

Strategies for Promoting Inclusive Physical Education in Diverse Classroom Settings

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Abstract: Inclusive physical education (PE) emphasizes equitable access to physical activity and learning opportunities for all students, regardless of ability, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background. As classroom diversity continues to increase, the need for pedagogical strategies that support inclusivity in PE has become more urgent. This paper examines theoretical underpinnings, current challenges, and practical strategies for promoting inclusive physical education in diverse classroom settings. Drawing on educational theories, policy documents, and international case studies, the paper highlights approaches including differentiated instruction, universal design for learning (UDL), cooperative learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and technology-enhanced solutions. The findings suggest that inclusive PE requires systemic support, professional development for teachers, collaboration with families, and policies that prioritize equity. Ultimately, inclusive physical education contributes not only to physical health but also to social cohesion, self-esteem, and lifelong learning.

Keywords: inclusive education; physical education; diversity; universal design for learning; culturally responsive pedagogy; differentiated instruction

1. Introduction

Physical education (PE) occupies a unique position within the school curriculum, as it combines physical development, cognitive engagement, and socio-emotional growth. Yet, traditional approaches to PE have often failed to meet the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities, cultural minorities, and those who face barriers related to gender or socio-economic status [1]. With the growing emphasis on equity in education, the concept of inclusive physical education has become central to modern educational reform.

Inclusive PE is not merely about integrating students into the same physical space; rather, it focuses on ensuring that all students experience meaningful participation and achievement. The principle resonates with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and international conventions on the rights of persons with disabilities. Schools are thus tasked with creating inclusive classroom environments where diversity is recognized and celebrated.

This paper explores the question: What strategies can effectively promote inclusive physical education in diverse classroom settings? It begins by reviewing theoretical frameworks, identifying challenges in practice, and then discussing a range of evidence-supported strategies.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Inclusive Physical Education

2.1. Human Rights and Equity Perspective

Inclusive education is deeply rooted in the fundamental principles of human rights, unequivocally asserting that every student, regardless of background, abilities, or other

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distinguishing features, has an inherent right to access quality education. This right is non-negotiable and should be upheld without any form of discrimination. When we apply this concept to Physical Education (PE), it takes on a very practical and vital meaning.

In an inclusive PE setting, it means ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to engage in physical activities. It's not just about getting everyone on the field; it's about creating an environment where each student can participate to the best of their ability. This includes providing access to the health benefits that come with regular physical exercise, such as improved cardiovascular health, stronger muscles, and better mental well-being. Moreover, inclusive PE should also facilitate personal development. It allows students to build confidence, develop teamwork skills, and learn how to overcome challenges, all of which are essential life skills that contribute to their overall growth and success.

2.2. Social Constructivism

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism holds that learning is not an isolated process but rather takes place within social contexts. In the realm of inclusive Physical Education, this theory has significant implications. Group activities form the cornerstone of inclusive PE under the social constructivism framework. When students participate in group-based sports or exercises, they are not just moving their bodies; they are actively constructing knowledge.

Through peer collaboration, students can share ideas, strategies, and experiences. For example, in a team game, students can learn from each other's playing styles, discuss how to improve their performance, and work together to achieve common goals. This process respects individual differences because each student brings their unique strengths and perspectives to the group. Some students may be more athletic, while others may have better strategic thinking skills. By collaborating, they can leverage these differences to enhance the overall learning experience for everyone involved. It creates a dynamic and inclusive learning environment where students can grow both individually and as a team.

2.3. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) serves as a comprehensive framework for creating flexible learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students. When applied to Physical Education, UDL takes on a multi-faceted approach.

One key aspect of UDL in PE is offering multiple ways of engagement. This could mean varying the intensity levels of activities to accommodate students with different fitness levels. For instance, in a running exercise, some students may be able to run at a fast pace, while others may need to walk or jog at a slower speed. Another way is through offering multiple ways of representation. This can involve using visual aids, such as diagrams or videos, to explain game rules or exercise techniques, in addition to verbal instructions.

UDL also emphasizes providing diverse modes of expression. In PE, this could mean allowing students to demonstrate their understanding of a sport or skill through different means, such as creating a presentation, writing a report, or performing a demonstration. Additionally, using adaptive equipment is an important part of UDL in PE. Adaptive equipment can help students with disabilities participate fully in activities, ensuring that no one is left behind [2]. By implementing UDL principles, PE can become a truly inclusive and accessible subject for all students.

3. Challenges in Inclusive Physical Education

3.1. Physical and Structural Barriers

Limited access to adaptive equipment and inaccessible facilities can exclude students with disabilities.

3.2. *Teacher Preparedness*

Many PE teachers report insufficient training in inclusive pedagogy, especially regarding disability inclusion and cultural responsiveness.

3.3. *Attitudinal Barriers*

Stereotypes about gender, culture, or ability can hinder inclusive practices. For example, girls in some contexts may be discouraged from participating in sports.

3.4. *Curriculum Rigidities*

Standardized curricula often focus on competitive sports, leaving little room for adapted activities that support inclusivity.

3.5. *Assessment Challenges*

Traditional assessments emphasize performance metrics, disadvantaging students with diverse abilities.

4. **Strategies for Promoting Inclusive Physical Education**

4.1. *Differentiated Instruction*

Teachers can modify tasks according to students' readiness, interest, and learning profile. For instance, in a basketball lesson, some students may focus on passing accuracy while others practice shooting at shorter distances.

4.2. *Universal Design for Learning in Practice*

Applying UDL, teachers can:

Provide varied equipment (lightweight balls, larger targets).

Adjust game rules to emphasize collaboration over competition.

Allow students to demonstrate learning through movement, reflection journals, or peer teaching.

4.3. *Cooperative Learning*

Group-based tasks that require shared responsibility promote social inclusion. "Jigsaw" games, where each student has a unique role, ensure that every participant contributes meaningfully.

4.4. *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*

Teachers should incorporate culturally diverse games and activities, such as traditional dances or indigenous sports, to validate students' cultural identities.

4.5. *Technology-Enhanced Solutions*

Wearable devices, interactive video demonstrations, and virtual reality can support differentiated engagement. For students with disabilities, assistive technologies such as speech-to-text apps or adapted gaming systems enhance participation.

4.6. *Peer Support and Mentoring*

Buddy systems pair students of differing abilities, fostering empathy and shared learning.

4.7. *Inclusive Assessment*

Assessment should focus on effort, improvement, and personal goals rather than standardized benchmarks. Rubrics that value persistence and teamwork encourage equity.

5. Case Studies

5.1. Finland: Holistic PE Curriculum

Finland integrates inclusive PE by emphasizing student well-being, cooperation, and non-competitive activities. Teachers adapt lessons based on student feedback.

5.2. United States: Adapted Physical Education Programs

Many U.S. schools provide Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for PE, ensuring that students with disabilities have personalized goals and support.

5.3. Australia: Indigenous Games in PE

Australian schools incorporate traditional Aboriginal games into PE curricula, promoting cultural respect and identity.

6. Implementation Framework

6.1. Teacher Training and Professional Development

For inclusive physical education to be sustainable, teacher training must go beyond short workshops and become a continuous professional journey. Universities and teacher education programs should integrate inclusive pedagogy into their curricula so that pre-service teachers acquire both theoretical understanding and practical skills [3]. This includes learning about differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, and strategies for accommodating students with disabilities. Practical simulations—such as role-playing the experiences of students with visual impairments or mobility challenges—help teachers develop empathy and adaptability. Ongoing mentorship programs in schools are equally vital, as novice teachers benefit greatly from guidance by experienced colleagues who have successfully implemented inclusive practices. Professional development should also encourage reflective practice, where teachers analyze their own biases and assumptions about diversity. By engaging in peer collaboration, teachers can exchange strategies, co-develop lesson plans, and create communities of practice that reinforce inclusive values. Without sustained training and professional development, even the most well-designed inclusive policies are unlikely to succeed at the classroom level.

6.2. Policy Support

Policy is the backbone of systemic change in education, and inclusive PE requires clear, enforceable, and well-funded policies. Governments must articulate policies that explicitly mandate inclusivity in physical education rather than leaving it to individual schools' discretion. Such policies should be tied to budget allocations that provide schools with adaptive equipment, accessible infrastructure, and funds for teacher training. Furthermore, accountability frameworks are needed so that schools report not only on student performance but also on inclusivity practices. Internationally, some countries have linked inclusive PE with national health promotion strategies, demonstrating that inclusivity is not solely an educational issue but also a public health priority. Policymakers must also consider equity between urban and rural schools, as the latter often face greater resource constraints. Policies that incentivize schools to collaborate with local governments, NGOs, and private partners can help bridge these gaps. Ultimately, without strong policy support, inclusive PE remains a fragile initiative vulnerable to budget cuts and shifting priorities.

6.3. School Leadership and Collaboration

School leaders, including principals and department heads, play a pivotal role in setting the tone for inclusivity. Effective leadership ensures that inclusive PE is not an isolated practice but part of a broader school culture that values diversity and equity. Leaders must provide clear expectations for inclusive teaching while also ensuring that teachers

receive the resources and support they need. One effective approach is fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. For example, PE teachers can work with special education staff to design adapted activities or with school counselors to address students' socio-emotional needs. Leadership also involves fostering a climate of trust where teachers feel safe experimenting with new methods without fear of punitive evaluation. Professional learning communities facilitated by school leaders encourage shared responsibility for inclusion, ensuring that it is seen as a collective effort rather than the burden of a single teacher. The success of inclusive PE depends heavily on visionary leadership that aligns school resources, staff, and community toward common goals.

6.4. Family and Community Engagement

Families and communities are essential partners in promoting inclusive PE. Parents of children with disabilities can provide critical insights into their child's needs and help teachers design more effective accommodations. Community organizations-including sports clubs, cultural associations, and disability advocacy groups-can enrich school PE programs by offering expertise, resources, and volunteer support. Involving families also ensures continuity of inclusive practices beyond the school day [4]. For example, when parents understand the importance of inclusive participation, they are more likely to encourage their children to remain physically active at home. Schools can host family sports days or multicultural athletic events to foster shared understanding and celebrate diversity. At the community level, partnerships with local governments and NGOs can help provide adaptive equipment, organize awareness campaigns, and facilitate training for school staff. Inclusive PE thrives when the school-community relationship is reciprocal, reinforcing the message that inclusivity is not just an educational priority but a societal value.

6.5. Continuous Evaluation

To ensure inclusivity is meaningful and not symbolic, continuous evaluation mechanisms are indispensable. Evaluation should not only measure whether students are included but also whether they are benefiting from participation in terms of skills, confidence, and well-being. Schools can employ mixed methods of evaluation, combining quantitative indicators-such as participation rates-with qualitative feedback from students, teachers, and parents. Regular student surveys are particularly valuable, as they provide direct insights into learners' experiences [5]. Continuous evaluation also involves ongoing classroom observations and peer reviews, allowing teachers to refine their practices. Importantly, evaluation must be formative rather than punitive, focusing on improvement rather than compliance. Schools should establish internal review committees that include teachers, administrators, parents, and even students to discuss inclusivity outcomes and identify areas for growth. On a broader scale, governments and education authorities can support schools by providing standardized tools for assessing inclusivity, ensuring consistency across contexts. By institutionalizing feedback and reflection, continuous evaluation ensures that inclusive PE evolves in response to student needs and changing social realities.

7. Benefits of Inclusive Physical Education

Inclusive physical education generates a wide range of benefits that extend beyond immediate physical outcomes. For students with disabilities, inclusive practices ensure that they are not merely present in the classroom but actively participating in activities tailored to their abilities. Research shows that structured opportunities for participation enhance self-confidence, foster resilience, and reduce social isolation. When students with disabilities successfully engage in sports or physical activities, they often develop a sense of agency that translates into other academic and social contexts. The structured support

of peers and teachers also nurtures communication skills and teamwork, further strengthening their social integration.

For all students, inclusive PE fosters empathy, mutual respect, and intercultural understanding. When students of varying backgrounds and abilities collaborate in physical tasks, they encounter diversity not as an obstacle but as a source of enrichment. Cooperative games, peer mentoring, and culturally diverse activities help dismantle stereotypes while promoting solidarity. In addition, inclusive PE settings emphasize teamwork over competition, which encourages students to value collective success as much as individual achievement. This orientation prepares young people for future social interactions in multicultural and diverse environments.

For schools, inclusive PE contributes to the creation of a more cohesive and equitable learning culture. Schools that prioritize inclusive practices in PE often extend these values to other subject areas, reinforcing a holistic vision of education. Teachers across disciplines benefit from shared strategies of differentiation and collaboration. Furthermore, inclusive PE helps reduce disciplinary problems, as students who feel respected and engaged are more likely to participate positively in school life. The sense of belonging cultivated through inclusive PE also enhances overall school climate and student well-being.

For society, the long-term benefits are particularly significant. Inclusive physical education nurtures citizens who embrace equity, diversity, and health. Students exposed to inclusive practices are more likely to carry values of respect, cooperation, and social justice into adulthood. By promoting lifelong participation in physical activity, inclusive PE also contributes to public health objectives, reducing health disparities across populations. From a civic perspective, inclusive PE helps build more cohesive communities where diversity is recognized as a strength, laying the foundation for inclusive democratic participation.

8. Challenges to Sustainability

Despite its clear benefits, sustaining inclusive physical education in diverse classroom settings presents significant challenges. Resource limitations remain a primary barrier. Many schools lack adaptive equipment, accessible facilities, or sufficient funding to implement inclusive practices effectively. Without proper infrastructure—such as ramps, wide hallways, or specialized sports equipment—students with disabilities may continue to experience exclusion despite inclusive intentions. Budget constraints often force administrators to prioritize academic subjects, leaving PE underfunded and marginalized.

Teacher workload and burnout also pose serious challenges. Designing and delivering inclusive PE lessons requires additional planning, creativity, and emotional investment. Teachers may feel overwhelmed if professional development opportunities and institutional support are lacking. In some cases, the absence of co-teaching arrangements or support staff (such as special education assistants) can make it difficult for a single PE teacher to manage the diverse needs of all students. This can lead to frustration, fatigue, and ultimately resistance to inclusive reforms.

Systemic policy gaps further threaten the sustainability of inclusive practices. While national or international frameworks may advocate inclusivity, local policies and accountability systems often remain focused on performance metrics and competitive achievements. Without explicit policy alignment, inclusive practices risk being implemented inconsistently or reduced to isolated pilot programs. In contexts where educational success is narrowly defined by standardized tests, schools may view inclusive PE as peripheral rather than central to their mission.

Another challenge lies in changing cultural and attitudinal barriers. Teachers, students, and parents may hold ingrained beliefs about who belongs in PE. For example, cultural norms may discourage girls from active participation, or communities may undervalue physical education compared to academic subjects. Overcoming such attitudes requires long-term engagement, awareness campaigns, and a redefinition of success in PE.

Finally, the sustainability of inclusive PE also depends on ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Without robust systems to track inclusivity, schools may revert to traditional practices under resource or performance pressures. Sustainability requires continuous adaptation, stakeholder involvement, and reinforcement of inclusive values. Addressing these challenges will demand coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, families, and communities to ensure that inclusive physical education becomes not an exception, but a norm.

9. Conclusion

Inclusive physical education is central to building equitable and diverse learning environments. By employing strategies such as differentiated instruction, UDL, cooperative learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and technology integration, schools can ensure that all students participate meaningfully in PE. Implementation requires comprehensive support, including teacher training, policy frameworks, and community collaboration. While challenges persist, inclusive PE fosters not only physical development but also moral, social, and cultural growth-making it an indispensable element of holistic education in the 21st century.

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