

# Adhering to Ethical Principles When Teaching Students with Disabilities in Physical Education

Lauren J. Lieberman

It is important for physical educators to think about their duties with respect to the duties of individuals in other professions. One of the hallmarks of any profession is that its members are required to act responsibly toward the people they serve: doctors must treat their patients, lawyers their clients, and educators their students in ways that promote individual welfare in accordance with current best practices (Friedson, 2001).

Courtade and Ludlow (2008) wrote that acting responsibly includes "a moral duty to act to the overall benefit of and in the best interests of the persons served" (p. 36). Consider the following scenario:

Mr. Gallagher is a paraeducator at Sojourner Truth Middle School. When he brought two of his students with disabilities to general physical education for their regularly scheduled inclusive class, the GPE teacher said, "Today 'your' students will not be able to participate with the class. The volleyball lesson moves too quickly. Please work on bowling in the hall today with them." Unfortunately this happens often in general physical education classes throughout the United States.

Physical education teachers who do not have an extensive background in adapting the curriculum for students with disabilities are often the sole providers of physical education. This is the reality of physical education today. This is a problem, because students with disabilities have traditionally been viewed as fundamentally different from students without disabilities (Block, 2007). This editorial addresses ethical principles in physical education—including access to physical

education—that can ensure the dignity and worth of all children.

It is important to address access to physical education because 95 percent of children with disabilities are included in regular schools (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Some children with disabilities are taught in inclusive classes with the general physical educator, while others are placed in modified classes, segregated classes, or a combination of placements with a general physical education teacher and an adapted physical education specialist.

Due to the number of children with disabilities and the limited number of undergraduate and graduate programs in adapted physical education (APE), most general physical education teachers are expected to teach a variety of children with disabilities despite their limited knowledge about how to support them. No matter the case, it is imperative that teachers who teach children with disabilities act ethically and responsibly.

To start, educators can look at what the National Education Association (NEA, 1975) says about ethical practice:

The educator, believing in the worth and dignity of each human being, recognizes the supreme importance of the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, and nurture of the democratic principles. Essential to these goals is the protection of freedom to learn and to teach and the guarantee of equal educational opportunity for all. The educator accepts the responsibility to adhere to the highest ethical standards. (Introduction)

The NEA (1975) also provides "ethics indicators for educators," which include a commitment to

- have access to varying points of view,
- protect students from harm,
- avoid embarrassment or disparagement,
- avoid discrimination, and
- ensure not disclosing confidential information

In physical education, teachers must treat students with disabilities as competent and deserving of access to a high-quality program. The Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC, 2008) "Code of Ethics and Standards for Professional Practice" recommends that teachers do the following:

- A. Develop the highest educational and quality of life potential of individuals with exceptionalities.
- B. Promote and maintain competence and integrity.
- C. Engage in professional activities that benefit individuals with disabilities.
- D. Exercise objective professional judgment.
- E. Strive to advance knowledge and skills.
- F. Work within standards and policies of the profession.
- G. Seek to uphold and improve laws, regulations, and policies governing special education.
- H. Do not condone unethical or illegal acts or violate professional standards.

All educators have these ethical guidelines from the NEA and the CEC, but how they implement them will depend on what each teacher believes about students, particularly students with disabilities. In order to ensure that each child is given the best and most appropriate physical education experience, and to provide in-

struction in the least restrictive environment, there are a couple key concepts that must be considered.

First, it is important to remember that APE is the *service* and not the *placement*. Although a child may have a disability and may be eligible for APE, the place where they receive their physical education instruction could be the inclusive setting. The teacher in that class must provide access to high-quality, differentiated physical education, even if he or she feels inadequately prepared to teach children with disabilities. This placement must be determined according to what is best for *the child*. The American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR) and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) have created a position statement related to eligibility and placement. Following those guidelines will ensure that children with disabilities are served in the best possible placement to the maximum extent possible with their peers without disabilities (AAPAR & NASPE, 2010).

Second, it is important to keep in mind that the curriculum used by the school district is the curriculum for *all* children. Hopefully this curriculum is aligned with the national standards (NASPE, 2004) and specific state standards. There is not a special curriculum for children with disabilities only; some students with disabilities will have specially designed instruction in physical education that will be their individualized curriculum, but in general their goals should align with state standards as well (Winnick, 2011). Children with disabilities have the right to, and deserve, the opportunity to be taught everything their peers learn. For example, if the general physical education class is learning object control through a volleyball lesson, students with disabilities should be learning similar skills, no matter how modified the lessons might need

to be. The equipment, distances, and instructional strategies may differ, but the fundamental skills being taught should be the same (Kowalski, Lieberman, Pucci, & Mulawka, 2005; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2009).

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Improvement and achievement toward standards is relevant to all children. How to modify a lesson to ensure they learn the most they can learn can be done by seeing the resources provided by AAPAR ([www.aahperd.org/aapar/publications/freeresources/](http://www.aahperd.org/aapar/publications/freeresources/)).

To address these priorities, there are many ways in which teachers can respect and promote the rights of students with disabilities, including the following:

- Teach the communication skills needed to express wants, needs, choices, and refusals. This goal is especially important when teaching or coaching young children and those who have difficulty communicating with others. Teaching students how to communicate with peers with disabilities is important and can be achieved through the use of signs, picture boards, and electronic communication systems.
- Show respect and concern by listening to students who have disabilities when they express their opinions, preferences, and feelings. Consider their suggestions.
- Give and respect choices. Although it may be necessary to constrain choices in physical education programs with mandated curricula, it is still desirable to present options when making de-

isions such as the order in which skills will be taught, equipment selection, and team membership.

- Help students with disabilities to develop sufficient knowledge and skills in a variety of sports and physical activities so they are prepared to participate in community programs and family recreational activities. Helping students with disabilities develop adult-level competence demonstrates respect for their ability to succeed.

- Provide opportunities for students and athletes to participate as leaders and followers. Mentor them to be effective in both roles.

- Be sensitive to individual preferences and privacy concerns when providing personal assistance to persons with disabilities. Ask the individual how you can help most effectively.

- Help (only as needed) persons with disabilities to advocate for their right to access physical activity programs and facilities, and to eliminate or reduce barriers to accessibility where they exist (MacDonald & Block, 2005; Dummer, 1999).

Teaching children with disabilities can be challenging, and there are not always easy or clear answers. All teachers want to do the right thing, yet some may not feel comfortable due to lack of experience or professional preparation. If that is the case, there are several things a teacher can do to meet ethical standards for access to general physical education. In order to get some support for teaching the curriculum to children with disabilities, teachers can take the webinars offered by AAPAR ([www.aahperd.org/aapar/careers/adapted-physical-education.cfm](http://www.aahperd.org/aapar/careers/adapted-physical-education.cfm)); go to the Project INSPIRE web site ([www.twu.edu/INSPIRE](http://www.twu.edu/INSPIRE)); participate in inservices, workshops, or conferences; hire consultants; or work with the district's APE consultant.

There is no shame or embarrassment in asking for help. This is a very common area of need in

our schools today. Teachers who want to meet their ethical obligation to their students may need to take some extra steps to do so. Children with disabilities, just like all children, are worth a teacher's time, energy, and effort. We must make it a point to make a difference for all children!

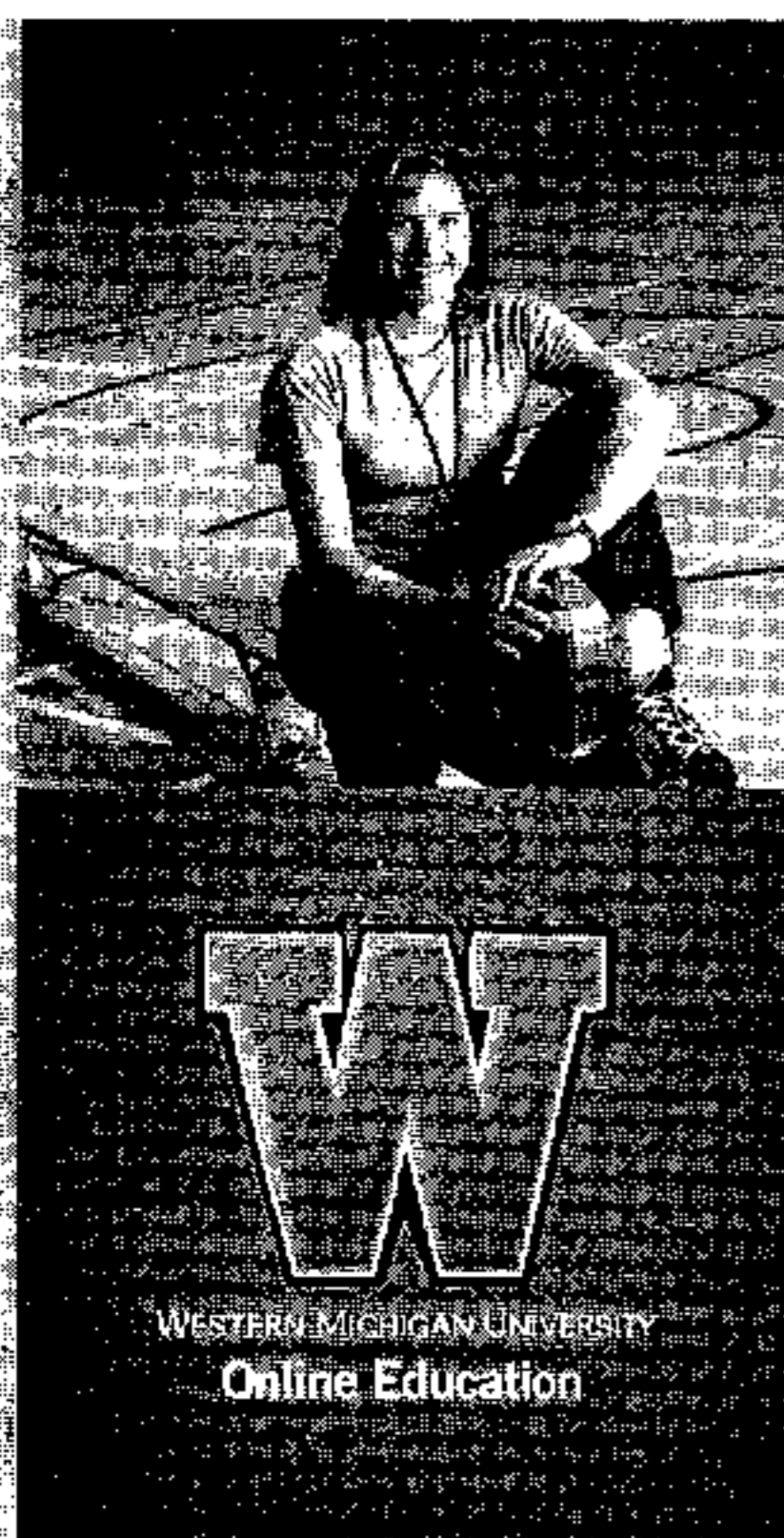
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—Lauren Lieberman (llieberm@brockport.edu) is a professor in the Department of Kinesiology, Sport Studies, and Physical Education at the College of Brockport, in Brockport, NY 14420, and a member of the JOPERD Editorial Board.



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