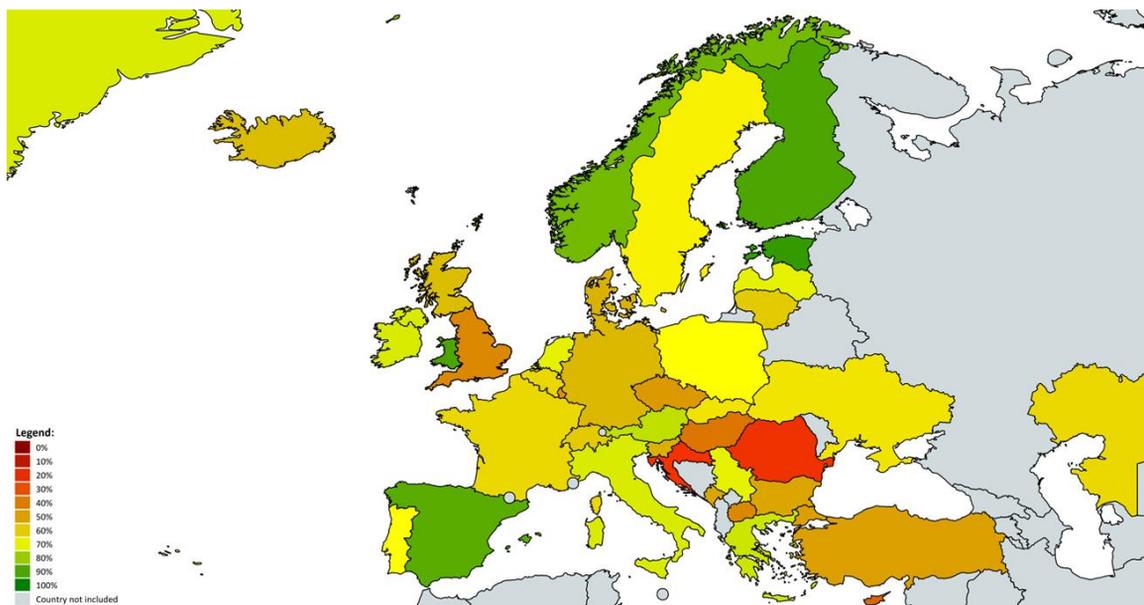
**1 Framework**  
We developed and applied a set of 15 criteria to assess how physical education curricula address key principles of physical literacy.

**2 Data Collection**  
72 Researchers from 40 countries reviewed their national physical education curricula using these criteria.

**3 Comparison**  
Country-level alignment scores were mapped and compared with indicators of human development, education standard, and innovation capacity.

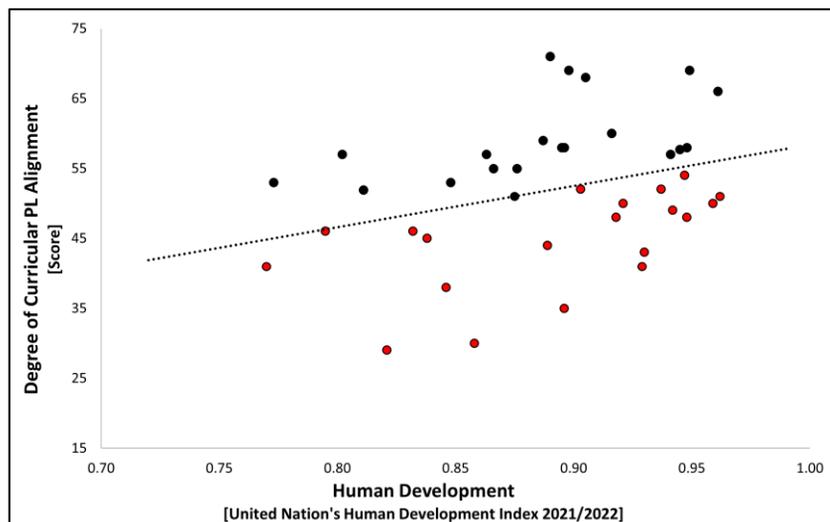
## Our Findings

We found **mixed alignment of physical education curricula with physical literacy** across Europe  
→ Countries shown in green had stronger alignment, while those in red showed weaker alignment.



## We found clear links to broader system indicators

-  Countries with **higher human development** tended to show stronger curricular alignment with physical literacy (see below).
-  Countries with a **higher educational standard** tended to show stronger curricular alignment with physical literacy.
-  Countries with **stronger innovation capacity** tended to show stronger curricular alignment with physical literacy.



When considering these links, the following countries revealed **areas for closer alignment with physical literacy** (see the red dots for the human development example):

- Belgium
- Croatia
- Cyprus
- Czech Republic
- Denmark
- England
- France
- Germany
- Hungary
- Luxembourg
- Montenegro
- Romania
- Scotland
- Slovenia
- Switzerland
- Sweden
- Türkiye



**Barriers against further curricular adoption:** Lack of consensus on how physical literacy is nationally defined, challenges with translating the concept into diverse languages, competing national concepts, differing traditions.

## Why this matters for UNESCO



Alignment of physical education curricula with physical literacy is **critical for quality education**

→ It ensures children and young people acquire the capabilities to be active and healthy throughout life.

Without consistent integration of physical literacy in education, countries risk goals on health, education and equity.

### Supporting UNESCO Strategies:



- The findings directly contribute to the **Quality Physical Education Guidelines for Policymakers**, particularly the priorities 'inclusion' and 'healthy, able and active citizens'.
- They provide empirical evidence for UNESCO's QPE statement (2015) that "**physical education policy implementation still remains inconsistent**" (p. 12).
- Strengthening physical education curricula through physical literacy also supports **UNESCO's wider 2030 agenda** (strengthening education systems, promoting holistic and lifelong learning, gender equality, global citizenship education).

### Contribution to the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs):



- **SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being:** Developing physical literacy fosters lifelong physical activity, reducing NCD risk and supporting mental health.
- **SDG 4 – Quality Education:** Ensuring that physical education integrates multiple, effective learning dimensions.
- **SDG 5 – Gender Equality:** Physical literacy-oriented curricula promote inclusive participation and reduce gendered barriers.
- **SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities:** Alignment of PE with physical literacy helps address disparities in access to quality physical education and health.
- **SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals:** The EUROPLIT Group exemplifies the power of cross-national collaboration.

## The EUROPLIT group

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