

Research Articles and Essays

Where is Adapted Physical Education Heading?

Is it the Right Direction?

Kelle L. Murphy¹, A. Josephine Blagrove², and Laynie Case²

¹Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

²California State University at Chico

Abstract

Over the past two decades, Adapted Physical Education (APE) has advanced, yet access to physical activities for people with disabilities persists. Stakeholders were mixed into groups and discussed barriers such as limited access, funding, and misconceptions about disabilities. Emphasis was placed on interdisciplinary cooperation and understanding for progress in this field.

Keywords: Adapted physical education, physical activity, inclusion

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Adapted physical education (APE) is physical education (PE) designed to provide access to the general PE curriculum for disabled students who cannot participate successfully in the curriculum even with modifications or accommodations (Auxter et al. , 2010; Sherrill, 2004). Historically, APE followed a medical model, meaning that disability was a result of a condition that doctors were trained to address and attempted to cure when possible. It wasn't until the 1990s with the passage of key legislation that participation in PE for students with disabilities began to change and more appropriate options for students with disabilities were made available. This article will summarize conversations and outcomes from a facilitated discussion at the 39th Annual Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity on February 28, 2024 in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

Initial Background

The following background information was provided by the presenters so that participants had a shared framework and discussion language. Participants travelled to the conference from various states, including California, Georgia, New Jersey, Virginia, and others, with varied knowledge of APE and PE. No participants were current APE teachers or receiving APE services at the time of this presentation.

Legislation

Adapted physical education began with the implementation of P.L. 94-142, Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975. P.L. 94-142 mandated a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities ages 3-21(20 U.S.C. §1401). Physical education was viewed as a direct educational service (20 U.S.C. §1401). The law also introduced the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which is specifically designed instruction for students with disabilities (20 U.S.C. §1401). Along with the IEP, least

restrictive environment (LRE) was introduced and refers to the environment where students with disabilities can participate to their fullest potential (20 U.S.C. §1401). Multiple placement options can be considered to adhere to LRE for the students with disabilities, including: (1) placement in a general PE setting; (2) placement in a general PE setting with instructional modifications implemented; (3) placement in a general PE setting with assistance from a paraeducator or APE specialist; and (4) placement in a separate APE class with other peers with disabilities and additional staff for assistance. Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975. P.L. 94-142 is now known as P.L.101-476 - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and has continued the concepts of FAPE, IEP, LRE, and PE as a direct educational service (20 U.S.C. § 1400 2004).

The implementation of P.L.101-336 - Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 expanded civil rights protections for individuals with disabilities in the public and private sectors which included public and private schools (42 U.S.C. § 12101 *et seq.*, 1990). Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was reauthorized in 1997 and 2003. Even though the laws were meant to increase opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in general PE with their peers to the maximum extent possible, there have been positive and negative trends that have influenced this.

Current Positive Trends in Physical Education

The aforementioned laws have allowed for improved access to the PE curriculum which has led to increased inclusion of students with disabilities in general PE. Physical education teacher candidates learn about disability awareness in their coursework and learn how to adapt and modify skills and include those modifications in their lesson plans for all students regardless of ability level. The growth of both high and low technology and enhanced equipment has allowed for greater inclusion of students with disabilities in PE. For

example, equipment that provides sounds for those with visual impairments to locate equipment and their body in space or equipment that is more tactile in nature for those with sensory needs. In the past decade, there has also been continued funding available in higher education for APE personnel preparation grants. When awarded, these grants provide direct financial support to help prepare APE teachers or those going into doctoral programs to work with students with low incidence disabilities.

Current Negative Trends in Physical Education

Despite some positive developments in APE, numerous negative trends persist. Often, uncertified teachers from other disciplines are hired as PE and APE teachers, undermining their importance and potentially leading to inadequate instruction. This shortage of qualified personnel, including paraeducators, exacerbates the issue, creating a detrimental cycle that deprives students, especially those with disabilities, of the full benefits of PE and APE participation. Additionally, support staff and paraeducators are not trained to understand how to appropriately instruct in PE classes, and often fall back on outdated “roll the ball out” models that have persisted for decades and provide little support to students with disabilities. This lack of support can lead to frustration on the part of the student and prevent them from engaging in physical activities outside of the mandatory classroom instruction. This further widens health disparities and health outcomes for those who are disabled.

Barriers to Progress

While people do understand the importance of physical activities for those who are disabled to enhance overall well-being and quality of life, the connection often is not made with the confines of school-based settings such as PE and APE. Students should be given the opportunity in schools to learn the skills necessary to engage in lifetime activities outside of school that will result in healthier lifestyles and should be provided the accommodations

needed to do this successfully. This often does not happen due to a lack of understanding of the importance of PE and APE among state legislators, educational leaders as well as educator and administrators in the schools.

There is a lack of awareness of the competencies needed of PE teachers to deliver APE which is demonstrated by school administrators not filling the positions with certified educators. When teachers are placed in positions with a lack of training in that subject area, professional development is needed and lack of funding at schools does not offer those important opportunities for teachers to learn. At universities and colleges, the pre-service curriculum for many Physical Education Teacher Education programs only includes one class in APE, which often is not sufficient for teachers to teach APE. Therefore, professional development opportunities are needed to supplement their knowledge base but may not be readily available. Collectively, these factors minimize and create barriers for progress within the APE field.

Discussion and Guiding Questions

After background information was provided through lecture format by the presenters, the presentation shifted to include general discussion. Prior to discussion, the presenters asked the background of attendees and found that participants ranged across the lifespan and a variety of educational and professional backgrounds. An informal poll was gathered and, based on responses, the presenters loosely categorized attendees into the following groups: high school students who attended a segregated deaf high school; adults with disabilities; special education teachers; K-12 service providers; higher education faculty; and doctoral students. The participants were then prompted to mix into three discussion groups so that participants were represented across all stakeholder types in each group. After this process, two of the discussion groups included various professionals and several deaf high school

students, whereas one group was primarily made up of professionals and adults. Three questions were created and used as initial conversation starters for the discussion groups:

1. What advancements have been made in the broader disability field in the last 10 years? Are those trends the same in APE?
2. What issues still need to be addressed in the disability field? Who is being left out of the conversation? Is this the same for APE?
3. How can we work collaboratively to move the field forward? How can APE be a part of this?

Themes and Take-Aways from Audience Discussion

Conversations in groups centered around the general topics, but not all groups discussed all questions in the given time. The following are general themes that emerged from the conversations: 1) desire for engagement; 2) lack of awareness and professional training; and 3) need for advocacy. These themes are further discussed below.

Those Who Are Disabled Want to Engage

Across the discussion groups, disabled students made clear their interest in and desire to engage in PE, physical activity, recreation, and sport. This desire was echoed by professionals actively working with disabled students and individuals. Within the discussion, several deaf students shared their love for sport. One student provided several examples of his love for basketball, sharing stories of various opportunities he had to play and develop his skill and passion for the sport.

In one discussion group, conversations of love for sport and physical activity prompted further questions of specific barriers or negative experiences within these spaces. While students agreed on their desire to engage, varied experiences were shared regarding whether or not disability contributed to any exclusion in sport. One student described that he

did not experience specific barriers due to disability or deafness, and instead minimized his playing when his skill level did not match the teams he was trying out for. Other students described specific experiences in which they were interested in engaging in activities, but differences in communication between them and hearing individuals presented challenges.

Lack of Awareness and Professional Training

The faculty and doctoral students felt that there has been a shift in the focus of inclusion. In particular, based on their observations, they discussed a potential increase in focus on academic inclusion in the classroom and a decrease on inclusion in APE. The focus recently seems to be more on academics, while the importance of physical activities to enhance academics is being overlooked. Additional discussions uncovered that attendees felt there has been a positive change in person-first versus identity-first language, and that more people with disabilities are being included in important conversations and decision-making processes.

Across all groups, there was an overall thread that many teachers were not adequately prepared to teach PE/APE and it was an “afterthought” assignment to their workloads. For example, special education teachers shared that they were often responsible for the PE programming of the students when they have little to no training in that area. One educator also shared frustrations she held toward other professionals that did not actively engage or make accommodations for her disabled students. These discussions appear to align with challenges documented with the literature and compliment previous calls for improved capacity for APE training among various professionals.

Need for Advocacy

Many stakeholders shared the need for improved advocacy at all levels- K-12, administrators in schools, higher education PE teacher education and APE programs,

legislators, and educational representatives in order for effective change to take place.

Parents, students with disabilities, and their families are a critical component of this communication. Education regarding the purpose of APE and how it can enhance academics and overlap needs to occur. There seems to be a lack of understanding of APE outside of the field, and there is a responsibility among those in the APE field to educate and communicate with others on the importance of the field.

Some students in the audience mentioned that in their own school, they felt like they had good support and were given several opportunities to engage in those interests. Many specifically shared that they did not have experiences with exclusion and that was never an issue or even a conversation. However, some students described that outside of their school, they weren't always given those same opportunities. In fact, those with experiences in general schools shared stories of not being included or acknowledged in the same way purely due to communication differences, similar to experiences of not being included in sport. A Deaf teacher shared that when she was a student, she had to learn to advocate for herself due to the lack of opportunities that included her and limited awareness among professionals that she could participate with her non-disabled peers.

Conclusion

This session aimed to increase understanding of PE/APE for disabled individuals among a diverse audience, provide an opportunity for shared conversation between stakeholders to understand varied perspectives, and hear what problems and solutions attendees had with understanding and implementation of PE and APE for disabled population. The guiding questions prompted engaging and meaningful conversations that highlighted several key themes that are also apparent in recent literature. One prominent theme that emerged from the discussions was the strong desire among disabled population to

be included and engage in physical activity and sport. The enthusiasm for engagement was echoed by both disabled students and various professionals in the audience, emphasizing the importance of providing accessible opportunities for individuals to enjoy the benefits of physical activities.

Moving forward, improving advocacy and understanding around PE/APE across the disability field, as well as encouraging professionals from within the field to engage and collaborate in other disability adjacent professions could contribute to important progress in the field. In addition, the conversations in this session underscored the importance and value of collaborative efforts, especially those including and highlighting the voices of members of the disability community. Future sessions that provide opportunities for such collaborations will be advantageous to our overall goals of creating inclusive and supportive PE/APE environments.

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