



# Poor, Old “Physical Education”

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## Abstract

The field of physical activity (and related) health) education (“poor, old ‘PE’”) needs to *assert its “will to win” more vigorously than ever before*. Scholarly and scientific investigation of the past 60 years since Sputnik was launched in 1957 has identified a wide variety of findings proving that a quality program can provide highly important benefits to the growing child and youth. Societal developments, including other curricular demands, have undoubtedly created uneasiness within the overall field of education. In North America the time and attention devoted to the relatively few involved in external highly competitive sport for the few has been a negative factor. At the same time intramural athletics for the large majority of children and youth has not been available to the extent it should be. There is now doubt as to the field’s ability to achieve high status within education. Therefore, *we must pledge ourselves to make still greater efforts to become vibrant and stirring through absolute dedication and commitment in our professional endeavors*. Ours is a high calling since we seek to improve the quality of life for all people on earth through the finest type of human motor performance in exercise, sport, and related expressive movement.

**Keywords:** physical activity education, human motor performance, kinesiology

## 1. Introduction

After 72 active years in the field of physical activity education and educational sport, “PE” if you must, my energy is beginning to wane. I thought the world would be in better condition by the onset of the 21st century. It *is* and it *isn't*. I thought the field of education would be in better shape by this time too. It *is* and it *isn't*. I thought that people would understand and implement a life-enhancing concept of educational and recreational sport at all educational levels. It *does* and it *doesn't*. Finally, I thought that the field of physical education (i.e., poor, old “PE” and related school health education) might have achieved what I have long believed be its rightful place both within education and in the society at large. *This has most definitely not happened!*

In 2012 there were 48.6 Americans not covered by health insurance. It's further discouraging because we are told that health-care costs in the United States, for example, increased 100 per cent in the decade between 1994 and 2004. (The figures for the rest of the world are not available.) The U.S.A.'s costs now in 2013 exceed two trillion dollars annually!! What's really discouraging, however, is knowing that these costs could be cut in half if people put into practice what we have been trying to teach all these years in school health and physical education programs! This, my colleagues, is a major challenge that the world faces, that formal education faces, and that the field of health and physical education faces from here on out. People need to know what to eat-if they can indeed get enough to eat (a major problem too!). They also need to know why, how, and how much to get involved with physical activity or exercise-if they are not being forced to labor too much (another major problem).

What should we in the field of physical (activity) education and (educational) sport do? What can we do? These are fundamental questions that I pondered, and about which I have sought to write professionally for 65 years! As I “fade from the picture”—gradually I hope—I can only say that our task in the immediate future is both daunting and frightening, but that nevertheless we must redouble our efforts as we seek to “bring a physical and health education message” and an “educational and recreational sport message” to the world.

We simply cannot be pessimistic, because we know that a state of pessimism is almost automatically self-defeating. On the other hand we can't continue with the naive optimism that idealists often bring to bear on seemingly insuperable problems. Our only course of action seems to be that of **meliorism** (a term from philosophy). We must “take it from here” and improve *our* situation as best we can both within educational circles and in the society at large. We have to do it gradually and steadily—step by step.

## 2. The Field's Name

The ongoing search for a name for “good, old physical education” in North America became very complicated in the “troubled sixties” when a disciplinary oriented thrust came into being. It left the field in a state of complete confusion. For example, the term “sport and physical education” has been used for a number of years by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education within the American Alliance (AAHPERD) to describe the professional effort in the United States. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education sought to “enhance knowledge and professional practice in sport and physical activity through scientific study and dissemination of research-based and experiential knowledge to members and the public.”

Next, after a type of merger, another national association has sprung under the umbrella of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. It was called the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR). AAPAR is “dedicated to enhancing quality of life by promoting creative and active lifestyles.” In Canada, where I live and have worked for half of my career, it is still “physical and health education” in the schools, but

the disciplinary name at the university level is often "kinesiology" or "human kinetics." However, the terms "physical education and sport" and "sport" were more popular in other countries at the turn of the century, countries that identify with the Western world and the European continent, respectively. In my opinion, no one of these names, or combination of names, is going to make it in the long run.

After considering this topic for more years than I like to think about, I have come to a firm belief that we must have agreement about:

- (1) agreement about a name,
- (2) a taxonomy for our subject matter,
- (3) the steady development of a undergirding body of knowledge, and
- (4) certification or licensure at the state/provincial level would reasonably soon place our field in a position where a professional practitioner would in time be recognized as a "such-and-such" no matter what type of position that person held within the field of education OR in society at large.

This should be true no matter in which state, province, or territory such professional service is being carried out. Reaching consensus on this perplexing, but indeed vital, matter at this late date will undoubtedly be extremely difficult. However, it is essential that we strive for such an objective. In my opinion, the time is also overdue for us to bring our field's image into sharper focus for the sake of our colleagues and students, not to mention the public. As a disciplinary title at the university level, we could call ourselves human motor performance, but this may not sound sufficiently academic for some. Movement arts and science has possibilities. The term "kinesiology" has been in the dictionary for decades, but we would have to broaden the definition that is there in one sense and narrow it in another. However, what we are fundamentally involved with is "*developmental physical activity*" in sport, exercise, and related expressive movement-and that's it! The late Elizabeth Halsey recommended this term back in the 1950s, but the time was not yet ripe for its acceptance. Quite simply, the professional aspect of our field should be called *physical activity education* and we, as *physical activity educators*, should be promoting *developmental physical activity* based on sound research about its effects on people of all ages and abilities.

### 3. Availability of Our "Body of Knowledge"

In addition, the time is past due when our field should be making our "body of knowledge" available to practitioners through computer technology in a variety of ways (e.g., ordered principles, expert systems). As we do this, we should also convey the understanding to the public that we who profess physical activity education are not typically qualified to be *recreation directors, health specialists or dance specialists!* People laboring in our allied fields are now too highly specialized for us to think that there ever can be one professional association again that can serve all four fields. (These professionals hold undergraduate and/or graduate degrees in their own allied professions.) What we do understand is *physical* recreation only, some of the "*health aspects*" of developmental physical activity, and occasionally some of the social and traditional dances.

Note: For the remainder of this presentation I will continue to insert the word "activity" in parentheses-i.e., (activity)-whenever I use the historical term "physical education."

In the early 1970s, my late friend and colleague, Laura Huelster (University of Illinois, U-C), and I reasoned that one approach would be to "conjure up" a taxonomy that would include both the professional and the scholarly dimensions of our work.

Table 1. DEVELOPMENTAL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY  
(IN EXERCISE, SPORT, AND RELATED EXPRESSIVE MOVEMENT)

Areas of Scholarly Study & Research	Sub-disciplinary Aspects	Sub-professional Aspects
I. BACKGROUND, MEANING, & SIGNIFICANCE	-History  -Philosophy	-International Relations  -Professional Ethics
II. FUNCTIONAL EFFECTS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY	-International & Comparative -Exercise Physiology  -Anthropometry & Body Composition	-Fitness & Health Appraisal -Exercise Therapy
III. SOCIO-CULTURAL & BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS	-Sociology -Economics -Psychology (individ. & social) -Anthropology -Political Science	-Application of Theory to Practice

IV. MOTOR LEARNING & CONTROL	-Geography -Psycho-motor Learning -Physical Growth & Development	-Application of Theory to Practice
V. MECHANICAL & MUSC. ANALYSIS OF MOTOR SKILLS	-Biomechanics -Neuro-skeletal Musculature	-Application of Theory to Practice
VI. MANAGEMENT THEORY & PRACTICE	-Management Science -Business Administration	-Application of Theory to Practice
VII. PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT	-Curriculum Studies	-Application of Theory to Practice
(General education; professional preparation; intramural sports and physical recreation; intercollegiate athletics; programs for special populations-e.g., handicapped-including both curriculum and instructional methodology)		
VIII. MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION	-Theory about the Measurement Function	-Application of Theory to Practice

With this thought uppermost in our minds, we decided that what was needed was a balanced approach between the *sub disciplinary* areas of our field and what might be identified as the *sub professional* or concurrent professional components as explained above. As part of an effort to close what was becoming a debilitating, fractionating rift within the field, we developed a taxonomical table to explain the proposed areas of scholarly study and research using *our* nomenclature (physical activity education terms only) along with the accompanying disciplinary and professional aspects. We agreed upon eight areas of scholarly study and research that are correlated with their respective sub disciplinary and sub professional aspects in Table 1 (see above). Most importantly, the reader will note that the names selected for the eight areas *do not include terms that are currently part of the names of, or the actual names, of other recognized disciplines*-and that are therefore usually identified with these other (related) disciplines primarily by our colleagues and the public.

Thus, our position was that we must promote and develop *our own discipline* of developmental physical activity (or whatever it is called eventually) and *our own profession* of physical activity education as described below. At the same time, we should be working cooperatively with colleagues in the *related* disciplines and the *allied* professions (to the extent that they show interest in our problems). The recommendation is that-by continuing to speak of *sociology* of sport, *physiology* of exercise, etc.-the time is ever closer when these other disciplines and professions will really awaken to the importance of what we believe to be *our* professional task. That task is the gathering and dissemination of knowledge about developmental physical activity through the media of sport, exercise, and related expressive movement, and the promotion of it to the extent that such promulgation is socially desirable.

I am certain that you can readily understand my concern: the end result of a continuation of this ongoing multi-disciplinary splintering of our field of physical activity education and educational sport will inevitably result in a "mishmash" of isolated findings. It will turn that way because these other well-intentioned, scholarly people are not in a position to fully understand the larger goal toward which our field is striving. In addition-and this is vital for us-in the process we will be destined (doomed?) to lower standing in the academic "firmament" and a mishmash of perpetual, unrecognizable trade status as perennial jacks-of-all-trades, masters of none-not *professional* status-as perennial jacks-of-all-trades, in society at large.

What I am arguing for now, therefore, is that we call ourselves by a name that bespeaks precisely what it is that we study and what we stand for professionally. Our considered decision was to recommend "developmental physical activity" as our *disciplinary* term, one that is similar to such terms as law, medicine, business administration, etc. The understanding would be that this term relates to the potential of exercise, sport, and related expressive movement to serve humans throughout their lives. We presume, also, that this term could work both at all levels of the educational system, as well as in public, private, and commercial agencies.

It would simply be up to us to explain the following further as follows:

- (1) Physical (activity) education taught by
- (2) Physical (activity) educators based on knowledge emanating from the scientific and scholarly study of
- (3) *Developmental physical activity* in exercise, sport, and expressive human movement for accelerated, normal, and special populations of all ages.

This developing theory would be based increasingly on scholarly and research endeavor of a high order. We are the people who are concerned with healthful physical activity that is used for some sort of worthwhile development throughout a person's life. Any specializations within the field could develop further by using these terms as a point of

departure. *However, in the final analysis, we simply must agree on some acceptable name and see that it is implemented forever (or at least for decades to come until possibly better terms should appear).*

The controversy over a name does point up the urgent need for clarity in our use of language, however, not to mention the need to close what Pat Galasso, former dean at the University of Windsor (Canada), called the "say-do" gap in our professional endeavors. Indirectly it also points the way also to bridging the ever-widening gap developing among the professional practitioner, the bio-scientific researcher, the social science and humanities scholar, and the administrator/manager and supervisor. I believe most sincerely that increased emphasis in our own field is a truly important point right now, because it is symptomatic of the many divisions that have developed in the past fifty years or so in our field. That is why the taxonomy for the scholarly and professional dimensions of our field was recommended in Table 1 above.

#### 4. Recommendations for the Future

In the second part of this analysis, I would like to make some *specific recommendations* that, if carried out, could insure the future of physical activity education in the 21st century. What *should* we do-perhaps what *must* we do-to ensure that the field will move more decisively and rapidly in the direction of what might be called *true* professional status? Granting that the various social forces will impact upon us willy-nilly, what *can* we do collectively in the years immediately ahead? These positive steps should be actions that will effect a workable consolidation of purposeful accomplishments on the part of those men and women who have a concern for the future of developmental physical activity as a valuable component of human life from birth to death.

The following represent, therefore, a number of categories joined with action principles that relate directly to the "modifications" that have occurred in recent decades in North America at least. We have now reached the point where we should actively reach out to seek a world consensus on the eighteen steps spelled out below. If such could be achieved, as dedicated professionals we could then take as rapid and strong action as possible through our national and international professional associations. Also, we will undoubtedly receive assistance indirectly from the research findings of scholars in our allied professions and related disciplines. These recommended steps are as follows:

1. **A Sharper Image.** Because in the past the field of physical education has tried to be "all things to all people," and now doesn't know exactly what it does stand for, we should now-as *physical activity educators*-sharpen our image and improve the quality of our efforts by focusing primarily on *developmental physical activity in sport, exercise, and related expressive movement*. As we sharpen our image, we should make a strong effort to include those who are working in the private agency and commercial sectors. This implies further that we will extend our efforts to promote the finest type of developmental physical activity for people of all ages whether they are members of what are considered to be "normal, accelerated, or special" populations.

2. **Our Field's Name.** Because all sorts of name changes have been implemented (a) to explain either what people think we are doing or should be doing, or (b) to camouflage the presumed "unsavory" connotation of the term "physical education" that evidently conjures up the notion of a "dumb jock," we should continue to focus primarily on developmental physical activity as defined immediately above as a disciplinary name while moving toward an acceptable working term for our profession (e.g., physical activity education?). In so doing, we should keep in mind any profession's bifurcated nature in that it has both theoretical and practical (or disciplinary and professional) aspects.

3. **A Tenable Body of Knowledge.** Inasmuch as various social forces and professional concerns have placed us in a position where we don't know where or what our body of knowledge is, we will strongly support the idea of disciplinary definition and the continuing development of *a body of knowledge* based on such a consensual definition. From this must come a merging of tenable scientific theory in keeping with societal values and computer technology so that we will gradually, steadily, and increasingly provide our members with the knowledge that they need to perform as top-flight professionals. As professionals we simply must possess the requisite knowledge, competencies, and skills necessary to provide physical activity education based on sound knowledge about developmental physical activity to the public.

4. **Our Own Professional Associations.** Inasmuch as there is insufficient support of our own professional associations for a variety of reasons, we need to develop voluntary and mandatory mechanisms that relate membership in *professional* organizations both directly and indirectly to stature within the field. We simply must now commit ourselves to work tirelessly and continually to promote the welfare of professional practitioners who are serving the public in areas that we represent. Incidentally, it may be necessary to exert any available pressures to encourage people to give first priority to our own groups (as opposed to those of disciplinary-oriented societies, related disciplines, and/or allied professions). The logic behind this dictum is that our own survival has to come first for us!

5. **Professional Licensing.** Although most teachers/coaches in the schools, colleges, and universities are seemingly protected indefinitely by the shelter of the all-embracing teaching profession, we should now move rapidly and strongly *to seek official recognition* of our endeavors in public, semi-public, and private agency work and in commercial organizations relating to developmental physical activity *through professional licensing at the state or provincial level*. Further, we should encourage individuals to apply for voluntary registration as qualified practitioners at the federal level in their countries.

6. **Harmony within the Field.** Because an unacceptable series of gaps and misunderstandings has developed among those in our field concerned primarily with the bio-scientific aspects of human motor performance,



those concerned with the social-science and humanities aspects, those concerned with the general education of all students, and those concerned with the professional preparation of physical (activity) educators/coaches, managers, and scholars and scientists—all at the college or university level—we will strive to work for *a greater balance and improved understanding* among these essential entities within the profession.

7. **Harmony among the Allied Fields.** Keeping in mind that the field of physical education has spawned a number of allied professions down through the years of the 20th century, *we should strive to comprehend what they claim that they do professionally, and where there may be a possible overlap with what we claim that we do.* Where disagreements prevail, they should be ironed out to the greatest extent possible at the national level in all countries of the world.

8. **The Relationship with Competitive Sport.** In those relatively few countries where, within educational institutions, gate receipts are a basic factor in the continuance of sporting competition, for several reasons an ever-larger wedge is increasingly being driven between the unit of physical education and that of competitive sport. Such a rift serves no good purpose and has become contrary to the best interests of both groups. In these countries, *the organized field should work for greater understanding and harmony with those people who are primarily interested in the promotion of highly organized, typically commercialized sport.* At the same time it is imperative that we do all in our power to maintain competitive sport where offered within our schools, colleges, and universities in a sound educational perspective.

9. **The Relationship with “Intramurals” and Recreational Sports.** Intramurals and recreational sports as a program unit in a transitional state at present. Nevertheless, in North America, for example, it has proved that it is “here to stay” at the college and university level. For several reasons, however, intramurals hasn't really gained a foothold yet at the preparatory or high school level. This is most unfortunate, because it has a great deal to offer the large majority of students in what may truly be called *recreational* (and arguably *educational*) lifetime sport. (Everything considered, both philosophically and practically, intramurals and recreational sports ought to remain within the sphere of the physical activity education unit on campus.)

10. **Guaranteeing Equal Opportunity.** Because “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” should be guaranteed to all, as a profession we should move positively and strongly to bring about equal opportunity to the greatest possible extent to women, to minority groups, and to special populations (e.g., the handicapped) as they seek to improve the quality of their lives through the finest type of experience in the many activities of our field.

11. **The Physical (“Activity”) Education Identity.** In addition to the development of the allied professions (e.g., school health education) in the second quarter of the twentieth century, we witnessed the advent of a disciplinary thrust in the 1960s that was followed by a splintering of many of the various “knowledge components” and subsequent formation of many different societies nationally and worldwide. These developments have undoubtedly weakened the field of physical (activity) education. Thus, it is now more important than ever that we *hold high the physical (activity) education identity* as we continue to support those who are developing our profession's under-girding body of knowledge. Additionally we should re-affirm, but also delineate even more carefully, our relationship with our allied professions.

12. **Applying a Competency Approach.** Whereas the failures and inconsistencies of the established educational process have become increasingly apparent, *we will as a profession explore the full educational possibilities of a competency approach stressing laboratory experiences* as it might apply to general education, to professional preparation, and to all aspects of our professional endeavor in public, semi-public, private, and commercial agency endeavors. “Descriptive words are important, but we learn by doing!”

13. **Managing the Enterprise.** All professionals in the unique field of physical (activity) education are managers—but to varying degrees. The “one course in administration” approach in professional preparation programs of earlier times that included no laboratory or internship experience is simply not sufficient today or for the future. There is an urgent need to apply a competency approach in the preparation (as well as in the continuing education) of those who will serve as managers either within educational circles or elsewhere promoting exercise and sport in the society at large.

14. **Ethics and Morality in Physical (Activity) Education.** In the course of the development of the best professions, the various, embryonic professional groups have gradually become conscious of the need for a set of professional ethics—that is, a set of professional *obligations* that are established as *norms* for practitioners in good standing to follow. Our profession needs both a universal *creed* and a reasonably detailed *code of ethics* right now as we move ahead in our development. Such a move is important because, generally speaking, ethical confusion prevails throughout the world. Development of a sound code of ethics, combined with steady improvement in the three essentials of a fine profession: (1) an extensive period of training, (2) a significant intellectual component that must be mastered before the profession is practiced, and (3) a recognition by society that the trained person can provide a basic, important service to its citizens) would relatively soon place us in a much firmer position to claim that we are indeed members of a fine profession.

15. **Reunifying the Profession's Integral Elements.** Because there now appears to be reasonable agreement that what is now called the field of physical (activity) education is concerned primarily with developmental physical activity as manifested in sport, exercise, and related expressive movement, *we will now work for the reunification of those elements of our profession that should be uniquely ours within our disciplinary definition.*

16. **Cross-Cultural Comparison and International Understanding.** We have done reasonably well in the area of international relations across the world due to the solid efforts of a number of dedicated people over a considerable period of time. Now, however, we need to redouble our efforts to make cross-cultural comparisons of physical (activity) education while reaching out for international understanding and cooperation in all sections of the world. Much greater understanding on the part of all of the concepts of "communication," "diversity," and "cooperation" is required for the creation of a better life for all in a hopefully *peaceful* world. We need to develop ways that our profession can contribute significantly toward this long-range objective.

17. **Permanency and Change.** Inasmuch as the original "principal principles" initially espoused for physical education by the late Arthur Steinhaus (1952) of George Williams College can now be expanded significantly and applied logically to our professional endeavors, **we will emphasize that which is timeless in our work, while at the same time accepting the inevitability of certain societal change.**

18. **Improving the Quality and Length of Life.** Since our field is truly unique within education and in society, and since fine living and professional success involve so much more than the important verbal and mathematical skills, we will emphasize strongly that education is a lifelong enterprise. Further, we will stress that now *both the quality and length of life can be improved significantly* through the achievement of a higher degree of kinetic awareness and through heightened experiences in sport, exercise, and related expressive movement.

#### **5. Concluding Statement**

The field of physical (activity) education ("poor, old 'PE'") needs to *reassert its "Will to Win"*. The developments of the past 50 years have undoubtedly created uneasiness within the field of education. They have raised doubts on the part of some as to our ability to achieve the highest type of professional status within education. Therefore, *we pledge ourselves to make still greater efforts to become vibrant and stirring through absolute dedication and commitment in our professional endeavors.* Ours is a high calling since we seek to improve the quality of life for all people on earth through the finest type of human motor performance in exercise, sport, and related expressive movement.

**Editor's Note:** Earle F. Zeigler, Ph.D., LL.D., D.Sc. is a dual citizen of Canada and the United States. With 72 years of professional service divided equally between both countries, his areas of special professional interest have been the history and philosophy, management theory and practice, professional preparation, and international and comparative aspects of physical activity education and educational sport. In the 21st century he has also been writing about North American human values, ethics, and personal decision-making.