

Lived Experiences of Rural Adapted Physical Education Teachers in New Hampshire: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to learn about the obstacles and barriers to teaching Adapted Physical Education (APE) from the viewpoints of Physical Education (PE) teachers in rural New Hampshire public schools grades K-12. Two research issues drove this project: What challenges and barriers do Adapted Physical Education teachers experience when including students with disabilities in general physical education? And What are the experiences of rural New Hampshire Public Schools' Adapted Physical Education teachers to implement and adapt their classes for students with special needs? The study included interviews, observations, and the collection of artifacts and documents of Physical Education teachers in New Hampshire to investigate these concerns. Adapted Physical Education teachers encounter barriers and issues with inadequate equipment, class size, administrative support (superintendent and principal), physical space, funding, and a lack of professional development, according to the literature on Physical Education. However, in New Hampshire, a limited amount of study has been done on Adapted Physical Education, especially in rural public-school districts. Data was collected through triangulation using observations, document collection, and semi-structured interviews with Physical Education teachers in New Hampshire. Nearly all the Physical Education teachers in this study stated that they have adequate and sufficient administrative support (superintendent and principal); however, many of the PE teachers faced their biggest barriers and challenges when trying to work with students that have Social Emotional Learning (SEL) disabilities and behavioral issues. The research found that paraprofessional support is lacking, and, in some cases, it is completely non-existent in the PE classroom. Furthermore, several of the participants in this study cited "time" as a barrier, since they reportedly have limited opportunities to meet with students that have disabilities daily. Typically, only one class meeting per week. One participant in this study

stated that the entire sixth grade class/students do not receive Physical Education for the entire school year. Moreover, the study also showed that elementary and middle school students have limited opportunities and fewer options to take Physical Education classes compared to high school students. In addition, none of the participants in this study have earned their CAPE license and certification. Therefore, recommendations emerged that Physical Education teachers receive additional training and think about becoming a Certified Adapted Physical Educator (CAPE). The findings are examined, as well as the future of Adapted Physical Education in New Hampshire.

Keywords

Barriers, Inclusion, Class Size, Equipment

1. Introduction

In 1975, Congress passed Public Law 94-142, ensuring that all students with disabilities in the United States have access to a free and public education. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004 covers all educational settings, including Physical Education (PE). In short, these laws stated that all children with disabilities must have whatever is necessary to meet their needs, whether it is special adapted Physical Education classes, “regular” PE classes, building access, necessary transportation, playing areas, gyms, ramps, equipment, and so on. While these laws appear well-intentioned on the surface, problems arose from the start. For example, no funding was provided for any of the mandates in the bill. Moreover, according to the United States Department of Education’s Institute for Education Statistics, there are approximately 6.4 million students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21, accounting for roughly 13% of all students (2019). Not that long ago, Physical Education used to be centered on the idea of creating standard, uniform physical requirements for everyone, which went against the idea of each person’s individual development (Adyrkhaiev & Adyrkhaieva, 2017). Now, however, the fundamental purpose of Adapted Physical Education (APE) is to guarantee that each child receives Physical Education services that are tailored to his or her specific learning needs (Bruno, 2020). This notion of normalization, which became popular in the 1960’s, reflects this shift in perspective from a focus on rectifying disabilities to inclusion and value (Samalot-Rivera et al., 2017). Inclusion, a movement in education aimed at increasing engagement of students with disabilities in general education programs and supporting their needs, is a key problem in the United States (An & Meaney, 2015). While the concept of inclusion is becoming more common, it is still controversial with parents, administrators (principals), special education, and physical education teachers criticizing it (Byrnes, 2002). Furthermore, when it comes to the inclusion of children with disabilities, Physical Education, like all other curriculum areas, continues to encounter new problems and opportunities (Kirk et al., 2006). Physical Education

teachers that want to implement a worthy Adapted Physical Education program for students with disabilities can be hampered by any number of variables such as limited supplies and equipment (LaFee, 2008). Attitudes, low expectations, and teacher apathy, according to many experts, are key challenges and major barriers to education for students with disabilities in Physical Education (Lieberman, Houston-Wilson, & Kozub, 2002). Lack of time, suitable programming, and budget issues are further obstacles to successful inclusion (Lieberman et al., 2006). On the other hand, students and educators can benefit from inclusion. For instance, students without disabilities can learn to accept individual diversity as well as obtain a different perspective on life's problems (Block, 2016).

2. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to answer the following questions:

- 1) What challenges and barriers do Adapted Physical Education (APE) teachers experience when including students with disabilities in general physical education?
- 2) What are the experiences of rural New Hampshire Public Schools' Adapted Physical Education (APE) teachers to implement and adapt their classes for students with special needs?

3. Methods

A design of study, according to Creswell (2013), has three components: research design, research methods, and inquiry strategies. A research design, according to him, is a proposal or plan for conducting research. Furthermore, a problem, a question, or apt topic is the beginning point for numerous research projects (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). A qualitative study is the research design that has been chosen. Qualitative research is a method of investigating and comprehending the meaning that groups or individuals attach to a human or social issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research allows the researcher to develop a more comprehensive, complete overview by analyzing words, reporting extensive participant perspectives, and conducting the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998).

Qualitative researchers frequently gather data in the field, at the location where participants are confronted with the problem or issue under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is frequently referred to as the natural setting. The setting for this study is rural New Hampshire, public schools, grades K-12, and Physical Education teachers that currently have students with special needs that are enrolled in the same classes alongside their non-disabled peers. Public charter schools and private schools are not part of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of the traditional public-school setting. In terms of Physical Education, the natural setting can include gyms, playgrounds, weight rooms, cafeterias, auditoriums, parks, and aquatic centers. The state of New Hampshire is divided into the following ten counties: Belknap, Carroll, Coos, Cheshire, Hillsborough, Merrimack, Rockingham, Strafford, and Sullivan. Within these ten counties there are

130 school districts, known as School Administrative Units (SAU) offices.

Randomized sampling was conducted to identify participants. In the random number method, the researcher first created a chart which listed all the rural public SAU's in New Hampshire alphabetically. The researcher then assigned every individual SAU a number. Using the random number generator, the researcher randomly picked a subset of the population. Specifically, the researcher used the random number function (RAND) in Microsoft Excel to generate the set of random numbers. In addition, Microsoft Excel uses the Mersenne Twister algorithm to generate random numbers.

Once the list was generated, the researcher started contacting the Superintendent and Principals via email at each of the rural School Administrative Units offices that were randomly selected, and they were asked to identify any Physical Education teachers in their school district that met the following criteria:

- 1) possess a valid New Hampshire teaching credential in Physical Education (PE);
- 2) have at least one year of Physical Education teaching experience in that SAU; and
- 3) have at least one student with a disability enrolled in a general physical education class.

The participants in this study were elementary, middle, and high school Physical Education teachers from rural New Hampshire public schools. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from one year to over 30 years. There were a total of 14 participants.

Setting: In New Hampshire's northern and western regions, the landscape is primarily rural (<https://www.nh.gov/municipal>, 2018). In contrast, the central, south-central, and southern regions of New Hampshire have the highest population densities (<http://www.nhes.nh.gov/elmi/products>, 2018). In addition, more than half of New Hampshire's schools are in rural areas (Showalter et al., 2017). The state of New Hampshire is distinctive because it has the motto "*Live Free or Die*". Although there are some places that are heavily inhabited, many of the villages and small communities still have a rural atmosphere. Subsequently, most of the Physical Education teachers in New Hampshire are employed in rural areas. Furthermore, rural schools frequently do not generate enough tax income to cover their costs (Norton & Bird, 2017). Hinsdale, Berlin, Derry, Claremont, Northfield, Allenstown, Charlestown, Franklin, Newport, Pittsfield, and Milan are among the rural school districts that have suffered financially (Norton & Bird, 2017). In addition, rural communities anticipate that school obligations will be fulfilled with little resources (Budge, 2006).

At the conclusion of the study, all audio recordings were permanently deleted. All paper copies of data collected were kept in a locked office for the duration of the study and destroyed by the author once the study was completed. To preserve the rights and privacy of participants, the researcher used honesty in reporting data, techniques, results, processes, and publishing status, as well as not falsifying,

fabricating, or misrepresenting the data.

To construct themes or categories in a study, researchers use triangulation, a validity technique in which they look for convergence among multiple and diverse sources of data (Creswell, 2014). The researcher employed triangulation to lessen bias, boost validity, and enhance credibility. Triangulation in this study consisted of document collection, observations, and a series of two interviews. This study used semi-structured interviews, in-person observations, and the collection of documents and artifacts such as the teachers' syllabus, lesson plans, and the schools/teacher's website. Furthermore, individual students were not identified in the process of collecting data.

Moreover, the researcher observed teachers of Physical Education that made use of skill modifications, modified equipment, and specific equipment tailored to the requirements of the student. For example, one of the participants in this study utilized a Physio-Roll Gymnic yellow fitness 21-3/4-inch ball, which served as the perfect size for strength and balance training. The ball treatment was accessible to students of all ages and with any disability because the Physio-Roll's saddle-like seat offered stability, comfort, and confidence. Another PE teacher stated the best approach to teach juggling to students of all ages is using juggling scarves. By this PE teacher utilizing this modified equipment, juggling was used by the PE teacher to develop focus and hand-eye coordination, which they stated is a crucial component of almost any comprehensive elementary physical education program. In addition, several documents were collected from Physical Education teachers in rural public schools across the state of New Hampshire, which included lesson plans, unit plans, and course syllabuses. Each participant was interviewed two times; the first interview was conducted in-person and the second interview online via Zoom.

The coding strategy used for post interview analysis was derived from Saldaña (2021). This process includes, first, transcribing the conversation from the interview, and then use the coding technique developed by Saldaña (2021) of in vivo. The first step involved with in vivo coding consists of chronologically listing, clustering, and an outlining of codes (Saldaña, 2021). The second cycle coding methods included focused coding. Focused coding involves clustered codes that are integrated into their categories. In a phenomenological research study, this is an effective approach of coding the interview since it aids the researcher in summarizing the data, detecting themes and patterns while prioritizing and honoring the participants voice (Saldaña, 2021).

4. Results

This phenomenological study focused on grades K-12 in rural New Hampshire public schools. The lived experiences of 14 Physical Education teachers working in rural public schools in New Hampshire were examined utilizing qualitative research methods. There was a significant gap in the research that currently exists in Physical Education and Adapted Physical Education, especially in rural New

Hampshire public schools.

The study results showed that rural public school Physical Education teachers experienced many of the same barriers and challenges when it comes to including students with disabilities in general physical education classes. The participants in the study reported that their biggest barriers were adequate physical space, limited equipment, no funding or financial support, lack of paraprofessional help in the classroom, oversized classes, and specific challenges when working with students that have Social Emotional Learning disabilities. Physical Education teachers also reported that managing paraprofessionals, behavior management, and time management are some of their most challenging obstacles. Several of the participants in this study stated that they only could work with students in Physical Education class once a week, and if there is a holiday on the date they meet those students, it could be up to two weeks without students receiving Physical Education.

One participant specifically stated that their three biggest barriers were time, paraprofessional support, and non-disabled students that have negative attitudes towards the students in the class that have disabilities. Another participant stated, "All right, so I'll be brutally honest. I'm going to tell you everything, so let's start with lack of paraprofessional support. We'll start there. Um, you know there's a shortage in the country of all educators right now. That shortage, I know, is affecting everyone and not just PE, but we'll start there because it's a fact that there's classes that come in with special needs students with no paraprofessional educator support that might have one in other places, but they don't necessarily always come to PE. The paraprofessional with that class or with that kid might get pulled to another classroom somewhere else for the 40 minutes that kid comes to PE." Another participant remarked that the administrators (i.e., superintendent, principal, assistant principal, and special education director) at their school think there is a sort of mindset that students with special needs will just be fine in Physical Education because it is PE, and they can be active.

Another participant stated that she emphasizes to the students in her class on a regular basis that they need to be accepting of other students in the class that have disabilities and limitations. Participant "F" stated that this can be a struggle as a Physical Education teacher. She suggested that if she has somebody in class with autism, for example, and nobody wants to be their partner and nobody can get along because they cannot necessarily keep up or play at their level. Therefore, she insists that instead of having kids pick their own teams for games, since some students will not be willing to step up and work with a student that has a disability. She stated that she makes it a priority to explain to the student, so that they understand that we must make this change, and still, sometimes the students still do not really get it or understand the reasoning behind being paired and partnered up with a student that has a disability. Educators today understand the importance of improving students' learning chances through peer work and group projects that promote a deeper understanding of varied learner populations (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. A rural Physical Education (PE) teacher in New Hampshire has the field and equipment set-up for students to play Spaghetti and Meatballs. The students used modified hockey sticks to hit the foam balls out of the hula hoops.

Some of the participants in this study reported that they have never had any issues with funding or obtaining equipment that they need to serve the needs of students with disabilities in their Physical Education classes. Many of the participants in this study have experience using modified equipment and modifying the rules of the game. Participant “D” used an adjustable Multi-Ring basketball stand for kids of various sizes and abilities, which was ideal for students in a wheelchair. Moreover, the metal stand had three exterior hoops with adjustable heights and one central hoop, which made it perfect for both indoor and outdoor gross motor exercises. However, one participant in the study stated that the lack of funding and financial resources has resulted in her inability to purchase and obtain proper and necessary equipment for students with disabilities in her class. Moreover, during this study, the researcher during interviews and observations noticed that Physical Education teachers are empathetic towards their students, which enabled them to connect to them and demonstrate to them that they are aware of their lives outside of school. In addition, it was apparent that Physical Education teachers take pleasure in what they do and the students they work with are encouraged to continue doing it because it makes them happy. One participant stated, “Being able to improve a student’s life is a reward in and of itself”. Ultimately, Physical Education teachers could give back to others and the community while working under humanistic commitment.

5. Conclusion/Implication

The idea that physical activity and exercise are good for everyone, even those with

limited mobility and disabilities, led to the necessity for Physical Education programming for all students in public schools. Supporting fitness in rural public schools is mostly dependent on the creation of programming that takes into account the involvement of all students by the Physical Education teacher. However, the creation of programming that promotes physical activity and fitness at a challenging level while incorporating adaptation for learners who need adapted ways to participate is one of the issues facing Physical Education teachers in New Hampshire.

All the Physical Education teachers in this study stated that they have adequate and sufficient administrative support (superintendent and principal); however, many of the PE teachers faced barriers and challenges when trying to work with students who have Social Emotional Learning (SEL) disabilities and behavioral issues.

“Um, and we, we know it’s not always because of their disability, but sometimes, sometimes it is, is they, they’re not realizing the social cues around them, um, or things like that. So those are kind of the ones that I find more struggling.” (Participant 2)

The research found that paraprofessional support is lacking, and, in some cases, it is completely non-existent in the PE classroom. Several of the participants in this study suggested that paraprofessionals need more training in Adapted Physical Education to better help students with disabilities in PE class.

“Those are the things that matter the most, that’s the hardest part with time trying to cram a lot into a little time, but having to slow down to take care of that, uh, the para support would be more helpful, um, in those instances. And I wouldn’t, I’m going to add on to that having paras, uh, trained better.” (Participant 1)

One participant stated that sixth graders at their school do not attend Physical Education for the entire school year due to a lack of staffing and scheduling conflicts.

“Yeah, so the sixth-grade class doesn’t have PE um, because of the UA schedule, and they need to take guidance as a sixth grader, which is kind of like the DARE program. Um, they get one UA bump each year. So sixth graders just happen to not have PE whereas like eighth graders don’t have, uh, music or bands. So unfortunately, the sixth graders do not have PE with me.” (Participant 3)

7. Future Recommendations

The numerous and persistent challenges and barriers here require further investigation to identify their core causes and take action to remove or decrease them. Several of the participants in this study cited lack of paraprofessional support as a key barrier to effectively teaching Physical Education to students with disabilities.

In some cases, the Physical Education teacher had no assistant teacher or paraprofessional in the class to help facilitate activities and help with engaging students in the class, even though several participants stated that they had “adequate” administrative support from their superintendent and principals at their schools. Many of the participants contributed the “adequate” administrative support to having support when dealing with behavioral issues in the PE class and when it comes to obtaining necessary equipment and supplies for PE. In the same vein, some of the participants in this study asserted that it would be extremely helpful if paraprofessionals and assistant teachers attended and completed professional development and training on how to effectively assist Physical Education teachers in class when there is a student with a disability present. One participant suggested that school districts pay paraprofessionals more money, and stated, “There are high school students working at Dunkin Donuts that make more than our paraprofessionals here at our school.”

Future research on this subject must collect data that considers the nature of factors and the effects of identifying outcomes related to the ideas of success and failure for specific disabilities in Physical Education, sampling participants from urban and suburban areas of New Hampshire, and studies that look at residential, private, and charter schools in New Hampshire. Moreover, future research needs to examine the disparaging reality when it comes to financial resources that are available to rural school districts in New Hampshire due to property tax and the ways in which schools have the resources to hire experienced and educated staff (i.e., Physical Education teachers and Paraprofessionals). The training and professional development of teachers may also be the subject of future recommendations and studies. Moreover, examining participants in New Hampshire that already have obtained their Certified Adapted Physical Educator (CAPE) license could potentially provide insight into specific knowledge and skills obtained from obtaining their CAPE certification. Perhaps, teachers will have the knowledge and assurance to modify their instruction to meet the requirements of physically challenged children and students that have Social Emotional Learning (SEL) disabilities once they become Certified Adapted Physical Educators and earn this credential.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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