



Research Journal of the Month  
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### The Journal of Physical Activity and Health.

I will spare you all the lame quips about the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (JPAH) being the new kid on our block. This journal is neither new nor located on our (physical educators') particular block. Having just passed its first birthday and with five issues already in the archive, the rhetorical question raised by the editors in the first issue "Another new journal? Is this really needed?" has been answered with a firm "Yes." Perhaps JPAH was initially conceived of as a niche publication, but examination of the quality and range of studies in the first volume makes clear that the interdisciplinary field where physical activity interacts with human health is large, well supported, expanding vigorously, and well populated with productive scholars and research organizations.

As to whether physical educators might have cause to keep an eye on what appears in the pages of JPAH, the answer is more complicated. First of all, this is an insider's journal with content written by researchers for consumption (primarily) by other investigators. Original research reports, review papers, research commentaries, and research digests (abstracts of material available in other publications) all require at least a modest level of scientific literacy. It is absolutely true that among the best reports are some that are wonderfully transparent, but for professional practitioners much of the content in JPAH will constitute heavy going.

A second characteristic also serves to separate JPAH from main line journals in areas such as exercise, fitness, kinesiology, physical education, and coaching. So far, at least, the content really has centered on how physical activity influences health (exactly as is advertised in the journal's title). Some attention is given to interventions that affect physical activity for which physical education certainly is a significant venue, but, nonetheless, the organizing center here is health and the chronic diseases in which physical activity plays a role. That topic may have some relevance to curriculum and pedagogy in schools, but the reports in JPAH are not going to be about the practice of physical education.

So why review this journal on a website devoted to the service of physical educators? My argument for the importance of monitoring and selectively reading from JPAH is illustrated by an exchange I recently had with the audience of attendees at a regional AAHPERD conference. The topic for my lecture had been the problematic nature of the relationship between teachers and researchers. In the free-wheeling question and answer period that followed, the practitioners (including both teachers and teacher educators) made clear that they were sick of research studies with results that might be "considered." They wanted, instead, results that could be "used."

I probed that familiar complaint about impracticality by asking "used for what?" Their responses probably would not have surprised most readers of *Unlock*. The areas where practitioners wanted useful help from research dealt with political and structural aspects of school physical education and only very rarely with matters of pedagogy or curriculum. Concerns about staffing, schedule, budget, and space were prime issues within structure, while the impacts of school reform, state control of curriculum, declining support from administrators, parents, and academic colleagues, and marginalization within the workplace reflected issues that were more deeply political and social.

I had to confess to my audience that they would find very little research dealing with the structural and political problems confronted by physical educators – with one notable exception. In the places where educational policy is developed and policy makers are genuinely open to the influence of evidence (which, unhappily, is not everywhere the case), research that reveals the health consequences of encouraging vigorous physical activity and preparing children for active adult lifestyles can be a powerful ally. There is plenty of evidence, and properly presented to receptive officials, that kind of research can be persuasive about the need for high quality physical education.

To the extent that the promotion of behaviors related to health is one of the purposes served by school physical education, that kind of argument makes sense, and the utility of that kind of research is genuine. As I will demonstrate in a moment, JPAH already has included reports of that type. More importantly, I anticipate that the journal will quickly become a reservoir for evidence that physical education has a key part to play in any health initiative involving physical activity and school-aged children.

First, however, there are things you need to know about the journal. It is issued quarterly by Human Kinetics. The co-editors are Steven N. Blair, president and CEO at the Cooper Institute, and James R. Morrow, Jr., professor of research and measurement at the University of North Texas at Denton and a past editor-in-chief of the Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport. The 21-member Editorial Board reads like an international roster of all-stars in research on physical activity and includes a number of names that will be familiar to many physical educators. Among those are: Ainsworth, Corbin, Freedson, Morgan, Pate, Sallis, and Zhu.

The JPAH home page can be visited at <http://www.HumanKinetics.com/journals/> where current and back-issue tables of contents are available for non-subscribers. Yearly rates for the electronic edition are presently set at \$62 (US) for individuals, \$250 for institutions, and \$42 for students (print subscriptions are slightly less expensive). My recent individual electronic subscription allowed full (and immediate) access to all content in the archived issues at the web address noted above.

Placement in major indexing systems and inclusion in the databases provided by most libraries have not yet been accomplished. Text and reference formats are those of the American Medical Association Manual of Style (9th ed.), which differs little from the more familiar APA guide. I was disappointed to note the absence of structured abstracts (now used almost universally in medical literature) which can be particularly helpful for non-specialists who need to execute quick surveys of what is available. Perhaps growing success will bring demand for such useful embellishments.

Among the reports and papers from JPAH that I found relevant to the work of physical education were the following:

**Young children's intuitive interest in physical activity: Personal, school, and home factors.** (Ang Chen and Weimo Zhu)

**Activity-related support from parents, peers and siblings and adolescents' physical activity: Are there gender differences?** (Kirsten Krahnstoever Davison)

**Monitoring physical activity: Uses and measurement issues with automated counters.** (Michelle L. Granner and Patricia A. Sharpe)

**The independent influences of physical inactivity and obesity on health complaints of 6th to 10th grade youth.** (Ian Janssen, Peter T. Katzmarzyk, William F. Boyce, and William Pickett)

The first item cited above offers a perfect example of research that might meet a political need where physical education is competing for the life-space of time in the school curriculum. This is a study intended to identify which factors predict the extent to which kindergarten children have an interest in being physically active (and are seen to act that way by their parents) or physically sedentary (and are seen to act that way by their parents). The significance of such a question rests in the familiar aphorism, "As the twig is bent, the tree is inclined." There is persuasive evidence (of many kinds) that children interested in being physically active become active adolescents who become active adults. If you know what leads to that interest and inclination in childhood (at kindergarten) and that leading factor can be manipulated, you have the trigger for a sequence of vital following events.

Chen and Zhu got access to the enormous national data bank accumulated by the Department of Education's early childhood development study called the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten (ECLS-K). With data for 21,260 children enrolled in 1000 public and private kindergarten programs (including information from their parents and teachers), the sampling and data collection procedures allowed ECLS-K to represent a snapshot of all kindergarten children in the nation (with representation by gender, race, SES, disability, geographic region, and numerous other variables) in 2000.

One bit of datum was crucial to the study. Every child was represented by a parent's selection of one (or both) of two descriptions which "...is most like my child." The choices were (A) "Prefers to spend his/her free time reading, playing video games, or watching TV," and (B) "Prefers to spend his/her time riding a bike, swimming, or playing sports." That was the key variable representing early interest in, and tendency to be, active or sedentary. A vast quantity of other data was accumulated for each child, including demographic information, personal factors such as body mass index and motor skill, an array of family and community facts, and two items of central interest for us – **physical education classes per week, and teacher experience in teaching physical education.**

The quest was to locate which among all those data points seemed to be firmly related to activity interest or disinterest. The analysis was conservative and careful with particular attention to distinguishing among statistical artifacts that had no practical utility and associations that were sufficiently robust to allow prediction. The results, of course, were complex and sometimes very surprising. For example, body mass index and motor skill were not strong predictors, and attendance at sporting events actually reduced the odds of being interested in physical activity.

When all was said and done, of the things in the child's life that were open to direct societal manipulation, those factors were in the school environment, and they consisted of how many times each week the child had a formal physical education class (not a recess period) and how much experience their teacher had previously had in teaching physical education.

It was as simple and stark as that! Yes, there were other predictors that were important, such as having a safe neighborhood in which to have active play after school, but nothing was as powerful and directly open to policy decisions as the number of physical education classes. As the twig is bent, the tree is inclined.

Today's kindergarten children are our national twig, and given the epidemiological facts of life

about physical activity and health, how that growing tree is inclined is a matter of vital national consequence. That same evidence also puts physical education solidly in the mix of what must be a complex community effort to encourage healthy lives.

Watching the pages of JPAH for evidence like that seems to be a worthy use of professional time. I shall do so, and so should many other physical educators:

Your comments on this review will be welcome at [lflocke@hotmail.com](mailto:lflocke@hotmail.com)

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