

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

## A policy brief to WHO 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 by WHO, UNESCO and OECD as a foundation for **lifelong physical activity, and for wider health, education, and social benefits.**



**Schools, and in particular physical education (PE),** are uniquely placed to develop 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 WHO 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 WHO's leadership**  
**Continue to explicitly highlight physical literacy across WHO strategies** (including GAPPA beyond 2030 and the Health-Promoting Schools Framework).
- 2. Support national policy development**
  - Provide **technical guidance, capacity-building and translation support** to help countries integrate physical literacy into PE curricula.
  - Facilitate **regional working groups** to build consensus and share best practice.



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## Background



Physical fitness  
Movement skills



Motivation  
Confidence



Collaboration  
Communication



Knowledge  
Understanding

Physical literacy **puts the person at the centre**, recognizing the importance of **cognitive, affective and social development** alongside **physical competence**. This holistic approach directly supports WHO's vision for empowering individuals, promoting physical activity, changing lifestyles, fostering health, and leading fulfilling lives.



Physical literacy is prominently featured in **WHO's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030 (GAPPA)**.

Physical literacy is also mentioned in **UNESCO's Quality Physical Education Guidelines for Policymakers** as well as the **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 WHO's policy vision for physical literacy** as the foundation for lifelong physical activity.



## Our Analyses

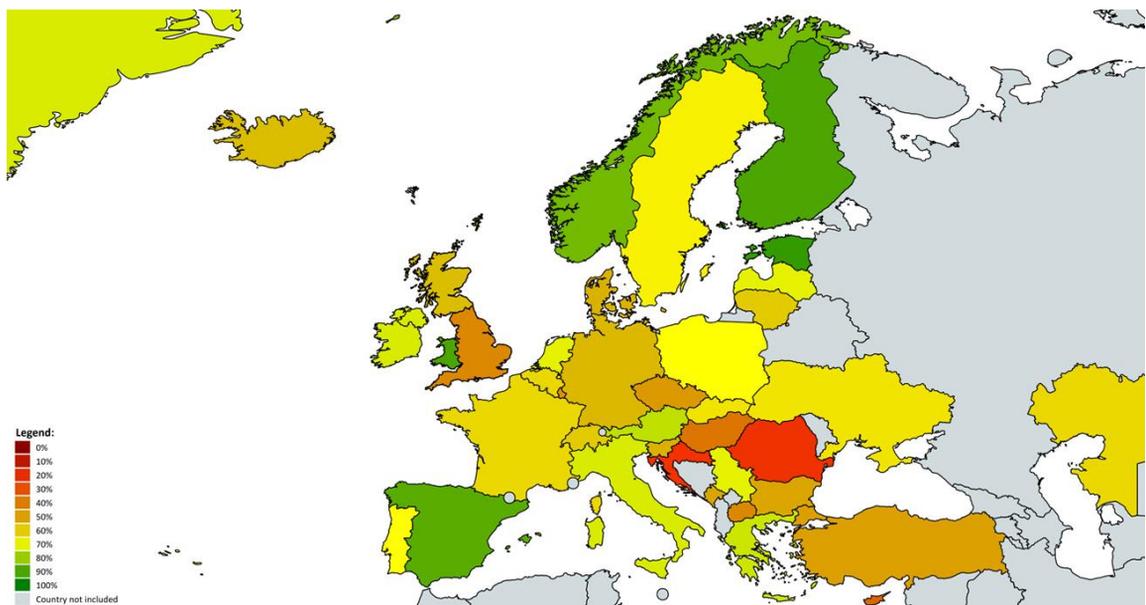
**1 Framework**  
We developed and tested a set of 15 items to assess how physical education curricula address key principles of physical literacy.

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

**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 associations with broader system indicators



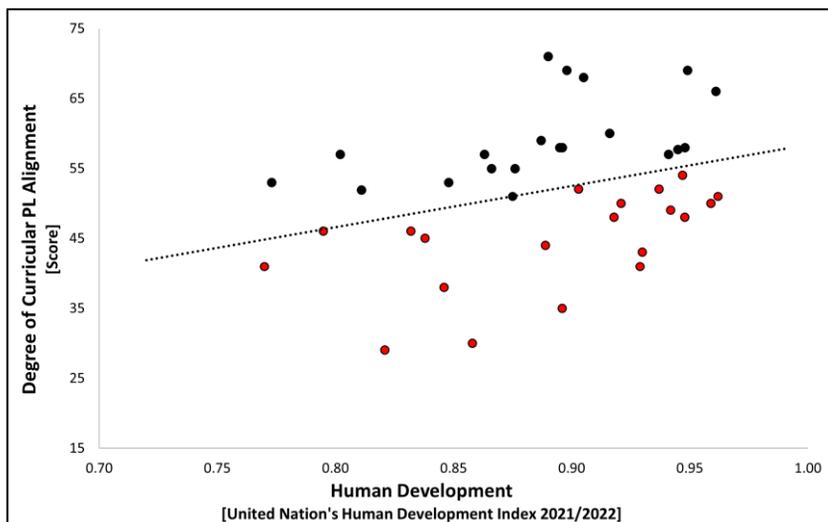
Countries with **higher human development** tended to show stronger curricular alignment with physical literacy (see below).



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 associations, 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 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 WHO



Alignment of PE curricula with physical literacy is a **system-level lever**

→ 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 WHO Strategies:



- The findings directly contribute to the **Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (GAPPA 2018–2030)** and its successor agenda beyond 2030, particularly the pillars of ‘active people’ and ‘active societies’.
- They align with the **WHO Health-Promoting Schools Implementation Framework (2021)**, which emphasises creating school environments for lifelong health and wellbeing.
- Strengthening physical education curricula through physical literacy also supports WHO’s **wider non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention agenda** by embedding healthy behaviours early in life.

### 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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