Perspectives on Inclusion from Students with Disabilities and Responsive Strategies for Teachers

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Knowing how students with disabilities view inclusion can help teachers identify ways to improve the physical education environment.

Jeremiah, a fourth grader who has spina bifida, uses a wheelchair and therefore has a very strong upper body. He is an active boy and loves to play four-square at the playground, shoot hoops, and play baseball in his cul-de-sac with his friends. During physical education, his teacher, Mrs. Costa, does the best she can with the limited background she has in teaching students with disabilities, and Jeremiah participates in many of the units she offers. The problem is that she does not include him in all of the units and some of the time. He does not feel comfortable in physical education. For example, Mrs. Costa has always taught a soccer unit on the grassy plateau behind the school. Because of his wheelchair, Jeremiah could not access the field nor participate during the soccer unit. Instead he sat in Mrs. Costa's office and read a book for three weeks. This was very demeaning and frustrating for Jeremiah, but he did not really know what to do to change the situation.

Later in the school year when Mrs. Costa introduced the floor hockey unit, she assigned another student, Colin, to be Jeremiah's partner. Without guidance, Colin thought he was being helpful by hitting the puck softly to Jeremiah during passing drills and always running to the puck to give it to Jeremiah when it was away from his chair. What Colin and Mrs. Costa did not know was that Jeremiah had experience with hockey and felt that Colin did not think he was a good enough athlete. Even during the basketball unit where Colin was Jeremiah's partner, he kept trying to help Jeremiah get the ball and would upset Jeremiah by saying “It's okay, I can help you” or “Wow, Jeremiah, you almost got a basket!” Luckily the school year ended well—during the fitness unit Jeremiah was able to do the most push-ups. He was thankful to think that maybe the other kids would no longer treat him like he was unable to perform activities in physical education.

Jeremiah's story is not unique. Some students may not enjoy physical education because of poor skill level, while others fear ridicule about their lack of movement skills. Students with disabilities often have fears regarding their skill level and the response of their classmates toward their participation in physical education class (Block, 2007).

Perspectives on Inclusion from Students with Disabilities
Many students with disabilities would rather sit out than risk being ridiculed or embarrassed in their physical education class (Stuart, Lieberman, & Hand, 2006). Physical education teachers have a responsibility to try to understand the views
of students with disabilities in their classrooms. If physical education teachers listen to the voices of students with disabilities, they will be better able to meet their needs and enhance their feelings of belonging in physical education. The purpose of this article is to explore the voices of students with disabilities in regard to inclusive physical education and to provide specific ways that teachers may improve their inclusive physical education classes to benefit everyone.

Researchers have indicated that students with disabilities have both positive and negative views about inclusive physical education, but generally view inclusive physical education favorably. In one study, researchers investigated the personal experiences of students with cerebral palsy and other physical disabilities within an inclusive physical education environment (Hutzler, Fless, Chacham, & van den Auweele, 2002). Eight females and two males ages nine to 15 participated in the study. The results indicated that these students believed they were more challenged when playing with peers who were not disabled. Students reported that they felt more "normal" when their friends assisted them and made them feel part of the group. Although students with disabilities were for the most part in favor of inclusive physical education, they did report negative feelings associated with it. For instance, some students said that they often felt embarrassed because they were unable to perform skills the same as other students in class. Others reported that they were often teased and ridiculed, which left them feeling unworthy.

Researchers in another study investigated the experiences of youths with visual impairments in general physical education (Lieberman, Robinson, & Rollheiser, 2006). The participants in this study were 60 youths ages nine to 23 with all levels of visual impairment. The results indicated that the participants felt excluded from physical education because of their visual impairment. For example, some students indicated that they were not allowed to participate at all or only with their vision teacher. The participants in this study also commented on the physical educator’s failure to provide appropriate accommodations such as equipment that was larger or that made sounds to help students with visual impairments be successful in physical education.

Another study, which investigated the experiences of students who used a wheelchair in inclusive physical education, indicated that students characterized their experiences as very positive (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). Nine students, ages 10 to 12, who used wheelchairs participated in the study. Four of the participants had spina bifida, four had cerebral palsy, and one had amputations; four were ambulatory and five were nonambulatory. The students reported that inclusive physical education experiences promoted a feeling of belonging, as well as a chance to share in the benefits of a physical education program and to participate with classmates. They also reported that these benefits included enhanced fitness, skill acquisition, and positive social relationships. The students with disabilities said that their sense of belonging resulted from the constant companionship and support from both the teacher and peers (Goodwin & Watkinson).

The results further indicated that, although the students reported a sense of belonging in inclusive physical education, they also experienced social isolation and rejection at times. Often students with disabilities were only able to participate in a limited manner and received little or no support from their teacher or peers. Students reported that their non-disabled peers at times called them names or yelled at them; they believed that their non-disabled peers did not always see them as a whole person.

Perhaps part of the responsibility for the negative views of inclusive physical education held by students with disabilities rests with the physical education teacher. Research results from a study conducted by Blinde and McCallister (1998) indicated that students with disabilities reported that their physical education teachers did make attempts to modify activities, but the modifications were not regular and often the students were given nonphysical activities as options, such as being a line judge. Participants in this study were 20 students (17 males and 3 females), ages 10 to 17, with a variety of disabilities including cerebral palsy, spina bifida, birth defects, muscular dystrophy, paraplegia, and polysonic fibrous dysplasia. The students with disabilities perceived that the physical education teachers lacked the desire to create modifications for them. As a result of the lack of modifications, the students with disabilities often believed that they were outsiders and excluded because they played the activity differently (Blinde & McCallister).

The results from another study reinforced the role of the teacher in creating meaningful learning experiences for stu-
udents with disabilities in physical education (Place & Hodge, 2001). Participants in the study included 22 eighth-grade students; three with physical disabilities (all female) and 19 (11 females and 8 males) without. The three participants with disabilities had spastic cerebral palsy or spina bifida with no other identified disabilities. The participants also had average or above average intelligence. The results indicated that physical education teachers did not provide equal participation opportunities for students with and without disabilities. The general physical education teacher provided more instructional information to students without disabilities, and the students with disabilities waited longer for opportunities to respond during games and skill practice. During one game, students without disabilities batted first, and the students with disabilities did not bat until one student spoke up and pointed out to the teacher that the students with disabilities had not batted. Often situations such as this and an overall lack of interaction leave students with disabilities feeling excluded, neglected, and awkward.

Although accommodations are sometimes lacking for students with disabilities, when they are made, students with disabilities report greater success. Kalyvas and Reid (2003) investigated the effect of sport adaptations on the participation and enjoyment of students with and without physical disabilities in a Newcomb volleyball game. The participants consisted of 35 students ranging in age from seven to 12 years. Fifteen students had a physical disability (11 males, 4 females) and 20 had no disability (8 males, 12 females). Five of the students with disabilities were nonambulatory, with physical impairments such as cerebral palsy and spina bifida. Ten were ambulatory with cerebral palsy, spina bifida, or arthritis, two of which needed supportive equipment for independent walking. The participants played in a nonadapted game of Newcomb followed by an adapted game.

The results indicated that students with disabilities who were seven or eight years old found the adapted game to be easier to play, but liked playing both. They acknowledged that their peers without disabilities were more cooperative and helpful during the adapted game. Participants with disabilities in the nine-year-old group preferred the adapted game with a balloon. They reported that the adapted game was easier to play and that they paid more attention to the game because they were more successful. Participants with disabilities in the 10-to-12 age group liked the fact that their peers without disabilities cooperated with them during both activities and they did not feel ignored. Furthermore, the participants commented that they were more successful in game play during the adapted activity.

The results from these research studies indicate that students with disabilities see many benefits to inclusive physical education; however, they also encounter ridicule and misunderstanding in physical education class. Much of the ridicule that students with disabilities experienced came from peers; however, the research indicated that physical education teachers could do more to make the experience of students with disabilities more positive in inclusive physical education.

How to Address the Negative Aspects of Inclusion

Teachers should examine their practice and make an effort to eliminate negative student experiences in inclusive settings in order to enhance the teaching-learning process, as well as the self-esteem and self-efficacy of students with disabilities in physical education. Table 1 offers recommendations for doing this based on research results regarding the beliefs that students with disabilities hold about inclusionary physical education. Teachers can also take the following professional-development steps to improve their instructional skills in order to provide appropriate modifications for students with disabilities in physical education:

1. Talk to your adapted physical education (APE) specialist or consultant. There are many trained and certified specialists available to give APE teaching suggestions. Consultants can help you advocate for the students; educate other teachers, aides, and parents; or help with an existing program. These APE consultants are often nationally certified adapted physical educators (see www.cortland.edu/APENS). Some districts will designate these individuals to help general physical education teachers meet the needs of students with disabilities. However, in some smaller districts there may not be a specialist, and the GPE teacher may have to seek assistance from a consultant in a larger district. See Huetig and Roth (2002) for more suggestions on maximizing the use of APE consultants.

2. Attend a workshop or inservice. Some school districts provide inservice training. Sessions about APE often include demonstrations of alternative teaching strategies, peer assessments, and sample lessons that have worked with students in the past. To find out more about workshops, contact your
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<td>Lack of opportunity to participate in school-sponsored activities</td>
<td>Increase opportunities through non-disabled and adapted after-school sports such as track and field, swimming, basketball, volleyball, etc.</td>
<td>Students with disabilities can join intramurals, after-school sports teams, Special Olympics sports teams, community sports, or disability sport juniors teams. The teacher must help the students find what is right for them.</td>
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<td>Excluded, ignored</td>
<td>Modified activities could help increase participation and acceptance. Exclusion is not an option when the individualized education program says “inclusive PE.”</td>
<td>Students with disabilities should have the same units as their able-bodied peers. Some of the units may need modifications for inclusion to be successful. See Lieberman &amp; Houston-Wilson (2009) for examples of modifications for specific units.</td>
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<td>Lack of role models</td>
<td>Increased community- and school-based activities will increase the number of athletes with disabilities who are role models in the community and school.</td>
<td>All children need people like them who are successful to look to as role models. Seek role models, in the community and on the Internet, who have disabilities similar to the students at your school. For example, if a child has type 1 diabetes, he or she may need to see other individuals with diabetes who are successful athletes so they know they can be as well. Another example would be a Paralympic athlete with cerebral palsy as a role model for a student who has cerebral palsy (see <a href="http://www.usparalympics.org">www.usparalympics.org</a>).</td>
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<td>Positive and negative peer interaction</td>
<td>Train peer tutors to work with students with disabilities and maintain constant communication between all students. Monitor the relationship between peer tutors and students with disabilities and be sure to assess for intended learning outcomes. See Lieberman &amp; Houston-Wilson (2009) for the full training program.</td>
<td>Choose peer tutors who will be able to instruct and give feedback to the students with disabilities. Train them and the students with disabilities on how to give instruction and feedback. When possible, ensure that the relationship is reciprocal, meaning both students instruct and give feedback.</td>
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<td>Normalcy and being part of a group</td>
<td>Educate students on disability awareness.</td>
<td>Ask the student with the disability how much about their disability they want others to know. Have them share with their peers the cause of their disability and how they function as much as possible. Increasing awareness minimizes fear and increases understanding. Peers will be more likely to embrace modifications to games and activities and pair up with the child with the disability.</td>
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<td>Success</td>
<td>Allow all students in the class to choose their own equipment for the skill being practiced. Varying the way skills are performed and the equipment used is extremely important for everyone to be successful.</td>
<td>Students with and without disabilities perform skills at different levels. Offering balls in a variety of sizes, colors, and textures is just one way to meet the skill needs of each student. Allowing students to throw overhand, underhand, or side arm is a good way to vary the activity and get a baseline. Students can then work on skill progressions based on their own comfort and challenge level so the activity becomes accessible to everyone.</td>
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<td>Lack of structured activity during physical education</td>
<td>Many students without disabilities assume that not doing anything is better than saying or doing something wrong. Educate students on disability awareness.</td>
<td>Increasing disability awareness can lead to better communication and friendships. Allowing all students to interact and get to know one another through sports and activities can open up avenues for dialogue and interaction. This will decrease feelings of neglect and isolation among students with disabilities. The teacher is a role model and should always include students with disabilities in conversations, discussions, and all activities.</td>
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<td>Low expectation for success, student’s competence is questioned</td>
<td>Explain the student’s disability to the other students. Explain what they may have difficulty with and what interests and skills they share with their peers.</td>
<td>Have the student with a disability explain the cause of the disability, and what modifications are necessary for each activity.</td>
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<td>PE teachers’ lack of desire to create consistent modifications for specific sports and skills</td>
<td>Search for helpful information on the Internet or at workshops, clinics, conventions, conferences, and inservices. Turn to colleagues at the school or district for more information and advice.</td>
<td>Teachers can also ask for assistance from the school’s physical therapist, occupational therapist, special education teacher, administrators, autism specialists, etc. These professionals can help with behavior modifications, equipment, technology, and paperwork associated with students with disabilities.</td>
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<td>Segregated inclusion, isolation in a different part of the class</td>
<td>Assign peer tutors who are willing and available to participate at all times.</td>
<td>In this case the teacher should follow suggestions for setting up a successful peer-tutor program and ensure proper inclusion.</td>
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<td>Lack of social interaction</td>
<td>Encourage students to work with different groups or partners in each activity or unit, teach an adapted unit, or participate in Disability Awareness Day.</td>
<td>When planning lessons the teacher could set up ways for students with disabilities to be included in groups and be a part of a team. One way to do this is to offer disability sports. If a child has a visual impairment, the class could play goalball so the child with the visual impairment can be included with no barriers.</td>
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<td>Lack of praise and feedback during activity</td>
<td>Give all students attention and the praise necessary for successful completion of the activity. All students deserve an equal amount of attention and feedback from the teacher and paraeducator.</td>
<td>When the teacher is going around to supervise skill development or activities, he or she should ensure that each student gets praise and feedback. When asking for demonstrators, give all students an equal opportunity.</td>
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athletic director or special education director. States and regions also have conferences where attendees can observe and hear about experiences on maximizing APE strategies, meet vendors who sell APE modified equipment or software, and meet other professionals in the field who can share thoughts, ideas, and experiences.

3. Use the Internet. The Internet can provide answers to questions, lessons, and explanations of specific disabilities. Useful web sites include the National Center on Physical Activity and Disability (www.ncpad.org), Project INSPIRE, which provides instructional techniques, strategies, and safety tips related to students with disabilities (www.twu.edu/INSPIRE), and PE Central (www.pecentral.com/adaptedmnu.html).

4. Teach a universally designed lesson. Based on universally designed instruction, curriculum, and assessment, this teaching strategy cuts out learning barriers. In this approach the teacher plans accommodations well before the unit begins. For example, in a jump rope unit, the teacher would have various lengths of ropes, ropes of different weights, jump ropes cut in half, and stations that progress from easier to more difficult jumps. This variety of options will allow...
students in wheelchairs to participate as well as students who are at the beginning stages of jumping a self-turned rope. The benefits of this teaching style include increased student motivation, reduced management time, increased learning, and increased acceptance from peers (Lieberman, Lytle, & Clarq, 2008).

**Additional Strategies**

The following approaches may help teachers to improve inclusionary practices by addressing the negative aspects of inclusion, including the lack of social interaction with nondisabled peers, hurtful and emotionally damaging treatment of students with disabilities, exclusion from activities, and insufficient accommodations from physical education teachers.

**Boost Disability Awareness.** Teasing and ridicule often stem from a lack of knowledge about disabilities. Disability awareness can be raised by having students search for articles about individuals with disabilities or for information on the Internet, or by inviting guest speakers with disabilities. The teacher can also have students on both teams simulate a certain disability in order to ensure an equal playing field and increase disability awareness. The class as a whole can bring awareness about disabilities to the school by doing a fundraiser for a local organization. For example, Jeremiah’s class could invite as a speaker a local athlete with spina bifida who competes in marathons, provide a wheelchair for the other team when playing games, and join the walk-a-thon for the local spina bifida association. It is also important to remember to include the child with the disability in the development and implementation of any disability awareness program.

**Present Role Models.** Teachers and peers are often unaware of the abilities of students with disabilities. Bringing in a role model with the same disability as a child in class can increase expectations from the teacher, peers, and even the child. For example, Vejas is a fifth grader with a visual impairment in an inclusive school. His school invited Paralympic goalball player Jessie Lorenz, a member of the gold-medal-winning women’s goalball team in Beijing, to speak at the school. Her speech was inspirational and informative, and it made an impression on everyone. All of the students wrote about their reactions to her speech, and many classes held discussions and watched videos of her games. The expectations of Vejas’s class increased, and his teacher knew that he had more potential than she had originally thought.

**Trained Peer Tutors.** Several of the studies reviewed earlier stated that peers had low expectations of students with disabilities. The low expectations and lack of confidence were discouraging to students with disabilities. Training peers to be tutors to provide support at the appropriate level can create friendships and positive relationships while providing increased instruction and feedback to the child with a disability. See Lieberman and Houston-Wilson (2009) for a training program.

**Train Paraeducators.** Research has indicated that paraeducators can either support or interfere with the socialization of students with disabilities in physical education (Block, 2007). Training paraeducators to facilitate socialization as well as increase skill performance can improve peer relations and inclusion for the entire class.

**Include Disability Sports.** There are many Paralympic sports that students with disabilities can enjoy with peers. Including sports such as sit volleyball, goalball, wheelchair basketball, bocce, or wheelchair curling can improve students’ understanding of disabilities and improve the self-esteem of the child with the disability (Davis, 2002).

**Use Online Videos.** The United States has very little coverage of Paralympic sports and other disability sport competitions. One way to showcase Paralympic sports is through YouTube or other online videos. By seeing a true elite game of sit volleyball, goalball, or wheelchair basketball, students can get a true sense of the athleticism and skill of athletes with disabilities. They can also get an idea of how the game is played before they play it themselves (Columna, Arndt, Lieberman, & Yang, 2009).

**Highlight Accomplishments.** Some students with disabilities may be involved in sports outside of school. For example, Jeremiah was a member of the Rochester Rookies, a wheelchair track team. He trained all year, and in June he went to sectionals. Some of his older friends even made it to the track-and-field nationals. By sharing this information with his class, the teacher enabled his peers to learn more about his skills and gain respect for his abilities in physical education.

**Ensure Leadership Opportunities.** All students deserve the opportunity to be a leader. Physical education is a natural place to provide leadership opportunities, such as for leading stretches, or being an equipment manager, squad leader, team coach, or statistician. Providing leadership opportunities to students with disabilities will ensure that their peers will also consider them leaders.

**Provide the Same Units for All Students.** The physical education curriculum should be the same for all students. If a sixth-grade class has 11 units throughout the year, then students with disabilities—whether included or segregated—must have all 11 units. The way they learn may be modified, but what they learn should be the same. By providing the same opportunities, students will improve their motor and sport skills and be better able to choose what they do and do not want to play, which can result in more opportunities for socialization.

The preceding suggestions are just a few ways that teachers can increase socialization for students with disabilities as well as minimize the negative effects of inclusion. Some teachers may already be practicing one or all of these suggestions. It is not expected that they will all be implemented at the same time, but they are considered “best practices” and should be implemented over time.

**Summary**

It is important to listen to the voices of students with disabilities in order to provide them with quality physical

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Physical education is a unique profession that blends education, kinesiology, and coaching. Physical educators must be masters of multiple sports and skills, pedagogy, motor learning, and related disciplines such as exercise physiology and biomechanics. We must be exceptional at what we do if physical education is to survive in our schools. Therefore, we must receive as much specialized physical education training as possible in our undergraduate studies. There is no room in a PETE program to replace pertinent classes with classes that might be of benefit if we were to choose a different profession. That is what a post-graduate degree or a minor in a different subject should be for. Physical educators do not have the luxury to dilute undergraduate education; we must be the very best at what we do every day. Our students deserve it.

—Doug Ackley, student, Boise State University, Boise, ID.

References


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