



Unlock Research Research for Physical Educators

Research Journal of the Month
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The Physical Educator.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must make clear from the outset that I am an unrepentant fan of The Physical Educator (TPE). I skim through every issue and have done so for more years than I care to count. I have lifted tables, abstracts, and quotations for use in classes; identified articles for citation or inclusion in my own publications; made copies to pass on to needy graduate students (at least, I regarded them as such); and squirreled-away a treasure trove of borrowed ideas against future need.

It also is true that I am not always pleased by what appears within its covers. As a vehicle for publication of research, it has some limitations, and several of its persisting flaws are more than just irritations – in my judgment they are downright dangerous. Nevertheless, my generally happy but occasionally love-hate relationship with TPE continues to this day. Perhaps the affair persists, as often is the case with matters of the heart, because we are so much alike: dowdy in appearance, always a bit quirky, independent to a fault, often unresponsive to the good counsel of friends, and, certainly, now aged well beyond the time when it is easy to be perfectly comfortable with a new generation of professional and academic colleagues.

TPE is sponsored by Phi Epsilon Kappa, a national professional fraternity for people with careers in health, physical education, recreation, and safety (all members receive copies as a benefit of membership). Individual subscriptions for non-members presently are available at a yearly rate of \$42.50.

Issued quarterly, TPE is considered to be a fully refereed journal. Accordingly, it maintains a relatively large 28-member Editorial Review Board for that purpose. The present editor is William F. Stier, Distinguished Service Professor and Graduate Director of Physical Education and Sport in the State University of New York at Brockport. Subscriptions and other business matters are managed (as they have been from the outset) through the administrative office of the Fraternity at 901 W. New York St., Indianapolis, IN 46202. Additional information about TPE can be found on the Phi Epsilon Kappa website at <http://www.truman.edu/pek/>.

With a circulation of about 4,000, TPE is indexed in the Education Index, Physical Education Index, Current Index to Journals in Education, and the online service, Sportsearch. Full text reprints of all articles in volumes beginning with January 1996 (Vol. 53.3) are available through ProQuest (for information, visit <http://www.proquest.com>), as well as through several other database outlets found at larger institutional libraries. Exclusive of occasional book reviews, the journal averages between five and six articles per issue (a standard 56 page format serves to constrain that number). Instructions for authors are printed with every issue, and the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th edition) provides the mandatory standard for form and style in all manuscript submissions.

From the first issue in 1940, TPE has included both data-based research reports and a variety of other article types ranging from research reviews and scholarly essays, to exhortative polemics, program descriptions, and accounts of new teaching strategies. The early balance between reports and other articles heavily favored the latter, while today that distribution has been reversed (a survey of the last 10 issues shows that 41 out of 56 items could be confidently classified as research reports).

Despite such an unusual mixture of content, however, readers will find reviews, articles, and research reports dealing with such familiar areas as: motor learning; curriculum design; pedagogy;

measurement; teacher education and professional development; student attitudes and beliefs; program administration; and class management. Contributions from the hard sciences of kinesiology are more rare, and notably so for exercise physiology and biomechanics. Also, I have the impression that few of the research reports involve investigations funded from large grants or sources external to the researcher's institution; sample sizes generally are smaller; the span of time encompassed by the active phase of studies is somewhat shorter than that typically found in other research journals; and co-authorships reflecting collaboration between professors and teachers or other practitioners are more common in TPE.

Differences of that sort and magnitude, however, do not themselves add up to anything that could serve as an index of quality, or that even would mark TPE as a distinctive publication. Where do the more substantial differences lie? A look at the 54 active chapters of Phi Epsilon Kappa provides a useful clue. Only four are located at major research institutions. Most are at smaller private institutions, state colleges, university extension units, and mid-sized, multipurpose institutions.

Again, a glance at my quick survey of 10 recent issues shows that 38 of 56 published items were authored or co-authored by individuals working at state colleges, university branches within state systems, and small private institutions (7 were submitted by authors in other countries). Only 11 came from large main-line institutions (and several of those were not research reports). Without comparative data it is impossible to be certain, but it appears possible that TPE primarily serves authors with a demographic profile that is different from what characterizes those who publish in other outlets for research in physical education.

Moreover, I feel confident that the audience addressed by many of the authors in TPE is distinctive. There is, I believe, evidence to suggest that the readership imagined by typical TPE authors is not composed exclusively of other researchers (who certainly are the consciously intended audience for investigators when writing for other research journals). They seem often to be talking to practitioners such as schoolteachers, administrators, and teacher educators. In sum, TPE might be imagined as a kind of muscular, rough-around-the-edges, blue-collar vehicle through which scholars who work in the less rarified atmosphere of modest sized institutions report ideas and research findings to the people actually doing the applied tasks of health and physical education – and do so in a manner primarily intended to interest and assist them.

After close inspection, however, you might find that to be a more generous (and romantic) assessment than is justified by what you find on the printed pages. One criticism of TPE always has been that the content is uneven, both as to the quality and sophistication of writing, and the adequacy of the research reported. Please note that the word I used to characterize such opinion is "uneven," and not inadequate. While any critique of consistency in TPE suffers from a large element of subjective judgment, there is another that does not.

In virtually every issue, errors of format and content appear in both the citations and reference lists of at least some reports. By my standards, that truly is unfortunate. That some of the same problems can be detected in other journals does not matter. Whether the blame in TPE rests with authors, reviewers, or editors (or all three) also does not matter. Careless handling of detail is lethal to credibility – and that really does matter!

In the end, if there is a degree of unevenness in the quality of content in TPE, that simply means you have to read carefully, maintain a slightly higher threshold of skepticism, and search for valuables that depend less centrally on the technical virtues of the exactly right statistic, the best possible design, or the most reliable measure. Please remember also that TPE has always published some studies that would stand review in any company. You can find the story of sound investigations carefully reported in graceful and transparent prose, and you can find both utility and inspiration in some of the reviews and essays.

The right way to use TPE is cautiously and selectively, but always with an open mind – and a few extra grains of salt. It is a quirky old journal that isn't going to change very much (it took more than 50 volumes for an editor to finally impose the requirement that research reports should begin with an abstract, and the first major change in cover design appeared only after 57 volumes had been issued).

Nevertheless, I want to testify that TPE never fails to entertain and inform me. If it also serves to exasperate me, the feeling only shows that our old affair of the heart still is very much alive. I won't say that if you try it -- you will love it. But contributing to it would be a fine way for all of us to make it more loveable!

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