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Beyond the Playground: Challenges in Physical Education (PE) for Students with Additional Needs. A case Study Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted challenges encountered among students with additional needs in physical education (PE) classes. This study explored the various experiences of six students with additional needs who were subjected to semi-structured interviews in the physical education class participation at the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology. The findings revealed two sub-themes: barriers to physical activity, which can be categorized as physical activity limitations and disability-related academic barriers, and psychosocial barriers, which include self-worth struggle and social exclusion in physical education (PE) classes. These barriers highlight the need for inclusive and adaptable physical education programs that cater the diverse needs of all students and create an atmosphere where everyone may actively engage and derive benefits from participating in physical education. Future studies should prioritize exploring educational interventions that effectively break down these challenges to enhance attitudes toward disabilities and promote social inclusion for students with additional needs.

INTRODUCTION

Physical education (PE) was identified as a particularly challenging setting since it was the source of more than 75% of the negative experiences of persons with disabilities (O'Connor & McNabb, 2020). Recent studies have investigated the difficulties experienced by learners with additional needs in PE classes such as lack of theory and practical experience for teachers on inclusion within schools (McGrath *et al.*, 2019), problems facing adapted PE teachers in conducting lessons through the Internet which is affected by Covid-19 (Ramezanejad *et al.*, 2022), multiple and diverse students groups across different schools (Hodge, 2019), the ability to motivate and support learners with disabilities, lack of PE teachers' preparedness, no curriculum to support the teachers, and absence of professional support from education departments (Kassaw, 2017). Moreover, challenges in integrated learning strategies in PE training programs that have been noted include lack of structure in teaching methodologies as well as little collaboration among students (Navarro *et al.*, 2021). These concerns highlight the need to enhance the quality and quantity of teacher training, ensuring the accessibility and usage of appropriate resources, and supporting the inclusion of students with additional needs and their integration into physical education classes.

The feeling of inclusion substantially impacts the engagement of students with disabilities in PE classes (Pendergast *et al.*, 2018). Students with identified special learning needs, especially those with learning disabilities, experience difficulties in social relations, communication,

and acceptance (Arroyo-Rojas & Hodge, 2023). Inadequate satisfaction of the need for belongingness can have adverse consequences for students, such as affecting their intellectual performance and limiting their ability to reach full learning potential. These unpleasant experiences frequently involved emotions of exclusion, failures, and the impression of not being heard. Students with disabilities may feel outcast in PE due to barriers such as lack of accommodations, teacher factor influence, and socialization, affecting their overall experience in PE classes (Holland & Haegele, 2021).

Students' sense of belonging in their classrooms was enhanced when they perceived that their peers possessed knowledge and comprehension of them, and when they received both academic and emotional assistance from their peers (Hoi *et al.*, 2024; Adugna *et al.*, 2024). Confidence, which also has an impact on students' performance in school, it usually help boost their self-beliefs in acquiring the right skills to meet their goals, a sense of control in their lives, their actions, and their expectations to perform things that is expected them to do (Navarro *et al.*, 2021).

Physical Education classes are integral to education since they enable children to develop their physical, social, and emotional skills. Although these classes are advantageous in helping all learners, students with special needs may encounter unique challenges when participating (O'Connor & McNabb, 2020; Asola & Obiakor, 2016). Coping can also be an issue due to several factors, such as the environment in which the classroom is conducted, the methods applied in teaching, and the perception of

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peers. This study aims to explore the specific challenges encountered by students with additional needs (SWAN) in participating in physical education classes, drawing upon relevant scholarly sources to provide insights and recommendations for addressing these issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Participation of Students with Special Needs in Physical Education

People with special needs often face unique challenges when they try to engage in sports and physical activities, especially in physical education (PE) classes (Darcy, 2019; McConkey *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, inclusive practices have been pushed as a way to offer a wide range of educational services and make sure that all students, no matter their background or skills, have the same chances. A persistent difference has been found in the experiences of students with physical disabilities in physical education environments that are open to everyone (Sunday, 2018). They may feel like they belong, be able to participate well, and enjoy the benefits of physical exercise on good days. Negative days may result in social isolation, competency questions, and limited participation (Adugna *et al.*, 2024; Asola & Obiakor, 2016).

Empowering individuals with special needs to participate in Physical Education (PE) classes provides numerous benefits for their physical, emotional, and social growth. Studies suggest that implementing physical education (PE) programmes can improve social interaction skills, increase involvement in physical activities, and strengthen locomotor movements in students with disabilities. This can promote independence, develop coping capacities, generate competitiveness, and encourage teamwork (Mawena & Sorkpor, 2024; Furrer, 2023). Moreover, the implementation of inclusive education in physical education settings can enhance the social and emotional growth of children with special education needs (Ralić & Marković, 2024). This approach focuses on fostering relationship skills and promoting positive thinking, while also addressing specific areas such as goal-oriented behaviour and self-control for further enhancement. In addition, inclusive physical education (PE) environments are essential for fostering social involvement and acceptance. However, there are still obstacles in terms of limited social connections and acceptability, particularly for students with intellectual disabilities (Furrer, 2023). Active involvement in physical education programmes not only enhances physical abilities but also fosters crucial social and emotional skills that are essential for the comprehensive growth of individuals with special needs. Teachers have a vital role in promoting inclusive physical education by comprehending legal frameworks, modifying programmes, and collaborating with education experts to accurately interpret rules (Borges, 2023). Inclusion of children with physical disabilities in Physical Education Classes has become a big area of concern in the sector of education (Asola & Obiakor, 2016). This affirmed that

these students are bound to encounter some of these barriers which would make them to either withdraw or be partially withdrawn from their fellow classmates (Asola & Obiakor, 2016; Sunday, 2018). To address this issue, scholars, educators, and governmental organizations have called for the integration and adoption of the principle of inclusion in education (Asola & Obiakor, 2016; Bossaert *et al.*, 2013). It is to ensure that children with physical disabilities and health impairments in the PE class have an opportunity to be fully involved and included in a natural way. Physical education teachers implement an adaptable teaching method that entails integration of assistive technology into teaching, and encouraging students to participate through encouraging inclusion of teaching approaches, and teaching techniques that are special to them.

Barriers Experienced of Student with Special Needs in PE

Students with disabilities are faced with numerous challenges when they are undertaking physical education or PE lessons. The challenges faced by teaching teams regarding the implementation of adapted physical education (APE) services include the following: inadequate appreciation and investment on the part of the special education team; scarcity of qualified APE personnel; the challenge of cultural appreciation of, and resource allocation to, APE; PE teachers' limited training and knowledge on how to fully include students with disabilities; insufficient resources and support in teaching students with mobility impairment; and disruptions in learning environment when teaching students with special needs (McNamara *et al.*, 2024; Benzinger *et al.*, 2022; Owusu *et al.*, 2024). Such barriers highlight the complex and systemic challenges which explain why students with special needs cannot be fully included and accommodated in physical education programmes. This underlines the need to make people more aware of the status, teach them better, encourage them to join and support the movement to create a better PE environment for everyone who would like to engage in this area (Asola & Obiakor, 2016; Owusu *et al.*, 2024). In the study conducted by Thekethe & Ogonnaya (2024), it was noted that Physically Challenged Learners (PCLs) face some forms of barriers that limit their effective involvement in practical PE classes. Such barriers include limited access to equipment, decreased social support, limitations in the current PE curriculum/programme, and PE teachers' lack of knowledge on how to deliver effective physical education for PCLs.

In the Philippines, learners with disabilities face several challenges that hinder them from effectively and efficiently engaging in physical education activities (Borges, 2023). These barriers include teachers' attitudes towards integration, lack of preparedness of special education instructors on fitness testing and incorporation of physical activity in their lessons, and need for enhancement of

implementation of adapted physical education to embrace their practices in sports and fitness (Tolentino *et al.*, 2022; Benzinger *et al.*, 2022). Thus, while studying, resources and equipment are scarce, and the number of appropriate activities and evaluations for students with disabilities is restricted, preventing them from fully participating in the tasks of physical education courses (McNamara *et al.*, 2024; Benzinger *et al.*, 2022). To eliminate these challenges, measures should be taken towards enhancing teachers' training needs, enhancing the integration processes and providing for appropriate facilities and accommodations to allow a child with special needs to fully participate in the physical education activities. Studies have shown that successful learners with special educational needs (LSEs) possess a good level of knowledge and behavior while the teachers moderately perceive their attitude and skills (Vistar *et al.*, 2024). However, some barriers like, physical access barrier, lack of specialized equipment and facilities and inadequate infrastructure are the barriers of educating students with disability in physical education class (Alberto *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, how teachers' perceptions and acceptance of students with disabilities has a big impact on how well inclusion works. As a result, teachers need more training and help in recognizing and preventing these issues (Sari *et al.*, 2023). Differentiated and fair teaching methods are needed for all students, but they are especially important for disabled students because they need to be able to attend and be part of all classes, including gymnasium classes (Tianio *et al.*, 2022). Understanding the experiences of students with additional needs in physical education classes is essential for the purpose of establishing more inclusive and easily accessible learning. Thus, this research study aims to explore the challenges of students with additional needs (SWAN) in physical education class. This study will utilize pertinent scholarly sources to offer insights and ideas for effectively addressing these concerns.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design

This current research employed an exploratory case study research method, which is a qualitative research method that aims at describing experiences and other phenomena. It delves into understanding the experiences, meaning, and phenomena through a descriptive, non-numerical lens. For this study, the research approach is a qualitative one, hence comprising structured, but naturally semi-structured interviews that provide insights as to the sorts of barriers that SWAN students experience when participating in PE lessons. The interviews for this study will be conducted in the participants' homes and will be audio-taped and transcribed.

Participants

The participants of this study were six students in MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology based on the

following criteria: (1) they must be a student of MSU-IIT, (2) Must be a person with disabilities (PWD) or someone with additional needs (SWAN), (3) and have successfully completed the physical education course. Before gathering the data from them, researchers ensured that the participants had an idea of the study. The data was collected using both in-person interviews and online via google meet. The researchers employed purposive sampling to pick participants according to specific criteria.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, a panel of experts conducted a thorough examination of the interview questionnaire guide and made necessary adjustments to its language and sequence, taking into consideration the objective of the study. The survey was administered both online and in-person, and participants were given informed consent forms prior to their participation in the study. The questionnaire guide highlighted the study's objective, as well as the rights of the participants and the importance of data confidentiality. In addition, the participants were not restricted or given any limitations on the questions they may ask regarding the study. The researcher had constant access in order to assist and enhance their responses to the items. Therefore, the researchers took into careful consideration the respondents' availability, time preference, and comfort.

Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis; a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes within data, in which the responses will be coded and then will be themed to come up with a result and conclusion.

(1) The data information set will be familiarized and actively observed for meaning and patterns.

(2) When the patterns are understood, it will be then initially coded based on the common responses from the participants.

(3) When the analyzed information is coded, it will be then classified and sorted for a potential theme and backed up with supporting points for the claim.

(4) A narrative form analysis will be constructed to the theme for the claim and point presented.

RESULTS

The researchers discovered that students with additional needs (SWAN) faced numerous problems and difficulties in participating in PE class and engaging with material due to their condition. Upon presentation and analysis of the data, the researchers detected four recruiting patterns in the answers and responses of the subjects under study. The primary objective of this study was to explore various challenges that students with additional needs face in PE classes. The following table is a framework that displays the data of the individuals involved in this research.

Table 1: Background Information of the Participants

Pseudonym	Year and Course	Condition
Louie	3 rd Year Bachelor of Physical Education	Hearing Impairment
Renalyn	4 th Year BS Chemistry	Orthopedic Disability
Mica	4 th year BS- Entrepreneurship	Congenital Limb Deficiency
Ronan	3 rd Year BS- Computer Science	Orthopedic Disability & Dwarfism
David	2 nd Year BS- Entrepreneurship	Orthopedic Disability
Regino	4 th Year AB FILIPINO	Orthopedic Disability

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Sub themes	Categories	Sample Codes
Challenges Experienced among students with additional needs	Barriers to Physical Activity	Physical Activity limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitation to perform exercise and sport activities • Difficulty in performing the activity • Incapable of executing physical activity • Unable to execute exercise
		Disability-Related academic barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability hinders the performance • Disability affected my engagement in PE class • Disability hinders me to catch up from the discussion • Disability affected grades in class participation
	Psychosocial Barriers	Self-worth struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-confidence • Feeling low of myself • Envious feeling • Feeling disappointed to myself • Slowly losing motivation to attend classes • Easily get tired
		Social exclusion in PE Classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling awkward to perform physical activity • Feeling of not belong in the class • Feeling Lonely during class • Feeling excluded in class • Feeling ashamed to my classmates • I feel isolated • Feeling different from others

Table 2 highlights various themes and subthemes that present the challenges experienced by students with additional needs in PE activities. Barriers to physical activity is one of the primary subthemes, which consists of the obstacles related to the physical inactivity like difficulty to perform the activities and inability to adequately perform the exercises. Another category is disability-related academic barriers, highlighting how disability reduces achievement and motivation in PE classes, limits one's capacity to contribute to discussions, and impacts academic achievement due to inactivity. Another sub theme of psychosocial barriers is based on the conflicts of self-esteem, where the person seldom feels confident, disappointed, and envious, seldom motivated to attend classes and gets easily tired. The issue of social exclusion in PE classes highlights the social dimension of these challenges. It involves experiencing a lack of coordination in physical activities, a sense of being excluded, feelings of isolation, rejection, and embarrassment, as well as a constant awareness of being out of sync with others. In aggregate, these themes embody the essence and complex overlap of the physical,

intellectual, emotional, and societal obstacles encountered in PE settings, particularly among individuals with disabilities or those facing significant psychosocial challenges.

DISCUSSIONS

Barriers to Physical Activity

Barriers to physical activity, specifically in PE, arise from a range of interconnected restrictions that significantly impact an individual's participation and performance. One notable barrier is the physical activity limitations, which encompasses inability to perform exercises and difficulties in participating in physical activities. These restrictions may be due to physical disability, some health conditions or any other body-related conditions that limit movement and energy. These challenges make it difficult to effectively participate in physical education programs hence developing feelings of dissatisfaction, decreased physical fitness, and a lack of interest in physical activity (Rojo-Ramos *et al.*, 2023). It is common for persons with disabilities to have restrictions in PA and this include Physical Education (PE) classes. Challenges reveal that

those with disability exhibit lesser intensity in physical activities than those with no disability (Carr *et al.*, 2023). These constraints can also contribute to a sedentary way of life, which is linked to several health conditions, such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and reduced general welfare (Asola & Obiakor, 2016).

“I think, the aspect that i want to improve is, for example like me that is incapable of doing some physical activities, if there is a PE class, we want to have our own designated activities, and for me, I feel like it was unfair because, the thing I only have to do is just to standby and my other classmates are doing the said activities, and it was very unfair because I feel like I don’t belong, so yeah.”

The incapacity to carry out physical activities proficiently not only affects bodily well-being but also reduces the chance for social engagement and skill enhancement generally acquired from sports and exercise (Hoi *et al.*, 2024). Various research focuses on the idea of inclusive PE classes and modified activities for students with disabilities so that they could feel active and self-sufficient (Hutzler & Choresh, 2023; Tianio *et al.*, 202; Lobo *et al.*, 2022). The characteristics of physical activity exhibited by individuals with disabilities, along with the duration of the activity, will facilitate the completion integration of students with such disabilities in physical education classes. Interventions aimed at expanding chances for disabled individuals to participate in physical activities within educational settings are crucial for overcoming barriers and promoting sustained participation.

Moreover, disability-related academic barriers are one of the challenges encountered by students with special needs in PE settings. These barriers include insufficient training for teachers (Alves *et al.*, 2022), difficulties in modifying PE activities to accommodate the needs of disabled students (Tiano *et al.*, 2022), and the existence of ableism in PE classes, which hampers the complete integration of disabled students (Alves *et al.*, 2022).

“...is just like that there are times that we do have an activity, I can’t do it, and I can’t achieve it, then sometimes it can cause what we call cramps”

Disabilities affect students’ performance and participation in PE classes, which challenges class discussions and activities (Holland & Haegele, 2021). As a result, the students stand to perform poorly in his or her academics. These barriers cause feelings of isolation and stigmatization as students with disabilities will always feel as if they cannot perform their best like other students. This exclusion can also worsen one’s low self-esteem and loneliness, which, in turn, discourage anyone from engaging in any physical activities. Students with physical disabilities in PE classes encounter academics. Inadequate resources and training for teachers, along with the absence of a supportive physical education (PE) environment, create barriers for students with mobility issues to participate in PE activities (Benzinger *et al.*, 2022). The presence of these barriers emphasizes the immediate necessity for a change in viewpoints and enhanced teacher education. and the creation of a

comprehensive curriculum and settings to promote the academic engagement and involvement of students with disabilities in PE classes.

“Sometimes I wonder if I want to go to school. Because I still have nothing to do. That’s the way it is, then I go to school if there is a given task but it’s for the sake of attendance and then for belongingness.”

Studies have highlighted the major challenges faced by students with additional needs in Physical Education (PE) classes, including physical activity limitations and disability-related academic barriers. Studies have shown that students with physical impairments encounter challenges when participating in PE classes. These students require tailored instructional needs and testing accommodations (Lobo *et al.*, 2022; Tianio *et al.* 2022). Moreover, women who have physical disabilities have distinct barriers when it comes to participating in sports and physical activities. This highlights the significance of creating an inclusive social climate that encourages their involvement (Olasagasti-Ibargoien *et al.*, 2023). The lack of pre-service training for PE teachers is a hindrance to the integration of impaired students in PE classroom settings. This emphasized a deficiency in adequately equipping educators to effectively assist students with impairments (Alves *et al.*, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers individuals’ unique requirements, promotes inclusive environments, and provides specialized training for teachers. This will help to ensure fair and equal participation in physical education (Shaw & Stoll, 2023).

Psychosocial Barriers

Psychosocial barriers in the context of physical education (PE) are complex and have a profound impact on students’ mental and emotional well-being as well as their capacity to engage in physical activities (Wang, 2019). Out of all these barriers, the Self-Worth Struggle refers to students’ inability to maintain good self-esteem, feelings of self- failure, and jealousy with regard to other students who do not experience such difficulties. These negative self-perceptions decrease opportunities of practicing and promote a diminished interest in attending PE classes and other physical activities progressively (Tanure Alves *et al.*, 2022). This withdrawal is usually compounded by the feeling of tiredness and as such there will be little or no energy to participate in the required physical exercises. Thus, the challenge of having low self-worth not only negatively affects physical well-being but also exacerbates other aspects of students’ academic life, leading to withdrawal from other various aspects of school life (Marlina & Kusumastuti, 2019; McNamara *et al.*, 2024).

“Yes, because it’s a part of me that’s somewhat disappointed, like it feels like losing motivation, but I just shrug it off, you know. I try to think positively that at least I got that grade instead of a smaller one.”

Students with special needs often experience issues with self-worth when participating in physical education (PE) class activities (Wang, 2019; Tanure Alves *et al.*, 2021).

Factors such as disability, self-efficacy, physical obstacles in the environment, and teacher and peer support all have a positive or negative impact on the implementation of the inclusion of students with special needs in PE activities (Wang, 2019). The view of inclusion among these students is perceived negatively, thus limiting engagement in PE activities (Wang, 2019; Tanure Alves *et al.*, 2021). Teachers need to be aware of the difficulties that students with disabilities may experience and intervene in a way that would help enhance the students' self-confidence and involvement in PE classes (Lobo *et al.*, 2022). Schools and governments can enhance the independence and confidence of students with special needs in PE lessons by removing physical obstacles in the environment, providing trained teachers for adequate support, and offering teaching aids (Wang, 2019).

“Sometimes I wonder if I want to go to school. Because I still have nothing to do. That’s the way it is, then I go to school if there is a given task but it’s for the sake of attendance and then for belongingness.”

The second psychosocial barrier is social exclusion during PE classes, the experience of discomfort, loneliness and the feeling that one does not belong (Ralić & Marković, 2024). These feelings are usually as a result of perceiving themselves to be different from other children in some way, thus these children experience shame as well as loneliness during physical activities. While such exclusion can be generalized, it is worse when they feel formally excluded or singled out by class colleagues, as shown to significantly impact the overall health of human beings emotionally and psychologically (Niemi & Vehkakoski, 2023). Experiences of exclusion and isolation can have a discouraging effect on students, leading to their reluctance to engage in physical education. This, in turn, deprives them of the various physical, social, and emotional advantages that regular physical activity offers (Tanure Alves *et al.*, 2022). The consequences of such psychosocial barriers are considerable since such tendencies can result in lifelong avoidance of PA and related threats (Furrer, 2023; Klenk *et al.*, 2023; Rojo-Ramos *et al.*, 2023).

“I think, I’m hoping that if they have or if the professor knows that they have handled a student with additional needs is at least they get something like PE that is not tough for me”

Research evidence indicates that students with intellectual disabilities suffer from low levels of social contact and acceptance more so than their peers without this disability even in integrated PE programs (Furrer, 2023; Klenk *et al.*, 2023). This affiliation is supported by the finding on the individual reference norm orientation of the PE teacher and teaching cooperative norms, which facilitates social acceptance and interaction with a view of children with intellectual disabilities (Furrer, 2023; Niemi & Vehkakoski, 2023). To eliminate these barriers, there is a need to encourage and facilitate the integration of school culture that fosters acceptance to accommodate

these students in PE classes and participate in the classes as should be expected. While the physical domain encompasses the changes to the content and context of any movement according to the needs of each student, including addressing physical and developmental disabilities, the psychosocial domain includes providing ways for the students to accept their counterparts, as well as supporting each other if they fail to manage psychosocial problems adequately.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight notable challenges to engaging in physical activity within PE environments, highlighting both the physical and psychosocial dimensions. Students face substantial challenges in their physical health due to its limits in physical activity, such as inability to carry out activities effectively. These limitations result in less engagement and adverse effects on their overall well-being. Disability-related academic barriers further complicate the challenge by limiting participation and performance in physical education activities, leading to feelings of exclusion and marginalization. Psychosocial barriers, such as self-worth struggle and social exclusion in PE classes, exacerbate these difficulties, leading to emotional distress and further demotivation to engage in physical activity. These barriers highlight the need for inclusive and adaptable physical education programs that cater the diverse needs of all students. Such programs aim to create an atmosphere where everyone may actively engage and derive benefits from participating in physical education. Addressing these challenges requires implementing educational initiatives to enhance attitudes toward disabilities and promote social inclusion for students with additional needs. While some insightful contributions are drawn from the study, it’s important to acknowledge its limitations. This case study examines a specific group of students with special needs in one educational setting. This approach has limited the practical applicability of the findings to a larger group or a different kind of educational setting. The distinct traits of the study’s participants and setting might not reflect the experiences of other students with additional needs. The use of self-reported data brings biases like social desirability and recall bias, which could skew the results. Additionally, the small and homogeneous sample size may not cover the range of experiences among students with needs (SWAN), and because this study is specific to its context, its relevance to other educational environments is limited. Future research should prioritize overcoming these limitations by including groups using measures to assess physical activity and engagement and exploring interventions that effectively break down these barriers. In this way, if we embrace this methodology, we may come up with more comprehensive strategies for inclusivity and effectiveness in the enhancement of physical education.

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