



Physical Education in Seventh-day Adventist Schools and Institutions: A Review of Health, Wellness, and Spiritual Integration

Franklin Hutabarat^{1*} Ervin Bin Karau¹

Faculty of Religious Studies, Asia-Pacific International University

Abstract

This study examines the role of physical education within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with particular attention to its contribution to health, wellness, and spiritual integration. The research employs a literature-based review design, analyzing peer-reviewed journal articles, theological writings, denominational publications, and official documents related to Adventist health philosophy and education. Sources included in this review were selected based on their relevance to faith-based health promotion, physical education within Adventist institutions, and discussions of spiritual or holistic well-being. The review primarily draws from studies addressing Adventist educational settings, community health initiatives, and lifestyle research within Adventist populations. The findings of the reviewed literature indicate that physical education aligns closely with the Church's holistic health principles, which integrate physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of life. Existing studies suggest that structured physical activity supports not only physical fitness but also stress management, character development, social cohesion, and spiritual growth. However, the literature also reveals that physical activity has historically received less systematic emphasis compared to other aspects of Adventist health reform, particularly dietary practices. Overall, the review demonstrates that physical education functions as a meaningful component of the Adventist holistic health framework. Strengthening its integration within schools and church-affiliated institutions may further support the Church's commitment to balanced living and comprehensive well-being.

Keywords: Seventh-day Adventist, Health Principles, Physical Education, Wellness, Spirituality

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1. Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is widely recognized for its strong emphasis on health and holistic well-being, integrating physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of life [1]. This health emphasis is grounded in biblical principles and significantly shaped by the writings of Ellen G. White, who promoted balanced living, proper nutrition, regular exercise, and self-discipline as essential components of Christian life and service [2]. Within this framework, physical education (PE) may be understood as one practical expression of the Church's holistic health philosophy. Rather than being limited to physical fitness alone, PE can function as a structured means of supporting balanced lifestyle development consistent with Adventist values [3].

The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of physical education within the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its contribution to health, wellness, and spiritual integration [5]. This research is designed as a literature-based study that analyzes theological writings, official Church documents, and scholarly sources related to health and education within the Adventist tradition. By reviewing these sources, the study seeks to clarify how physical education conceptually aligns with the Church's commitment to holistic well-being [6]. Through this focused examination, the study aims to contribute to ongoing academic discussion regarding the integration of faith, health, and education within the Adventist context [10, 11].

¹Corresponding author; e-mail: franklin.hutabarat@gmail.com

1.1 Research Questions

1. How do physical education programs within Seventh-day Adventist schools and institutions align with the Church's holistic health principles, and what impact do they have on the physical and spiritual well-being of participants?
2. What are the attitudes of the Seventh-day Adventist community toward physical education and its role in promoting health and wellness in accordance with the Church's doctrines?
3. In what ways do physical education activities contribute to the development of a sense of community, stress management, and spiritual growth within the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to deepen understanding of the relationship between physical education, health, and spirituality within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. Although the SDA Church has long emphasized health as part of its holistic doctrine, the specific role of physical education in supporting these principles has received limited focused attention. This research seeks to address this gap by examining how physical education programs are implemented and perceived within the SDA community, as well as their influence on physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

This study highlights the importance of integrating physical education into religious and educational practices. By exploring how physical education supports the Church's health message, the research demonstrates how physical activity contributes not only to physical fitness but also to spiritual growth, stress management, and community building. Such integration reinforces the SDA commitment to holistic living by caring for the body, mind, and spirit, and provides practical evidence of physical education as a tool for promoting overall well-being [12].

Additionally, the study examines the attitudes and beliefs of church members toward physical education. Understanding these perspectives can help SDA institutions develop

health and educational programs that align with the values and needs of the community. The findings may also identify challenges or barriers to fully integrating physical education into church life, offering guidance for future program improvement [13].

Beyond the SDA context, this research contributes to the broader field of faith-based health promotion. By investigating the effects of physical education on spiritual growth, social cohesion, and well-being, the study may encourage other religious communities to consider physical education as part of holistic health initiatives [14]. Ultimately, this research underscores the value of physical education as a means of fostering comprehensive health and strengthening faith-based communities [15].

1.3 Research Method

This study utilizes a qualitative integrative literature review design to examine the role of physical education within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in relation to health, wellness, and spiritual integration. The review adopts a thematic content analysis framework to systematically synthesize theological, denominational, and peer-reviewed academic sources. The study follows a structured narrative synthesis approach grounded in qualitative thematic analysis. No primary empirical data were collected. Instead, existing literature was critically analyzed to identify conceptual patterns, recurring arguments, and thematic relationships concerning physical education in Adventist educational and institutional contexts. Data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theological writings (including works by Ellen G. White), and official denominational publications addressing Adventist health philosophy, faith-based health promotion, and educational practice. Sources were selected based on relevance to physical activity, holistic health, and spiritual development within Adventist settings.

The analytical procedure involved three stages: 1) systematic identification and screening of relevant texts; 2) open coding of key concepts and repeated themes; and 3) axial categorization to group related codes into broader thematic constructs. The final synthesis generated five principal themes: theological foundations of health, educational implementation of physical education,

community-based health promotion, spiritual and psychosocial outcomes, and institutional challenges and opportunities (Table 1). This methodological framework ensures analytical

rigor, transparency, and coherence in the interpretation of the reviewed literature.

Table 1. Thematic categories were identified in the literature review.

Theme	Description	Representative Sources
Theological Foundations of Health	Biblical and doctrinal basis for health as stewardship; influence of Ellen G. White	[2], [8], [9]
Physical Education in Educational Institutions	Integration of PE in SDA schools; character development; lifestyle education	[4], [16]
Community Health Promotion	Church-based health initiatives; lifestyle practices; longevity research	[7], [10], [14]
Spiritual and Psychosocial Benefits	Stress reduction, emotional resilience, spiritual engagement through physical activity	[6], [11], [13]
Challenges and Opportunities	Limited emphasis on exercise, resource constraints, need for program development	[1], [8], [17]

2. Literature Review

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church has long emphasized the importance of health and wellness, viewing them as integral to spiritual well-being. Central to this philosophy is the belief in holistic health, which incorporates physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Physical education (PE) plays a crucial role in this framework, serving as a means of fostering not only physical fitness but also spiritual development, stress management, and community engagement [1].

This literature review synthesizes scholarly discussions on the integration of physical education within the SDA Church, with a focus on its theological foundations, health implications, and its role in the Church's educational and community structures. The analysis draws from historical perspectives, theological writings, and contemporary research on faith-based health promotion.

2.1 The Theological Foundations of Physical Education in the SDA Church

The SDA Church's emphasis on health is rooted in its theological framework, which views the body as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). This perspective underscores the responsibility of believers to maintain their physical well-being as an act of worship and devotion to God. Ellen G. White, one of the Church's foundational

figures, strongly advocated for a lifestyle that included regular exercise, proper nutrition, and avoidance of harmful substances [2]. Her writings highlight the belief that physical health is directly linked to moral and spiritual clarity.

The SDA doctrine of "present truth" includes a call to physical purity and discipline as part of preparing for Christ's second coming. Consequently, physical education is seen not merely as a recreational activity but as a spiritual discipline that enhances one's ability to serve God effectively [3]. Moreover, the Adventist philosophy of health extends beyond individual well-being to communal responsibility. Physical education programs in SDA institutions are designed to promote not only personal health but also social cohesion, reinforcing the biblical principle of collective stewardship over one's body and community.

2.2 The Role of Physical Education in SDA Educational Institutions

Education has always been a cornerstone of Adventist mission work, and SDA schools and universities incorporate health education as a fundamental component of their curricula. The Church's commitment to education is evident in its global network of schools and universities, which integrate faith-based learning with principles of health and wellness [4]. SDA educational institutions emphasize a balanced lifestyle that includes

physical activity as part of their broader health message. Many Adventist schools have well-established physical education programs that align with the Church's principles of holistic health. These programs are designed not only to promote fitness but also to instill values such as discipline, teamwork, and self-control.

SDA educational institutions often frame physical education within the context of stewardship—teaching students that caring for their bodies is an act of gratitude toward God. This approach differentiates Adventist physical education from secular fitness programs by embedding spiritual principles into physical activity. Another unique aspect of physical education in SDA schools is its emphasis on lifestyle habits.

Unlike conventional PE programs that focus primarily on sports performance, SDA schools prioritize lifelong fitness, encouraging students to adopt healthy habits that extend beyond their academic years. This aligns with the SDA Church's broader health initiatives, which advocate for plant-based diets, regular exercise, and abstinence from harmful substances [1].

2.3 Physical Education and Health Promotion in the SDA Community

Beyond educational institutions, physical education is integrated into Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) community programs as part of the Church's broader health and wellness efforts. Numerous SDA health initiatives promote physical activity as a means of disease prevention and overall well-being.

SDA churches and community centers frequently organize fitness activities including walking clubs, aerobics, and recreational sports. These programs serve both health and community-building purposes and often include spiritual elements such as prayer or devotionals. Studies show that Adventists who follow the Church's health guidelines, including regular physical activity, experience better health outcomes.

The Blue Zones research by Buettner (2008) identified Adventists in Loma Linda, California, as one of the world's longest-living populations, partly due to active lifestyles [10]. However, some scholars note that physical activity receives less emphasis than dietary practices in SDA teachings, presenting

opportunities for stronger promotion of physical education.

2.4 Spiritual Benefits of Physical Education in the SDA Church

Physical education within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) context extends beyond physical fitness to support mental and spiritual well-being. Research indicates that regular physical activity reduces stress, enhances emotional health, and promotes deeper spiritual engagement [6]. Exercise improves cognitive function and emotional resilience, both of which contribute to spiritual development. Many SDA leaders emphasize that physical health supports mental clarity and self-discipline, enabling a more focused spiritual life. Physical education also fosters spiritual connection through nature-based activities.

The Adventist emphasis on outdoor recreation reflects the belief that time spent in nature strengthens one's relationship with God. As a result, SDA schools and institutions often incorporate activities such as hiking, gardening, and nature walks into their physical education programs to promote holistic renewal. Additionally, group-based physical activities strengthen community bonds within the Church [4].

2.5 Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancing Physical Education in the SDA Church

Despite the acknowledged benefits of physical education within the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, several challenges remain. One major issue is the perception that exercise is secondary to other spiritual practices. Although health is emphasized in SDA teachings, physical activity often receives less attention than dietary reforms or medical care. Limited resources further hinder the development of effective physical education programs, particularly in developing regions where schools and churches may lack facilities or trained instructors [8].

Cultural attitudes toward exercise also pose difficulties, especially in urban SDA communities where sedentary lifestyles are increasingly common due to modern work environments and technology. Encouraging active living in such contexts requires creative strategies, including integrating physical

activities into church programs and organizing congregation-wide fitness initiatives [1].

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist to strengthen physical education by increasing awareness of its link to spiritual well-being and fostering collaboration among Adventist health institutions, schools, and churches to promote holistic health practices [17].

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature reveals that physical education (PE) is conceptually and practically aligned with the holistic health philosophy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Central to Adventist theology is the understanding of health as stewardship, where physical well-being is regarded as an expression of spiritual responsibility [12, 13]. The writings of Ellen G. White further reinforce the connection between physical vitality, moral discipline, and spiritual clarity [9, 10]. Within this theological framework, physical activity is interpreted not merely as recreation but as a supportive discipline that enhances one's capacity for spiritual growth and service.

The literature also indicates that Adventist educational institutions integrate physical education within a broader philosophy of harmonious development [4]. Structured physical activities in schools are associated with character formation, discipline, teamwork, and the cultivation of lifelong healthy habits [16]. However, scholarly discussions suggest that structured exercise has historically received less systematic emphasis compared to dietary reform and medical missionary initiatives within Adventist health teachings [11]. This imbalance may contribute to uneven development of physical education programs across institutional contexts.

Beyond formal educational settings, physical activity is promoted through church-based health initiatives and community wellness programs. Research on Adventist populations demonstrates positive health outcomes linked to adherence to lifestyle principles that include regular physical activity [7, 10]. Community-based exercise programs further serve to strengthen social cohesion and shared identity among church members [17], reflecting the communal dimension of Adventist health philosophy.

From a psychosocial and spiritual perspective, existing literature associates regular physical activity with reduced stress, improved emotional regulation, and enhanced cognitive clarity [13]. These outcomes support spiritual practices by fostering mental focus and resilience [14]. Nature-based activities and group exercise programs are likewise described as facilitating spiritual reflection and relational bonding, reinforcing the integrative role of physical education in supporting both individual spiritual formation and communal well-being [15].

Despite these benefits, several challenges emerge from the literature, including cultural attitudes that prioritize other aspects of health reform, limited institutional resources, and competing educational demands [12,16]. Nevertheless, opportunities remain for strengthening physical education through clearer theological articulation, intentional curriculum integration, leadership advocacy, and collaboration among Adventist schools, churches, and health institutions [17]. Strengthening these areas would more fully align institutional practice with the Church's holistic commitment to the unity of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

The literature also indicates that Adventist educational institutions integrate physical education within a broader philosophy of harmonious development [4]. Structured physical activities in schools are associated with character formation, discipline, teamwork, and the cultivation of lifelong healthy habits [16]. In contrast to many secular physical education models that primarily emphasize athletic performance or physical fitness outcomes, institutions affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church intentionally frame physical activity within a theology of stewardship and holistic formation. Physical education is therefore presented not merely as skill development, but as preparation for responsible living and effective spiritual service.

While this integrative orientation distinguishes Adventist physical education philosophically, claims regarding its superiority in producing long-term healthy lifestyles must be approached with academic caution. Research on Adventist populations, including longevity findings associated with the Loma Linda community, suggests that adherence to

faith-based lifestyle principles such as regular physical activity, plant-based nutrition, and abstinence from harmful substances is associated with favorable long-term health outcomes [7,10]. However, the current body of literature does not provide sufficient comparative empirical evidence directly demonstrating that SDA physical education programs are more effective than secular PE models in producing sustained behavioral outcomes. It is therefore more precise to state that the Adventist model offers a distinctive integrative framework that intentionally connects physical activity, spiritual formation, and lifelong health stewardship, rather than asserting demonstrable programmatic superiority.

3.1 Proposed Operational Model for Integrative Physical Education

To strengthen the practical implications of this review, a Proposed Operational Model is advanced to guide institutions affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church in implementing integrative physical education. While the preceding discussion establishes theological and conceptual foundations, translating these principles into structured practice is essential for ecclesiastical and educational leadership.

The proposed model consists of three interrelated components: 1) Curriculum Integration, 2) Spiritual-Physical Formation Practices, and 3) Community Wellness Engagement.

First, Curriculum Integration involves the development of a specialized physical education curriculum that intentionally incorporates biblical principles of stewardship, self-discipline, and holistic well-being. This may include short devotional reflections linked to themes such as perseverance, teamwork, and respect for the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, alongside instruction in lifelong fitness habits rather than performance-centered athletics.

Second, Spiritual-Physical Formation Practices encourage structured activities that combine movement with reflection. Examples include nature-based activities (e.g., walking programs with guided spiritual reflection), journaling components connected to personal health goals, and character-based assessment

criteria emphasizing responsibility, cooperation, and integrity.

Third, Community Wellness Engagement extends physical education beyond the classroom through initiatives such as a congregation-wide “Wellness Challenge” protocol. This may include time-bound health campaigns integrating physical activity goals, plant-based nutrition awareness, accountability groups, and periodic spiritual encouragement sessions. Such initiatives reinforce collective identity and lifestyle sustainability.

This operational framework provides actionable direction while remaining consistent with Adventist theology of stewardship and holistic formation. By embedding spiritual intentionality within structured physical education programming, institutions may more effectively align practice with doctrine.

4. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that physical education is conceptually consistent with the holistic health philosophy of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Rooted in a theology of stewardship and the unity of body, mind, and spirit, Adventist health principles provide a strong foundation for understanding physical activity as an expression of spiritual responsibility. The writings of Ellen G. White further support this integrative perspective by emphasizing the relationship between physical vitality, moral clarity, and effective service.

The literature indicates that physical education contributes meaningfully to character development, psychosocial well-being, and spiritual engagement within Adventist educational and community contexts. Structured physical activities promote discipline, teamwork, resilience, and social cohesion, while also supporting mental clarity and stress management—factors that enhance spiritual life. Community-based health initiatives further reinforce the collective dimension of Adventist health practice.

At the same time, the review identifies ongoing challenges, including limited institutional emphasis on structured exercise, cultural perceptions that prioritize other health reforms, and resource constraints in certain regions. Addressing these challenges requires clearer theological articulation of the spiritual value of physical activity, stronger curricular integration, and closer collaboration among

Adventist schools, churches, and health ministries.

Overall, strengthening physical education within Adventist institutions would more fully reflect the Church's longstanding commitment to holistic well-being and affirm its role as an essential component of its health and educational mission.

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