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Physical Activity Education: The New Name for Our Field

Tyler G. Johnson

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Change is inevitable. Climates and seasons change. People — and even their ideas — change. Change happens everywhere, and it is not always easy to predict. It can occur gradually or quickly, minimally or extensively, regularly or erratically. What cannot be refuted is that change is a fact of life. It is not *whether* change will occur but *when* and *how*.

Throughout its history the field of physical education (PE) has experienced change. One aspect that has not changed, however, is its name as a school subject and for our profession. In the November 2012 issue of *JOPERD*, the “Issues” section addressed the question: “Is it time to rebrand physical education?” A number of physical education professionals — teacher educators, K–12 teachers and teacher candidates — responded. Most of the respondents, for various reasons, indicated that rebranding is necessary. While not every respondent agreed with rebranding, it was overwhelmingly clear that all of the respondents interpreted the word “rebrand” as a name change for the field. The question to which they responded could very well have been written: “Is it time to change physical education’s name?”

We believe it is time to reconsider a name change for physical education. It is time because the field is very different today than it was a generation ago, or even 10 years ago. The purpose of this article is to briefly address why a name change for physical education is needed and to propose a new name. This article is a follow-up to a previous Viewpoint article, wherein we challenged the oft-cited distinction between physical education

Comments from the *JOPERD* Editorial Board

Bradley J. Cardinal, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR; Stephen L. Cone, Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ; Heather Erwin, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY; Javier Fernandez-Rio, University of Oviedo, Oviedo-Asturias-Spain; Lauren Lieberman, The College at Brockport – SUNY, Brockport, NY; David G. Lorenzi, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Latrobe, PA; Jennifer Mak, Marshall University, Huntington, WV; Benjamin Sibley, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC

Dating back to the 19th century, the term “physical education” was widely recognized as the umbrella term for the field. Over time and through much debate and discussion (Brassie & Razor, 1989; Newell, 1990), physical education began to organize itself as an academic discipline comprising multiple subdisciplines and an increasing array of areas of practice (Henry, 1964). While there is no world-wide consensus on the name of the discipline, in the United States “kinesiology” has been advanced by leading organizations such as the National Academy of Kinesiology, the American Kinesiology Association, and the National Association of Kinesiology in Higher Education, among others, as the consensus name for the academic discipline (Morrow & Thomas, 2010; Newell, 1990; Rikli, 2006; Thomas, 2014; Thomas et al., 2007; Ulrich & Feltz, 2016). The National Research Council (2006) also has recognized the discipline by the name of kinesiology. Regardless, multiple names and name combinations continue to exist both domestically and internationally (Schary & Cardinal, 2015).

In this Viewpoint the authors are proposing “physical activity education” as a school *subject matter* name and possibly a subdisciplinary name, not an overarching disciplinary name. Toward that end, the *JOPERD* Editorial Board sees this as a separate issue from the decades-old debate about the name of the academic discipline.

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and physical activity, and proposed an alternate definition of physical education that is aligned with the need to promote physical activity in schools (Johnson & Turner, 2016). In that piece, we proposed that physical education be conceptualized not only as a class or structured curriculum taught in pre-K–12 schools, but also as a series of learning occurrences or experiences that can happen in a variety of contexts (e.g., PE class, intramural athletic programs, activity clubs). We are not suggesting that physical education professionals are no longer relevant in this broader definition of physical education. In fact, we believe the opposite — the physical educator is crucial for implementing physical activity learning experiences in schools, both inside and outside of a structured class.

The Physical Activity Movement

Twenty-five years ago, Sallis and McKenzie (1991) proposed that physical education align its mission with the public/allied health agenda, especially pertaining to physical activity promotion. Still today, due to the wealth of scientific evidence substantiating the need for physically active living among all sectors of the population, physical education programs have been called upon to teach children and youth how to live physically active lives. As more scientific evidence about physical activity has continued to accumulate, a broad range of organizations from multiple sectors, including medical, public health, and education (e.g., Institute of Medicine, 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2013), have endorsed the place of physical activity in schools, including the recommendation that physical education be the cornerstone of physical activity promotion efforts. The scientific literature and the corresponding charge from professional organizations to fill the school day with numerous opportunities for physical activity has been designated “the physical activity movement” (Young, 2014).

As a result of this movement physical education has received considerable

time, mostly favorable, in the public spotlight that may be unprecedented in the field’s history. This public recognition has led some physical education professionals to reconsider or reevaluate the purpose of school physical education (Graber, 2012; Johnson, 2014). Perhaps the most significant practical change for physical education arising from the physical activity movement has been the comprehensive school physical activity

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program (CSPAP). As a brief summary, the CSPAP model emphasizes physical activity opportunities before, during and after school, including participation in physical education, recess, activity clubs, intramurals, classroom activity breaks, and more. Since physical activity participation is most commonly associated with the activities of physical education, teachers of physical education continue

to be the most qualified professionals to assume physical activity leadership roles in schools. For this reason, physical education teachers have been identified as ideal school-level champions to spearhead CSPAP efforts by serving as physical activity leaders (PALs; Beighle, Erwin, Castelli, & Ernst, 2009; Erwin, Beighle, Carson, & Castelli, 2013).

It is clear that the physical activity movement is affecting the field. The list of responsibilities for physical education teachers has grown. Teaching a structured curriculum during shrinking physical education class periods is no longer enough. It is now well known that regular activity, both inside and outside of structured class periods, is critical for optimal student growth, learning and development.

Not all physical education professionals, however, have fully embraced the physical activity movement. The movement has been challenged by those who argue that teaching and learning will take a back seat to physical activity promotion efforts (Lund, 2013). While “teaching and learning” advocates agree that getting and keeping kids active is important, they argue that physical activity accumulation is not the primary purpose of physical education in our schools. They emphasize “education” regarding physical activity, such as developing motor and/or sport skills and the attainment of conceptual knowledge about physical activity. In their eyes, a high-quality physical education class is best for helping students learn, compared to other opportunities for physical activity led or directed by non-specialists.

The physical activity movement has created somewhat of a divide between those who support “physical activity” and those who support “physical education.” On the one hand, physical education professionals are expected to promote physical activity in schools and, on the other hand, to help educate students regarding physical activity (i.e., to teach). Like Blankenship (2013), we suggest that physical activity and physical education are not diametrically opposed to each other. And they do not seek mutually exclusive goals (Johnson & Turner, 2016). Both perspectives are

intimately related and serve valuable roles in promoting physical literacy.

To some professionals the term “physical activity” may evoke only images of students doing mindless, repetitive movements designed to elevate their heart rate and improve health-related physical fitness (i.e., exercise). While exercise is one type of physical activity, it should be remembered that physical activity also includes participation in dance and motor-active games, play and sports. Students deserve opportunities to experience and learn about each of these subsets of physical activity and why regular engagement in them is so important for health, well-being and overall quality of life. When physical activity is conceptualized as participation in and learning about dance, exercise, games, play and/or sport, labeling the subject matter of our field as physical activity is an appropriate designation. As Gregg Twietmeyer (2012) observed, physical activity can serve as the “placeholder term” for the types of content we offer and teach to students in schools (p. 239).

“Physical Activity Education”

The recent influence of the physical activity movement creates an opportune time for us to reflect on whether it is appropriate to rename our subject in schools and in our teacher education programs. Based on the conceptualization of physical activity identified in the preceding paragraph, including the term “physical activity” in the new name makes logical sense. Physical activity in the form of dance, exercise, games, play and sport is what we want students to experience and learn. Renaming our field “physical activity education” would tie together the content of our field (“physical activity”), its mission (“for a lifetime”), and the major processes used to accomplish that mission (teaching and learning, i.e., “education”). This new name also allows our school and teacher education programs to be named similarly to other educational fields, such as mathematics education, science education, arts education, and music education. We are aware that the venerable Earle Zeigler (2005, 2015) has proposed

the same new name, but it is clear to us that his definition of physical activity education and its included subdisciplines (see Zeigler, 2015, p. 226) is much more descriptive of what is now commonly called kinesiology. We are suggesting that physical activity education refer specifically to instructional programs in pre-K–12 schools and professional preparation programs — what we now call physical education teacher education.

This new name would also likely promote more positive public acceptance of our school programs with its unmistakable content and mission, and it could offer more opportunities for physical activity education to become allied with

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the many other professionals, programs and agencies who share our mission in other settings. At a glance, the addition of just one word — “activity” — to our field’s name might not appear to be a major change, but, in fact, it would be a change that could redefine the course of our field’s future in schools and in our teacher education programs in ways that could ensure our value as key professionals in school settings. We think it is now time to make that change.

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