Original Article

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# Physical literacy from the teacher's point of view: a qualitative analysis of its representation

## La alfabetización motriz desde la perspectiva del profesorado: análisis cualitativo de su representación

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Physical literacy is an approach that has generated great interest in the field of Physical Education; however, its conceptualisation is understood in different ways. Objective: This study aims to explore teachers' representations of physical literacy. Methods: An interpretive qualitative study based on structure of social representations, in which 58 Physical Education teachers from the Araucanía region of Chile answered questions about the concept of physical literacy. By means of content analysis, the responses were coded and organised into categories according to their relationships. Results: Two categories were generated regarding the representation of physical literacy. Both categories were based on prior knowledge of the concept, indicating functional and traditional representations of Physical Education. Conclusion: It is necessary to approach and discuss the conceptualisation of Physical Literacy, considering its holistic character, and to separate it from the reductionism to the physical that has characterised the development of Physical Education.

**Keywords**: Physical literacy; Physical education; Social representations; Teachers.

RESUMEN

*Introducción: La alfabetización motriz es un enfoque que ha generado gran interés en el ámbito de la Educación Física; sin embargo, su conceptualización es entendida de diferentes formas. Objetivo: El objetivo de este estudio es explorar las representaciones que el profesorado tiene sobre la alfabetización motriz. Métodos: Estudio cualitativo interpretativo basado en la estructura de las representaciones sociales, donde 58 profesores de Educación Física de la región de La Araucanía de Chile respondieron las preguntas sobre el concepto de Alfabetización Motriz. Por medio del análisis de contenido, se codificaron las respuestas y se organizaron en categorías según sus relaciones. Resultados: Se generaron dos categorías frente a la representación de la alfabetización motriz. Ambas categorías se basaron en el conocimiento previo del concepto, indicando representaciones de orden funcional y tradicional de la Educación Física. Conclusión: Es necesario abordar y discutir la conceptualización de la alfabetización motriz considerando su carácter holístico y desmarcado del reduccionismo a lo físico que ha caracterizado el desarrollo de la Educación Física.*

**Palabras-clave**: *Alfabetización motriz; Educación física; Representaciones sociales; Profesorado.*

## Introduction

Physical literacy (PL) constitutes the foundation upon which physical activity is developed throughout the lifespan[1]. Consequently, it has become one of the research topics currently receiving considerable attention in the field of physical activity promotion, as reflected in the exponential increase in scientific publications in recent years[2-3]. This growing interest stems from the holistic approach of PL, which provides a comprehensive perspective for adopting an active lifestyle throughout

the life course[4]. In this regard, this approach is aligned with the objectives of many public policies aimed at promoting adherence to regular physical activity, and its use has therefore been addressed not only by researchers but also by policymakers in decision-making processes[1,4]. This has led to its rapid dissemination across many countries, although its conceptualization and structure are understood in different ways depending both on the geographical location and the context in which it is intended to be implemented[4-5]. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how different stakeholders conceptualize PL.

Although different definitions of physical literacy exist[6], the most widely accepted definition and the one most closely aligned with the Spanish-speaking context is that proposed by the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA), which defines PL as "the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for maintaining purposeful physical pursuits/activities throughout the life course"[7-8]. This definition highlights its holistic nature, which not only focuses on the physical aspect of human development but also addresses different dimensions of the human being[6]. This is grounded in philosophical traditions of Existentialism, Phenomenology, and Monism, which allow PL to be understood as a fundamental human capability that can be developed by everyone[9-11]. Although these philosophical foundations make it clear that the PL approach goes beyond the mere act of engaging in physical activity, there is still no clear translation into practice[12-14]. This has resulted in some definitions of PL being inconsistent with Whitehead's original conceptualization[11,15] or with the widely accepted definition proposed by the International Physical Literacy Association[7]. Thus, it is not surprising that PL is understood in different ways across different countries[1,6,7] and may have different connotations for different people and organizations[4].

From a pedagogical perspective, PL has been considered one of the fundamental pillars for promoting quality Physical Education[16]. As an approach, PL can enrich Physical Education, provided that it remains aligned with the original conceptualization, thereby contributing to the holistic development of children and young people and to their lifelong engagement in physical activity[17]. Conversely, if a holistic approach cannot be incorporated into the development of Physical Education, it is difficult for the field to move away from the dualistic paradigm that has traditionally prevailed[18]. In Chile, the traditional perspective of Physical Education teacher education is strongly associated with biological processes through intervention programs supported by psychomotor foundations based on the association between neurological diagnosis and motor maturation[19,20]. Even the current Chilean Physical Education curriculum is grounded in poor performance on standardized tests that include dimensions linking psychomotor performance with academic success and failure[21,22]. The strong emphasis that Physical Education in Chile places on the biophysical paradigm is also reflected in teachers' beliefs about the subject, probably as a result of the characteristics of initial teacher education, which emphasizes this paradigm[20]. Many teachers reproduce a traditional perspective linked to health, sport, physical fitness development, and certain social stereotypes, although there are also teachers who view Physical Education as a means of developing students' competencies to understand and transform social inequalities[23].

Considering the ontogenic and Cartesian predominance of the Physical Education curriculum in Chile, as well as the dichotomous position that teachers hold regarding the subject, it is highly possible that the intention to incorporate the PL approach as a central component of Chilean Physical Education may encounter resistance among teachers who adopt a traditional perspective, or may be supported by teachers who view Physical Education as a means of promoting the comprehensive development of children and adolescents. Studies conducted in Canada[24] and Finland[25] have found that preservice and practicing teachers already have some understanding of PL, although there is considerable variation in their interpretations and confusion regarding how PL should be integrated into Physical Education teaching[24,25]. Given the contextual differences between these settings and Latin America, it would not be appropriate to assume that the same situation exists in Chile, particularly because no studies have yet examined the concept of PL from the perspective of teachers' representations. For this reason, investigating how teachers understand PL and whether they view it as an approach that should guide Physical Education is highly relevant. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore PL from the perspective of teachers' representations, with the aim of proposing its incorporation into Physical Education as a comprehensive alternative that differs from the approaches traditionally present in school settings.


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# Methods

## Study Design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative perspective. This perspective allows the meaning of the social world to be interpreted through a flexible and context-sensitive methodology that analyzes reality and explains it through the complexity and understanding of the research setting[26]. To this end, this study draws on the structure of social representations (SR) proposed by Moscovici[27,28], understood as knowledge or beliefs specific to a culture or social group within a particular context, which are also collectively organized, shared, and produced[29]. The use of SR is considered an appropriate theoretical framework for obtaining a preliminary understanding of the existing perspective on PL, as it provides a means of understanding reality through social thought schemas[29,30]. In this regard, teachers are viewed as a collective immersed in specific and shared cultural frameworks[31]. This study is reported in accordance with the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) and the Checklist for Reporting Results of Internet E-Surveys (CHERRIES), with the aim of ensuring transparency and quality in the reporting of qualitative research, including the description of the study design, participants, data collection, analysis, and presentation of the results.

## Participants

A total of 58 Physical Education teachers (43% women, 57% men) participated in the survey. They taught in preschool education (9%), primary education (58%), and secondary education (33%) in educational institutions in the Araucanía Region of Chile. This sample corresponds to a subsample of the larger study entitled "Social Relevance of Physical Education According to Community Stakeholders," whose protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of La Frontera, Chile (approval No. 037_2017). Participation was voluntary, and teachers provided informed consent online, through which participants were assured that the information collected would be stored and used exclusively by the researchers for research purposes and treated confidentially. No incentives or payment were provided for completing the survey.

## Data Collection

The data used in this study correspond to the two questions on PL included in the larger study. Data were collected through an online form (Google Forms), and the questions were not configured as mandatory, allowing participants to respond freely and voluntarily. The online survey consisted of two questions: Question 1: "Had you heard of the concept of physical literacy?", which offered a dichotomous response format, with the options "yes" or "no"; Question 2: "What do you think physical literacy means?", which offered an open-ended response format, allowing participants to provide a free description of the concept. Because the survey consisted of only two questions, no formal pilot testing or technical testing of the form was considered necessary before its administration.

## Data Analysis

The analysis of the responses was conducted in three stages: (a) the frequencies of responses to the first question, "Have you heard of the concept of physical literacy?", were examined, establishing two categories based on the dichotomous responses "yes" or "no"; (b) for each of these categories, the responses to the second question, "What do you think physical literacy means?", were processed. The analysis was conducted through line-by-line interpretation using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti 23 and content analysis[32]. At this stage, the software was used to identify phrases that were relevant to the construction of SR of PL, and digital labels were assigned to these phrases, which were subsequently transformed into codes; (c) after the responses had been coded, the codes were organized into categories according to their corresponding relationships. These categories were created within the software by identifying similarities and differences that contributed to constructing the SR of PL from the researchers' perspective, based on their qualitative expertise and research experience related to SR. Subsequently, hierarchies and relationships among codes were established, resulting in a visual representation of the category and its components. Once this stage was completed, the category was reviewed based on its textual quotations, through which the SR of PL was projected.

To ensure the methodological rigor of the analysis, the responses were reviewed, the textual material was coded iteratively, and the codes were organized into categories according to their conceptual relationships. The analysis process was continuously supervised to ensure interpretive consistency between the coding criteria and the final construction of the categories.


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## Results

In response to the question, "Have you heard of the concept of physical literacy?", 53% reported that they had not heard of the concept. The information was then separated according to whether or not participants recognized the concept of PL, resulting in two categories representing the concept (Figure 1). The first category, which grouped those who indicated that they had previously heard of PL, was organized under the label "functional view of physical literacy." The second category, referred to as the "traditional view of physical literacy," comprised those who had not heard of the concept of PL.

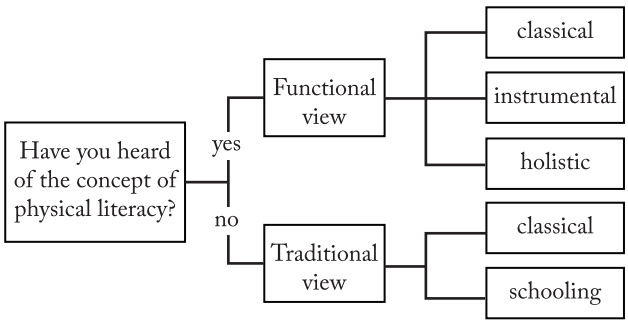


**Figure 1 –** Representations of the teachers who reported having heard of the concept of physical literacy.

The analysis of the first category, related to those who had heard of PL and referred to as the "functional view" (Figure 2), yielded three axes that explain its content: (a) the classical view of PL, (b) the instrumental view of PL, and (c) the holistic view of PL. Within the classical view, teachers linked PL to traditional components of Physical Education, such as motor performance, motor skills, the teaching of basic movements, and the relationship between movement and age. Examples of this understanding of PL can be found in statements such as: "Teaching basic motor movements in children" (P42), "Application and mastery of movement according to each age" (P33), and "Improving motor skills based on the development of the abilities and skills corresponding to each age through quality Physical Education" (P43).

In the second axis, the instrumental view of PL, teachers associated PL with improvements in physical fitness and academic performance. This axis reflects a way of understanding PL that attributes to it the capacity to produce change or modification, meaning that its use is related to the developmental stages and functional development of individuals. Thus, participants associated PL with: "Improving academic performance, promoting social inclusion, and generating new lifestyle habits among children through various teaching strategies" (P44), and "Encouraging motor actions at an early age, starting with the basics, to establish a habit of physical activity in people" (P47). Finally, the third axis of the category, the holistic view, was understood as a process that relates PL to new knowledge, play, and a global perspective on motor development. This was reflected in statements such as the following, provided as examples: "A rethinking of the conceptualization and motor practice for a different application in schools" (P62), "Learning skills and developing physical capacities through play, exercise, and/or activities" (P60), and "Knowledge and learning of skills and development of physical capacities through games, physical exercises, and physical activities" (P59).

Regarding the second analysis category (Figure 3), referred to as the "traditional view" and developed by those who had not heard of the concept of PL, the meaning attributed to PL was based on two central axes, namely: (a) the classical view and (b) the schooling view. The first axis, as in the previous category, was based on traditional theoretical conceptions of motor development and its development and application in the classroom. Examples of statements related to these conceptions of PL are presented below: "Acquiring basic motor skills as a precursor to more complex tasks" (P14), "Development and motor awareness of the human being in the spatiotemporal dimension" (P16), and "It is related to basic concepts of human motor development and its re-education through play" (P20).

The second axis of PL, referred to as the traditional schooling view, focuses on an academic-oriented school practice, in which PL is understood as a mechanism that could contribute to or reinforce the achievement of academic tasks, with particular emphasis on reading and writing skills. This view can be understood in light of the lack of familiarity with the concept and its association with traditional literacy, particularly reading and writing, a highly significant process within the Chilean school system. The following statements illustrate this view of PL: "Reinforcing reading skills through motor activities" (P1), "Development of motor activities through and in connection with language," and "Literacy: Teaching reading and writing, related to learning letters, etc. Physical (*Motriz*): Movement with intentionality" (P23).


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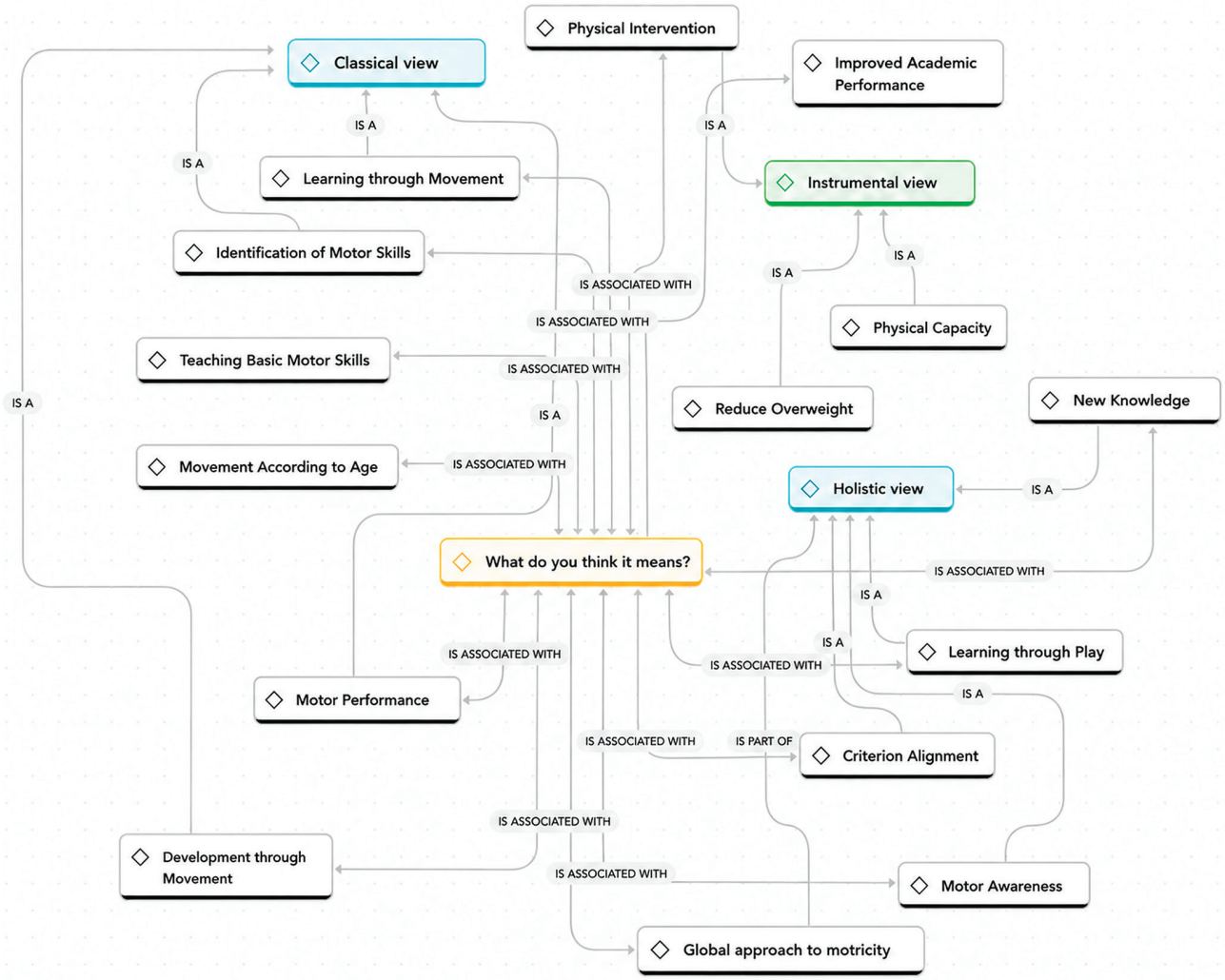


**Figure 2 –** First category, "functional view of physical literacy", comprising responses from participants who reported having heard of the concept of physical literacy.

## Discussion

This study shows that having or not having heard of PL is relatively evenly distributed among Physical Education teachers, suggesting that the introduction of the concept into the Chilean Physical Education context is still at an early stage. This differs from studies conducted in other non-Latin American countries, where a large proportion of teachers have heard of the concept of PL[24,25], although they hold different views of it. Considering that PL is an emerging approach that has only recently begun to gain ground in Latin America, it is not surprising that more than half of Chilean teachers had not heard of the concept. This situation highlights the need to further study PL in Spanish; nevertheless, it also represents an opportunity to reach a consensus on the concept of PL among Chilean teachers[33,34], potentially avoiding the conceptual confusion that has emerged in other countries.

When analyzing the categories emerging from teachers' representations, the results show that both groups tend to represent PL in similar ways, drawing on traditional dimensions of Physical Education related to developmental stages and motor development[35]. This representation of the concept is logically consistent with the Chilean school system and the dominant paradigms underlying teachers' training in motor development and the school curriculum[20,23]. This highlights the need to question this monofocal perspective centered on the physical dimension[35] and to develop proposals that address the teaching of Physical Education from a holistic approach[36].

The differences between those who report having heard of PL and those who report not having heard of it may be based on two aspects. The first stems from


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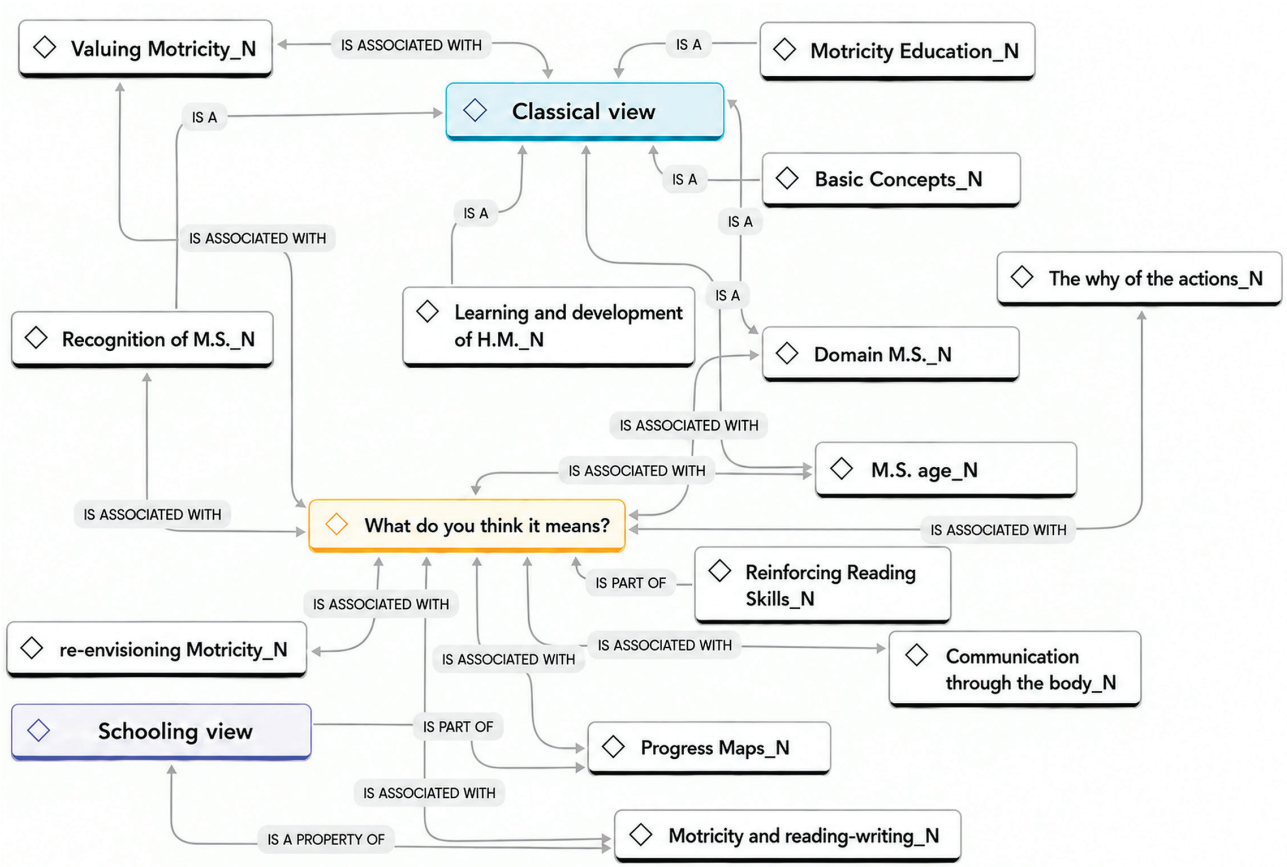


**Figure 3 –** Second category, "traditional view of physical literacy", comprising responses from participants who reported not having heard of the concept of physical literacy
Abbreviations: MS = motor skills; MH = human motricity; _N = code for participants who reported not havin heard the concept of physical literacy.

the fact that those who recognize the concept attribute meanings to it that are linked to the holistic nature of the human being, reflecting a holistic view that is closely aligned with the original meaning of Whitehead's proposal[11]. The second difference identified in the representation of PL arises within the group that reports not having heard of the concept, as PL is associated with literacy understood as reading and writing and with traditional, academic-oriented schooling. One factor that helps explain how Chilean teachers represent PL is the place it occupies (or rather, the explicit absence of the term) in official Physical Education regulations and curricular documents. In the Chilean context, the curricula and initial teacher education are predominantly grounded in an evolutionary and biophysical approach to motor development, articulated with standardized tests that link psychomotor performance to academic success or failure. In this context, it is not surprising that, even when some teachers report having heard of the concept of physical literacy, the representations they construct are anchored in traditional dimensions of the subject rather than in the updated and holistic perspective proposed in the international literature. This gap between the emerging conceptual framework and current regulatory references suggests that establishing PL as an approach to school Physical Education will require not only changes in teachers' beliefs but also a process of curricular updating that legitimizes the concept and its pedagogical implications within the Chilean school system.

In line with the Global Action Framework for Physical Literacy (GloPL)[1], based on the findings of this study, it is possible to establish that the priorities for the Chilean context are those aimed at developing a national understanding of the concept together with a dissemination strategy, as well as strengthening the training of teachers and other educational stakeholders[1]. These actions respond directly to the finding that teachers' representations continue to be dominated by traditional and reductionist perspectives of Physical Education, while PL remains an emerging concept in the country. In contrast, priorities such as the transversal integration of PL into educational policies, the alignment of initial teacher education with a holistic


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approach, and the consolidation of intersectoral collaborations represent more substantial challenges, as they require transforming paradigms that are historically rooted in the curriculum and in teacher preparation[20,23]. In this regard, the GloPL specifically proposes that countries develop a national interpretation of the concept, accompanied by strategies for dissemination, training, and cross-sector collaboration, while respecting cultural particularities without losing coherence with international principles[1]. Thus, the findings of this study highlight several challenges identified in the GloPL[1] that need to be addressed in view of the imminent introduction of the conceptualization of PL in Latin America, based on the representation of the concept among Physical Education teachers. The first is the installation of the concept, the second is the understanding of the concept, and the third is the false induction of the concept[33]. The installation of the concept will be challenging because the Chilean school system, particularly during the early stages of schooling, approaches motor development from an evolutionary perspective. Within this framework, Physical Education, as part of initial teacher education, plays a role in transmitting knowledge linked to tests and scales that measure motor development, as well as to the achievement of motor milestones as indicators of academic progress[22]. The foregoing is grounded in the view that both groups hold of PL, which is linked to a traditional perspective on the body and physical fitness[37,38], highlighting the importance of disseminating among teachers a conceptualization of PL that is close to its original conception[11]. The second challenge arises from the understanding of the concept, since, as suggested by SR theory, its structure is based on collective cultural dimensions that gradually develop as conventions that facilitate communication among members[39]. This is where initial teacher education plays an important role, as this is the stage at which future teachers are trained, and where there may be greater opportunities to introduce non-traditional paradigms[39]. Thus, for teachers to understand and reflect on the PL approach, it is necessary for their training to address different philosophical interpretations of the human body, such as the perspectives of the phenomenological school, which constitute a cornerstone of the philosophical argument underlying PL[9].

As a third challenge that the incorporation of PL may present is the false induction of the concept, since, as the results demonstrate, teachers may inappropriately associate PL either with the traditional conception of Physical Education or with the literacy process related to reading and writing. Whitehead[11] notes that, although the term "literacy" is useful as a common concept for describing a human characteristic to be developed, it is not a concept associated with embodiment, but rather with reading skills[11]. This is confirmed by the high significance that literacy holds in its literal sense, particularly during early childhood through the process of learning to read and write[40].

The results of this study provide one of the first insights into teachers' knowledge of PL in a Latin American context. However, because this study focuses on teachers in Chile, it is important to acknowledge several limitations, including the limited sample size and the fact that the study was conducted within a specific context that cannot be directly extrapolated to other areas of Latin America. Future studies should not only expand the sample but also include different geographical regions. Likewise, considering that these representations concern a term that is still emerging in the Spanish language, follow-up studies would be appropriate to determine changes in these representations over time. It is also recommended that future research examine more deeply the use of PL in the pedagogical practice of teachers who report being familiar with the concept, in order to determine how PL is addressed in teaching.

In summary, it can be concluded that PL is understood by Chilean teachers primarily as an extension of traditional Physical Education (improvement of motor skills, physical fitness, and academic performance) or even as a schooling process linked to reading and writing, confirming the hegemony of a biophysical and academic-oriented paradigm over the holistic conception of human development originally proposed by PL. Therefore, a new approach to Physical Education should promote the development of a curriculum that responds to this new conception, given that its implementation could functionally conflict with the Chilean educational model and school curriculum, ultimately failing to provide a holistic perspective within this new approach to embodiment.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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## Author Contributions

Rivera-Gutiérrez C: Conceptualization; Methodology; Software development, implementation, and testing; Data and experimental validation; Data analysis; Investigation; Data curation; Data visualization design; Writing-original draft; Approval of the final version of the manuscript. Henríquez-Alvear L: Conceptualization; Methodology; Software development, implementation, and testing; Data and experimental validation; Data analysis; Investigation; Resources; Data curation; Data visualization design; Writing-original draft; Approval of the final version of the manuscript. Castillo-Retamal M: Conceptualization; Investigation; Writing-review and editing; Approval of the final version of the manuscript. Martínez-López N and Candia-Cabrera P: Investigation; Writing-review and editing; Approval of the final version of the manuscript. Carcamo-Oyarzun J: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Supervision; Project administration; Data visualization design; Funding acquisition; Writing-original draft; Writing-review and editing; Approval of the final version of the manuscript.

## Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools in Manuscript Preparation

Perplexity, an artificial intelligence tool, was used in the preparation of this manuscript to assist with the translation of the manuscript. All material resulting from this process was reviewed by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the entire content of the manuscript.

## Availability of Research Data and Other Materials

The data are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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## Reviewers' assessment

The authors and/or reviewers did not authorize the publication of either of the two reviews.