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Canadian Disability Participation Project



The CDPP is an alliance of university, public, private and government sector partners working together to enhance community participation among Canadians with physical disabilities. The research team for this project has expertise in health behaviour change and the psychology of physical activity, children with disabilities, and inclusive physical education.



Strategies to Support Teachers Who Deliver Inclusive Physical Education Classes

Teaching is already a dynamic and complex task. Adding to the complexity is that education policy-makers and administrators are increasingly requesting teachers to lead classes that are inclusive to students with a wide range of disabilities. This includes physical education classes and programs. For some physical education teachers, this is a new challenge—one they may not necessarily feel confident about meeting due to lack of knowledge and training.

The problem appears to have a two-part solution. The first is ensuring that there are high quality, standardized inclusive physical education teacher training resources and opportunities available. Many of these resources exist, and more are being developed all the time. The development and existence of these resources are beyond the scope of this brief.

The second part of the solution, which is addressed in this brief, is to stress the need for school administrators and educational policy makers to create supportive environments for teachers who are striving to learn about and embrace inclusive physical activity. Recently, a group of Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP) researchers set out to gain a better understanding of how this can be best achieved.

The researchers analyzed the most up-to-date theory about how to best prepare teachers with the knowledge and tools they need to effectively provide inclusive physical education. They also assessed an existing inclusive physical education teacher training resource. And they engaged with teachers to understand factors that both enhance and impede their use of training resources.

Based on the insights gained through this work, the researchers developed some strategies about how to best support teachers working in inclusive physical education so that they can acquire the tools they need to provide a richer and more meaningful experience for students with disabilities.

What exactly does inclusive physical education mean?

When we talk about inclusive physical education, we're referring to opportunities for students with disabilities to learn, engage, and participate in general physical education classes alongside their non-disabled peers^{1,2}. To be effective and meaningful, these opportunities must be structured so that each child with a disability is engaged in a supportive and encouraging environment, with physical activities being modified and adapted as required to meet each child's differing needs.

Why is inclusive physical education important?

There is a large body of evidence that underscores the power of physical activity participation for children with disabilities^{3,4}. However, we also know

that children with disabilities commonly face barriers to physical activity participation⁵ and, in turn, are not sufficiently active to reap the full benefits of physical activity⁶.

School-based physical activity, such as inclusive physical education classes, is increasingly being thought of as one of the most effective ways to address and remove barriers to participation^{7,8}. Inclusive physical education provides an opportunity for all students to participate in physical activity within a structured environment⁸. Properly implemented, inclusive physical education has the potential to support the three domains of learning--cognitive, psychomotor, and affective^{2,9,10}, as well as make distinct improvements to the overall health and well-being of children with disabilities¹¹.





What is the role of the teacher?

Teachers play a critical, front line role in facilitating inclusive physical education. Teachers are agents of change and work to make educational philosophy and policy, such as inclusive physical education, a reality within the classroom¹².

However, the inclusion of children with disabilities in physical education classes has proven to be a challenge¹³. Many teachers express an “overwhelmingly strong pattern of either negative feelings or uncertainty toward inclusion.”¹⁴

Teachers themselves have called for better training opportunities so that they’re able to more confidently and successfully implement and lead inclusive physical education opportunities for students with disabilities.

How can we support teachers who are learning about and implementing inclusive physical education?

Effective inclusive physical education teaching practices are multifaceted and complex. Therefore, effective training initiatives to support these practices, grounded in both theory and real world experience, are complex, and it takes time and effort for teachers to identify and utilize them to maximum benefit. Given this, it stands to reason that schools and boards should create environments that support and encourage teachers to learn about and utilize the best training resources and opportunities, so that they can in turn best support and benefit students with disabilities in an inclusive physical education setting.

Considering the need to understand teacher training from a broad vantage point, the CDPP researchers conducted a series of projects in order to identify theory-based strategies that contribute to the success of teachers meeting the challenge of learning about and implementing inclusive physical education. The researchers have categorized these strategies into two streams: ensuring high quality and easy access to teacher training resources, and creating an overall supportive school environment that encourages and assists teachers to embrace inclusivity. These are summarized in the following infographic, and provide some direction for the future development of inclusive physical education resources, and for school staff and administrations to consider when seeking to assist teachers who are leading inclusive physical education classes.

Note that we recognize that funding for inclusive physical education, including professional development opportunities, is sparse^{15, 16} and as such, should be allocated in a cost-effective fashion. The strategies outlined below are suggested approaches to support teachers’ implementation of inclusive physical education. Creating and providing teacher training interventions that consider and prioritize theoretical determinants of behaviour change will yield a better return on investment.

Strategies to Provide Teachers with High Quality and Easy Access to Training Resources

Online Platforms

Create a centralized website or online platform that would allow teachers to quickly and efficiently locate information relevant to their needs. Example: specific ways to modify activities based on students' varying abilities.

Links to Other Resources

Supporting teachers and facilitating learning opportunities by providing suggestions or pathways to other resources. Teacher training resources should connect teachers to other learning resources (e.g., workshops, online content) as well as facilitate connections between teachers and community resources (e.g., Special Olympics, ParaSport)

Specific Content

Provide content on how to modify and/or adapt games and activities to meet the needs of the student and classroom environment. Example: suggest a variety of suitable activity variations (e.g., equipment, rules, cues, transition times) so that all students have an opportunity engage in meaningful participation.

Dissemination

Leverage professional networks and communication channels as a means of resource dissemination. Examples: work to promote teacher training resources to educational leaders (e.g., principals, vice principals, department heads) as a means to influence classroom teachers' adoption.

Strategies to Create an Overall Supportive Environment for Inclusive Physical Education Teachers

Social Influence

Creating and facilitating opportunities for teachers to share information, share resources, and collaborate. Examples: develop professional networks, create inter and intra-school communication networks, develop community partnerships. Teachers and administrators should seek to create and foster Education Action Zones, personal learning networks/communities, and/or vertical teams.

Professional Identity

Supporting and encouraging teachers to realize that they play an integral role in helping all students lead a healthy and balanced lifestyle that includes physical activity. Examples: enshrine principles of inclusivity in the school's philosophy, values and mandate. The school improvement plan is a living document and a mechanism through which schools can create a strategy for inclusive physical education and evaluate progress.

Memory, Attention, and Decision Making

Ensuring that the school is providing enhanced learning opportunities for teachers in order to help reinforce concepts and ideas related to inclusive physical education. Examples: provide teachers with opportunities where they engage in the practice of retrieving information and rehearsing different inclusive strategies. Providing training opportunities that incorporate peer instruction, think-pair-share activities, and/or "just in time teaching" may work to facilitate teachers' retrieval of inclusive pedagogy.

Knowledge

Providing practical opportunities for teachers to learn and apply techniques to modify and adapt physical activity, particularly for students with complex needs. Examples: provide teachers with ability to enhance their knowledge through hands-on workshops and other professional development opportunities. Identify the value of creating action plans. Action planning can help teachers put their vision (inclusive physical education) into practice.

In Summary

Meaningful participation in physical education, and physical activity in general, are important for the improved health and overall well-being of children with disabilities. We believe it's vital that, in order to see more positive attitudes and teaching efficacy when it comes to inclusive physical education, our education systems must create supportive environments that allow and encourage teachers to learn about and make the most of inclusive physical education knowledge acquisition and training opportunities. Through understanding and developing ways to better assist teachers in the implementation of inclusive physical education, we believe that greater participation in physical education by children with disabilities, and all of its benefits, is achievable.

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