

# Reimagining school physical education through the lens of physical literacy: Bridging National Education Policy and National Sports Policy

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## ABSTRACT

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023 signal a transformative moment for schools by emphasizing holistic development, wellness, and experiential learning. Yet, physical education (PE) remains marginalized, unevenly implemented, and often limited to sport or drill. This paper argues that Physical Literacy (PL) defined as the integrated development of motivation, confidence, competence, knowledge, and understanding to engage in PA for life, offers a robust framework to reposition PE in India's evolving education landscape. Drawing on global scholarship and emerging Indian research, we contend that PL provides a unifying language across education, health, and community initiatives while substantiating PE as an essential academic subject. The paper reviews the current literature on PE and PL in India and globally, and provides practical strategies for policymakers, educators, and researchers to chart a way forward. Ultimately, PL offers India a culturally adaptable pathway to equitable, lifelong engagement in PA.

**Keywords:** New Education Policy; New Sports Policy; National Curriculum Framework; Physical Activity

## INTRODUCTION

India is undergoing a profound educational transformation, catalyzed by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy emphasizes holistic development, experiential learning, and the integration of physical and mental well-being into the school experience. While this provides a policy-level opening to reimagine PE, implementation on the ground has been inconsistent. In many schools, PE is still treated as a low-priority subject, often sidelined by academic demands or limited by a lack of resources. Yet, the NEP's vision opens the door to reposition PE not as an extracurricular activity, but as essential to students' all-around development.

Traditionally, PE in India has been associated with competitive sports, drills, or casual playtime practices that often exclude less athletic students and do little to develop meaningful connections to lifelong PA (Tripathi, 2024). Indian PE is rooted in holistic traditions, such as yoga and

indigenous games, focusing on the balance of body, mind, and spirit (Chaudhari, 2025). However, global trends and emerging Indian research are reshaping how we define PE. Increasingly, it is seen as a structured learning environment where children build the competencies, motivation, and confidence necessary to lead active lives. When well-designed and equitably delivered, PE becomes an academic subject with cognitive, social, emotional, and physical outcomes, not just a break from the classroom.

Against this backdrop, the concept of PL has gained global traction and is beginning to take root in India. Developed by Margaret Whitehead and widely adopted in countries such as Canada, Australia, and the UK, PL refers to the integrated development of the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding necessary to value and engage in PA for life (Durden-Myers et al., 2022).

In India, the **National Sports Policy (NSP, 2025)**, also known as the *Khelo Bharat Niti*, support PE as a fundamental component of school education. The policy underscores the importance of cultivating physically literate, skilled, and employable youth and emphasizes integrating sports, fitness, and health education into mainstream schooling. One of its core objectives is to **implement PL initiatives** that foster a **sustainable culture of sports and lifelong PA** among students.

This paper argues that PL offers a timely and powerful lens for repositioning PE in Indian schools. Despite a growing interest in PL in India, no existing scholarship provides an integrated analysis linking PL with NEP 2020 and NCF 2023 or examines how these policies can operationalize equitable PE. As an umbrella concept that spans schools, communities, health initiatives, and even faith-based programs, PL provides a common language and set of outcomes that can unify fragmented PA efforts. Within this broader framework, PE plays a foundational role it is the structured, school-based starting point where all children can begin their PL journey. By leveraging the growing interest in PL, we can substantiate the need for high-quality, equitable PE in schools as a critical component of India's educational future.

## Understanding Physical Literacy

PL is a holistic concept first articulated by [Margaret Whitehead \(2001\)](#) and has gained wide international recognition, particularly in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, where it informs education, sports, and health policies. It is defined as the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life, reflecting a lifelong journey rather than a fixed set of skills. Globally, PL is embraced as a foundational framework that transcends mere physical competence by integrating physical, cognitive, and affective domains. Governments and organizations across continents utilize PL to guide curricula and community programs that promote sustainable, inclusive PA engagement from childhood through adulthood.

At its core, PL encompasses five interrelated components: motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding. Motivation reflects an individual's willingness to engage in PA, while confidence supports the persistence needed to participate. Physical competence refers to the development of fundamental movement and sport skills. Still, these alone are insufficient without knowledge of why and how to be active and an understanding of the benefits and contexts of physical movement. Together, these components form a dynamic system that empowers individuals to make informed, autonomous decisions about their physical health and activity choices throughout life.

Unlike traditional views of PE or fitness, which often emphasize isolated physical skills, athletic performance, or short-term health outcomes, PL presents a more expansive and inclusive approach. Traditional PE may focus primarily on sports or physical fitness tests, sometimes sidelining students who do not excel athletically. In contrast, PL recognizes the importance of affective and cognitive domains, addressing how individuals feel about movement and their understanding of its role in a healthy life. This shift from performance-based metrics to a lifelong, holistic engagement model marks a paradigm change, positioning PL as a transformative framework that redefines the purpose and delivery of PE. Within this broad, society-wide approach, PE serves as the foundational platform for introducing and systematically nurturing physical literacy. Schools provide consistent, equitable access to structured learning, trained educators, and opportunities for all children not just those involved in extracurricular sports to build their PL. PE is where children first develop movement competence, understand the 'why' of being active, and explore their own motivation and confidence to move in diverse ways.

Therefore, strengthening PE is not just compatible with the PL movement, it is essential. Without robust PE, the broader aspirations for PL in community and cultural settings risk fragmentation or becoming inaccessible to

large segments of the population, especially those from under-resourced backgrounds.

## Physical Literacy: The Indian Landscape

A review of Indian literature on physical literacy indicates that Maverick Fit Kids made early efforts to introduce PL in select private schools in 2014, and later, in 2019, Pulela Gopichand and Tata Trust helped elevate PL into a national movement ([Myers, 2016](#); [Markandey & Green, 2019](#); [Raj, 2021](#)). At India's 2022 PL Conclave, Education (2022) reported that most stakeholders emphasised the need to embed the practical implementation of PL within school curricula and teaching pedagogy. While this signals a growing recognition of PL's importance, India is not exempt from the challenges of operationalising it. The NEP (2020) advocates holistic, competency-based learning that closely aligns with PL principles; however, the concept remains relatively unfamiliar to many PE teachers. The limited body of literature on how PL can be effectively contextualised, adapted, and sustained in the Indian educational system underscores a critical research gap and highlights the need for empirical studies that can inform policy and practice. The pioneering work of [Markandey and Green \(2019\)](#) suggests PL has become a significant concern for states, teachers, schools, and individuals in India, driven by cultural shifts and the evolving educational focus on holistic development. Because of PL's proposed wide range of benefits in lifelong PA and sports promotion, it is now crossing the trajectory from PE to other academic fields; for instance, [Chintakunta et al. \(2021\)](#) reported that PL is a vital health education topic in the Swasthya Vidya Vahini program, organised by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, India.

The current state of PE in Indian schools is marked by significant inconsistency and fragmentation. While PE is technically mandated, its implementation varies widely depending on the school's resources, leadership priorities, and location. Many schools lack dedicated, trained PE teachers, and even where staff are present, curricula are often outdated, overly sport-focused, or disconnected from students' developmental needs ([Shirotriya & Quraishi, 2015](#); [Shirotriya et al., 2023](#); [Paul & Jain, 2024](#)). Time allotted for PE is frequently sacrificed for academic subjects, and lessons when delivered are often limited to drills or unstructured play. These gaps highlight a systemic undervaluing of PE and create inequitable learning opportunities, undermining its potential to contribute meaningfully to students' physical, emotional, and cognitive development.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023 mark a transformative shift in how education is envisioned in India, providing fertile ground for reimagining the role of PE. Both documents emphasise the importance of holistic, experiential learning and recognise the significance of

physical and mental well-being in overall development. NEP 2020 explicitly calls for integrating health, wellness, and PA into the school day from the foundational years onward. Meanwhile, NCF 2023 reframes PE as an essential domain of learning, opening the door to age-appropriate, inclusive, and interdisciplinary approaches grounded in principles like PL. Together, these policies provide a critical opportunity for integrating PE into the academic core, rather than treating it as peripheral.

Parental and societal attitudes toward PE in India are evolving, yet many deeply ingrained perceptions continue to limit its value in schools. Traditionally, PE has been seen as secondary to academic achievement, with parents often viewing it as a break or distraction rather than a vital part of their child's development. Concerns about injuries, safety, and the notion that PE is only for athletically inclined students further restrict participation, particularly for girls. However, high-profile successes in Indian sports, growing health awareness, and national campaigns like Fit India have started to shift perspectives. As PL gains traction, there is an opportunity to engage families and communities in seeing PE not just as play or performance, but as essential preparation for lifelong health and well-being.

Research across India and internationally highlights persistent inequities in access to quality PE, particularly between urban and rural settings and between private and government schools. National datasets and comparative studies (Kumar, 2017; NUEPA, 2014; Panda & Mohanty, 2020) show that urban private schools are far more likely to have adequate facilities, trained specialists, and structured programs, while rural and government schools often operate with limited space, equipment, and overburdened or untrained teachers (Kokila & Natarajan, 2018; UNICEF India, 2020). These structural disparities disproportionately impact marginalised communities and align with broader patterns of educational inequality described in capability-based analyses of Indian schooling (Dreze & Sen, 2013; Singh, 2021). At the same time, global and Indian PE research emphasises that resource gaps, school culture, and limited teacher preparation reduce opportunities for children to develop foundational movement skills and PL (Bailey et al., 2023).

### PL as a Justification Framework for PE

Durden-Myers and Bartle (2023) argue that PL is a key concept that can enhance PE and support lifelong, healthy engagement in PA. PE in Indian schools faces significant challenges marked by inconsistencies in delivery, wide disparities in resources, and gaps in curriculum design. Many schools, especially in government sectors, lack trained PE teachers, appropriate infrastructure, and adequate scheduling, which diminishes the quality and frequency of PA opportunities. PE is often viewed as a non-essential subject and is frequently marginalized in favor of academic subjects, leading to

superficial or tokenistic implementation. These disparities result in uneven experiences for students, with many missing out on the physical, social, and cognitive benefits that quality PE can provide.

The NEP (2020) and the recently released NCF (2023) present critical opportunities to revitalize and mainstream PE within India's school system. Both policies emphasize holistic development, integrating physical well-being alongside intellectual and emotional growth. NEP 2020 explicitly calls for multidisciplinary learning and the promotion of health and wellness, creating an enabling policy environment to prioritize PE. The NCF 2023 further aligns with this vision by rearticulating PE as an academic discipline that contributes to lifelong health and well-being, encouraging schools to adopt more structured and inclusive PE curricula. Motivation and confidence core components of PL are strongly associated with persistence in PA and improvements in self-regulation, which NEP identifies as essential life skills. Thus, rather than positioning PE as an add-on, PL reframes it as central to the broader competencies NEP seeks to cultivate.

Significant disparities exist between urban and rural, and private and public schools regarding access to quality PE. Urban private schools often have better infrastructure, trained staff, and organized sports programs, enabling a more comprehensive PE experience. In contrast, many rural and public schools struggle with limited facilities, overcrowded classrooms, and a shortage of trained teachers, which restrict the scope and effectiveness of PE delivery. These disparities perpetuate inequities in PL and health outcomes, underscoring the urgent need for policy and programmatic interventions that ensure equitable access to quality PE across diverse Indian contexts.

### Challenges and Considerations

A major barrier to implementing PL in Indian schools is the lack of awareness and understanding among educators, administrators, and policymakers. Many teachers, including those assigned to PE, have not been formally trained in the principles of PL or in inclusive, student-centered pedagogies. Without clear professional development pathways, most rely on outdated methods focused on drills or sports performance. To integrate PL meaningfully, educators need access to training that not only builds their pedagogical skills but also deepens their understanding of PL's holistic, developmental focus. This professional learning must be ongoing, contextualized, and supported at institutional and policy levels.

PE in India often suffers from inadequate infrastructure and rigid school schedules that limit time for movement-based learning. Many schools lack basic facilities such as safe play spaces, sports equipment, or designated areas for PA, especially in rural or low-income areas. Even when space is available, PE is frequently limited to one or two short periods per week, making it

difficult to implement programs that support the sustained development of physical literacy. Without systemic scheduling reforms and investments in infrastructure, the full potential of PE to promote PL cannot be realized.

There remains a deep-rooted cultural and systemic emphasis on academic achievement in Indian education, often at the expense of physical, emotional, and creative development. Subjects like PE are frequently viewed as secondary or extracurricular, resulting in their marginalization in both policy implementation and school practice. Parents and school leaders may resist allocating more time or resources to PE, perceiving it as a distraction from exam preparation. This resistance is compounded by the high-stakes nature of academic assessments in India. Reframing PE through the lens of PL as essential to lifelong learning, health, and well-being can help challenge this mindset and reposition movement as a core part of education rather than a luxury.

### Policy and Practice Recommendations

PL remains an emerging concept in India, both academically and in practice, revealing a clear gap between current PE practices and PL goals. Research highlights that PE teachers' understanding and perceptions of PL are crucial, as a deeper grasp of the concept enables them to better foster children's PL development (Essiet et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2024; Friskawati, 2024).

Many Indian PE teachers often confuse PL with Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) and PA, reflecting a limited understanding of its holistic nature. To ensure effective integration of PL in schools, teacher education must embed explicit training on its principles and pedagogy. Both pre-service and in-service programs should highlight PL's lifelong value and relevance for all educators, PE specialists, classroom teachers, school leaders, and early childhood educators alike. Teacher certification and curriculum bodies should align national PE and health education standards with PL frameworks.

To effectively implement and track PL development, India needs assessment tools that reflect its unique cultural, linguistic, and educational landscape. Existing international tools may not translate well across India's diverse school settings, making it essential to develop instruments that are inclusive, age-appropriate, and aligned with local curricula. These tools should assess not only physical competence, but also students' confidence, motivation, and understanding of PA. Having reliable, context-sensitive assessments will provide educators with actionable data, strengthen accountability, and help shift perceptions of PE from non-essential to an evidence-driven, outcomes-based discipline.

To elevate the role of PE in India, it must be repositioned as a core academic subject, not an extracurricular activity. Advocating for PE through the lens of PL can help reframe its purpose, from physical

fitness or sports training to holistic human development. Policymakers, school leaders, and education boards should be encouraged to recognise PE as central to the goals of NEP 2020, particularly its emphasis on life skills, well-being, and inclusive learning. Using the PL framework provides a compelling rationale for allocating time, resources, and curricular weight to PE, making it a non-negotiable part of every child's education.

To build momentum and demonstrate impact, India should invest in small-scale pilot programs that operationalise PL in diverse school settings. These pilot initiatives, whether in urban public schools, rural communities, or alternative education environments, can provide valuable case studies showing how PL can be embedded in curriculum, instruction, and school culture. Partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, teacher training institutes, and international organisations can support these efforts. Documenting and sharing success stories, challenges, and lessons learned from such pilots will not only validate the approach but also create scalable models for nationwide implementation.

Future research should explore how Indian teachers apply PL-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies, and whether professional development or revised PETE curricula enhance teaching quality and student outcomes. Longitudinal studies could further evaluate how sustained exposure to PL influences students' holistic development, intrinsic motivation, and long-term PA engagement, helping redefine what *quality education* truly means in 21st-century India.

### CONCLUSION

PL is not merely an international trend adopted by many countries. It can be a powerful, culturally adaptable framework that aligns deeply with the educational and societal aspirations outlined in India's NEP 2020. Its emphasis on holistic development, inclusive participation, and lifelong engagement with PA offers a timely and compelling justification for making PE a central pillar of Indian schooling. By framing PE within the broader, cross-sectoral umbrella of PL, India can move beyond traditional notions of sports and fitness to embrace a more meaningful, equity-driven approach to physical development that resonates with its diverse populations.

However, realising the promise of PL in India requires more than conceptual alignment. It demands urgent and coordinated action across policy, practice, and research. Policymakers must prioritize PE in school timetables, teacher training frameworks must embed PL principles, and India-specific assessment tools must be developed to ensure culturally relevant implementation. Simultaneously, researchers should investigate how PL-based approaches affect student outcomes in various Indian contexts, and educators must be empowered to experiment with inclusive, student-centered PE practices.

Realising the promise of PL in India demands more than conceptual alignment it requires urgent and coordinated action across *policy, practice, and research*. Policymakers must prioritize PE within school timetables, teacher education programs must embed PL principles into their frameworks, and culturally relevant assessment tools must be developed to support effective implementation. Concurrently, researchers should examine how PL-informed pedagogies influence student outcomes across varied Indian settings. At the same time, educators should be empowered to adopt inclusive, student-centred practices that nurture confidence, competence, and motivation for lifelong PA.

## DECLARATION

This paper utilized Open AI's ChatGPT as a tool to generate concepts and refine the clarity of the text.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No Conflict of Interest were declared among authors.

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