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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inclusive Physical Education Pedagogy in Special Education: Examining Teaching–Learning Practices for Learners with Disabilities

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Abstract

Inclusive Physical Education (PE) has become a critical component of Special Education, as it promotes not only physical development but also social participation, emotional well-being, and lifelong health among learners with disabilities. Despite strong policy support for inclusion, challenges persist in translating inclusive principles into effective classroom practice, particularly in Physical Education contexts that require adaptation, movement, and interaction. This study examines inclusive Physical Education pedagogy by exploring teaching learning practices implemented for learners with disabilities in Special Education settings. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with PE teachers, and focus group discussions with learners. Thematic analysis revealed four key pedagogical practices: adaptive instructional strategies, differentiated task design, supportive learning environments, and collaborative engagement. Findings demonstrate that inclusive PE pedagogy enhances learner participation, confidence, and skill development when instruction is intentionally structured, scaffolded, and responsive to learners' diverse needs. However, challenges related to limited resources, teacher preparation, and time constraints were also identified. The study underscores the importance of professional development, institutional support, and reflective practice in sustaining inclusive PE. Implications for practice, policy, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: inclusive physical education, special education, learners with disabilities, teaching–learning practices, inclusive pedagogy

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a central priority in global educational reform, grounded in the principle that all learners regardless of disability, ability, gender, or socio-cultural background—are entitled to equitable access to quality and meaningful learning opportunities. Rooted in human rights frameworks and international policy commitments, inclusive education emphasizes participation, access, and belonging within mainstream educational settings. For learners with disabilities, inclusion extends beyond physical placement in schools and classrooms; it entails the provision of appropriate supports, responsive pedagogy, and learning environments that recognize and value individual differences.

Within this inclusive framework, Physical Education (PE) holds a distinctive and critical role. Unlike many academic subjects, PE engages learners in embodied, interactive, and social forms of learning that directly contribute to physical health, motor development, emotional regulation, and social competence. For learners with disabilities, inclusive Physical Education serves not only as a curricular requirement but also as a key context for developing functional motor skills, self-confidence, peer relationships, and a sense of social belonging. Meaningful participation in PE has been linked to improved physical well-being, increased self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward lifelong physical activity, all of which contribute to overall quality of life.

Despite strong policy mandates advocating inclusive education, the implementation of inclusive practices in Physical Education remains complex and uneven. PE classes often involve activities that require coordination, balance, speed, teamwork, and performance-based assessment, which can inadvertently exclude learners with physical, intellectual, sensory, or developmental disabilities when instruction is not appropriately adapted. Traditional PE models frequently emphasize competition, standardized performance outcomes, and uniform instructional routines. Such approaches may marginalize learners with disabilities, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, or exclusion and limiting opportunities for meaningful engagement.

In response to these challenges, inclusive Physical Education pedagogy has gained increasing attention as an approach that prioritizes participation, equity, and learner diversity. Inclusive PE shifts the focus from performance comparison to individual progress by emphasizing adaptation, differentiation, and learner-centered instruction. This pedagogical orientation involves modifying tasks, equipment, rules, pacing, and instructional strategies to accommodate varied abilities while maintaining meaningful learning goals. Research indicates that inclusive PE practices are associated with increased learner participation, enhanced motor skill development, improved social interaction, and more positive attitudes toward physical activity among learners with disabilities. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process, as their beliefs, competencies and instructional decisions directly shape learners' experiences of inclusion.

However, despite growing recognition of the importance of inclusive Physical Education, empirical studies examining how inclusive PE pedagogy is enacted in everyday classroom practice remain limited, particularly within Special Education and inclusive school contexts. Existing research often focuses on policy analysis or teacher attitudes, with fewer studies capturing the lived experiences of both teachers and learners in inclusive PE settings. There remains a need for in-depth, context-based investigations that document how inclusive teaching-learning practices are designed, implemented, and experienced in real classroom environments.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines teaching-learning practices in inclusive Physical Education for learners with disabilities. Specifically, it explores how teachers design and adapt instructional activities, respond to learner diversity, and foster supportive and inclusive learning environments within Special Education contexts. By foregrounding the perspectives of both teachers and learners, this study seeks to contribute empirical insights that can inform inclusive pedagogy, teacher preparation, and policy implementation in Physical Education.

2. Review of Related Literature

Inclusive education promotes the education of learners with disabilities alongside their peers through the provision of appropriate support systems, reasonable accommodations, and instructional adaptations. Existing research consistently shows that inclusive practices contribute not only to improved academic outcomes but also to enhanced social participation, self-esteem, and independence among learners with disabilities. Successful implementation of inclusive education depends on flexible pedagogical approaches, positive teacher attitudes toward diversity, and strong institutional support structures that enable teachers to address varied learner needs effectively.

Within this framework, inclusive Physical Education pedagogy places emphasis on participation rather than competition and on individual ability rather than comparison among learners. Instructional strategies commonly associated with inclusive PE include task modification, the use of assistive or adapted equipment, individualized pacing, and alternative forms of assessment that recognize diverse learning outcomes. Studies have demonstrated that when Physical Education instruction is intentionally differentiated and learner-centered, it supports both motor skill development and meaningful social interaction among learners with disabilities, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement.

Teaching–learning practices in Special Education further highlight the need for scaffolded instruction, consistent routines, repetition, and multisensory teaching approaches to support learners with diverse needs. In Physical Education contexts, these practices are particularly critical due to the physical, interactive, and dynamic nature of activities. Research underscores that teacher competence, ongoing professional development, and reflective practice play a crucial role in sustaining inclusive instruction, as educators must continuously adapt strategies to ensure that all learners can participate safely, confidently, and meaningfully.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to examine inclusive Physical Education pedagogy within a real-life Special Education context. The case study approach enabled an in-depth and holistic exploration of instructional practices, classroom interactions, and learner experiences as they naturally occurred in inclusive and SPED Physical Education settings. By focusing on a bounded educational context, the design allowed for rich descriptions of how inclusive pedagogy was enacted in practice.

The research participants consisted of Special Education and Physical Education teachers who were implementing inclusive Physical Education practices, as well as learners with disabilities enrolled in inclusive or SPED Physical Education classes. Purposive sampling was utilized to capture a range of perspectives and experiences across different disability types and instructional arrangements. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed direct and relevant experiences necessary to address the objectives of the study.

Data were gathered through multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation. Classroom observations were conducted to document instructional strategies, task modifications, and levels of learner participation during Physical Education sessions. Semi-

structured interviews with teachers were used to examine pedagogical decisions, instructional challenges, and underlying beliefs about inclusive practice. In addition, focus group discussions with learners provided insights into their experiences, emotions, and perceptions of participation in Physical Education classes.

All qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. This analytic process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification and refinement of themes, and interpretation of patterns across data sources. Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through methodological triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent from teachers and parents, as well as assent from learners, were secured. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were handled with strict confidentiality to ensure respect, safety, and ethical integrity.

4. Findings

Theme 1: Adaptive Instructional Strategies Enabled Meaningful Participation

Teachers consistently employed adaptive instructional strategies to ensure that learners with diverse physical abilities could meaningfully engage in Physical Education activities. These adaptations included modifying game rules, adjusting the size and weight of equipment, simplifying movement patterns, and allowing flexible pacing during activities. Classroom observations revealed that when activities were tailored to learners' functional capacities, participation levels increased and learners demonstrated greater willingness to engage in physical tasks.

Learners articulated this shift clearly, sharing, "*Kaya ko na po sumali kapag binabago ang laro,*" which reflects how task modification reduced fear of failure and encouraged active involvement. Teachers emphasized that adaptation was not about lowering standards, but about providing equitable access to learning experiences. By focusing on achievable challenges, learners were able to experience success rather than frustration, leading to sustained engagement.

Adaptive instructional strategies effectively minimized participation barriers and supported equitable access to learning opportunities. These practices align with inclusive pedagogy, which prioritizes flexibility, responsiveness, and learner access over rigid instructional uniformity. The findings suggest that adaptation is a critical mechanism for operationalizing inclusion in Physical Education settings.

Theme 2: Differentiated Task Design Supported Skill Development

Teachers designed differentiated tasks to accommodate variations in learners' motor skills, endurance, balance, and coordination. Instead of assigning a single activity to all learners, teachers provided multiple task options with varying levels of difficulty. This approach allowed learners to select activities aligned with their individual capabilities while still targeting the same learning objectives.

One teacher explained, "*Hindi pare-pareho ang gawain, mahalaga ay gumagalaw at natututo ang bata,*" underscoring the emphasis on participation and learning rather than performance comparison. Observations indicated that learners who were given autonomy in task selection demonstrated increased persistence and gradual improvement in physical skills.

Differentiated task design enhanced learner engagement and facilitated skill development by recognizing individual differences. This approach is consistent with learner-centered and SPED teaching principles that emphasize individualized instruction, autonomy, and mastery-based learning. Differentiation allowed learners to progress at their own pace while remaining actively involved in class activities.

Theme 3: Supportive Learning Environments Fostered Confidence and Social Interaction

Inclusive Physical Education classes were characterized by a supportive climate that emphasized encouragement, patience, and mutual respect. Teachers intentionally promoted peer assistance and cooperative activities, creating opportunities for social interaction and collaboration among learners. Such practices helped reduce anxiety, particularly among learners who previously felt excluded or self-conscious during physical activities.

Learners expressed appreciation for this environment, stating, *"Masaya po kapag tinutulungan kami at hindi pinagtatawanan."* This highlights the importance of emotional safety in promoting participation. Observations showed that learners were more confident in attempting tasks when they felt accepted and supported by both teachers and peers.

Supportive learning environments contributed to increased confidence, emotional well-being, and social participation among learners. These findings reinforce inclusive education research emphasizing the role of positive classroom climates in fostering holistic development, particularly in Physical Education where learners are highly visible and vulnerable to peer judgment.

Theme 4: Teacher Preparation and Resource Constraints Shaped Practice

Despite the presence of inclusive practices, teachers identified several challenges that constrained effective implementation. These included limited formal training in inclusive or adaptive Physical Education, large class sizes, insufficient preparation time, and a lack of specialized or adaptive equipment. Teachers expressed awareness of inclusive strategies but noted difficulties in sustaining them consistently under existing conditions.

As one teacher stated, *"Alam namin ang dapat gawin, pero kulang sa resources at oras."* This sentiment reflects a gap between pedagogical knowledge and practical feasibility. Teachers often relied on improvisation and personal commitment to address learners' needs, highlighting the absence of systemic support.

These constraints underscore the need for institutional and systemic support to sustain inclusive Physical Education practices. Adequate professional development, provision of adaptive resources, and manageable class sizes are essential to translate inclusive policy into consistent classroom practice. Without such support, inclusive efforts remain dependent on individual teacher initiative rather than sustainable educational structures.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that inclusive Physical Education (PE) pedagogy becomes most effective when teaching–learning practices are flexible, differentiated, and sustained by a classroom climate that values participation, belonging, and respect for learner diversity. This aligns with the broader inclusive education literature, which defines inclusion not merely as

physical placement in regular classes, but as the deliberate removal of barriers to learners' access, presence, participation, and achievement (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). In PE specifically, inclusive teaching is strengthened when teachers modify tasks, equipment, space, rules, and assessment in ways that allow all learners, including those with disabilities and diverse needs, to engage meaningfully in movement experiences rather than be judged primarily through uniform standards of athletic performance (UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO, 2026). Recent scholarship also shows that participation and learner confidence increase when PE environments are supportive, socially affirming, and responsive to individual differences, because teacher support and inclusive practices reduce feelings of exclusion and promote active engagement, self-belief, and enjoyment in physical activity (Su et al., 2025; Ulset et al., 2025). At the same time, the long-term sustainability of inclusive PE depends not only on teacher goodwill, but on systematic preparation and school-level support. Studies consistently report that teachers are more likely to implement inclusive practices when they possess adequate training in adapted or inclusive PE, stronger self-efficacy, and positive attitudes toward inclusion; conversely, limited preparation, insufficient materials, and weak institutional backing often constrain implementation (Alhumaid et al., 2022; Antala et al., 2022; Karamani et al., 2024). Thus, the present findings reinforce the argument that inclusive PE is both a pedagogical and organizational commitment: it flourishes when teachers are professionally equipped, schools are institutionally committed, and resources are intentionally provided to ensure that access is prioritized over competition and that every learner can participate with dignity and confidence.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study provides evidence that inclusive Physical Education pedagogy enhances participation, skill development, and social engagement among learners with disabilities when teaching–learning practices are intentionally designed and supported.

Implications for Practice

- Teachers should employ adaptive and differentiated PE strategies
- Learner participation should be prioritized over competition

Implications for Policy and Leadership

- Schools should provide professional development on inclusive PE
- Adequate resources and adaptive equipment must be allocated

Directions for Future Research

Future studies may explore longitudinal outcomes of inclusive PE and examine learner perspectives across diverse disability groups.

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