


The Modified Physical Education Class:

AN OPTION FOR THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT

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Jeremiah is in sixth grade and loves science, math and steam engines. He has been diagnosed with mild autism and has excelled in school in most subject areas. When he was in elementary school, he was in a smaller class for physical education (PE) due to the fact that his classroom was smaller than most, with 18 students. This placement was decided by the physical education staff and his parents in his individualized education plan (IEP) meeting. When he entered middle school, the teachers team-taught two classes of 32 students. This was very crowded, and Jeremiah found it difficult to learn in that setting. When they did skilled practice in volleyball, he was overwhelmed by the students around him waiting for their turn in line. When they ran the mile, he had a hard time in the crowd of his peers. Jeremiah also was challenged by the noise and commotion in the locker room before and after class. Physical education became something that he loathed, and he started trying to stand farther and farther away from his peers during class.

His classroom teacher, Mr. Gonzalez, noticed this behavior and brought it up to his multidisciplinary team in a meeting. The team agreed that the smaller class size, like the one he experienced in elementary school, was a better fit for Jeremiah. They did have a wrestling room free during his PE class, and one of the PE teachers, Mrs. Pierce, said she would be happy to teach a smaller PE class of his peers there. The team discussed this with Jeremiah, and he asked if he would go with his peers from his elementary school. There were 10 peers in that class from his elementary school, and they asked five other students to come to this smaller class. Most of the students welcomed the smaller class as they were doing the same units as the larger class, with more opportunity to practice and play. In addition, Jeremiah was allowed to go in the locker room 10 minutes early to change so he could avoid the large group in the locker room. He also changed a few minutes before his peers so he did not have the overwhelming experience before he returned to class. This situation aligned with his IEP, which stated that inclusive PE was his placement, and everyone won.

In this scenario, Jeremiah and his peers benefited from the modified placement that met everyone's needs. The purpose of this article is to present the modified placement as a purposeful, inclusive placement option for some children with disabilities.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) defines physical education as a necessary component of special education for all individuals ages three to 21 who qualify for special education services. According to IDEA (2004), all children with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and receive appropriate public education at no cost to the

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parents. The LRE requirement means that students with disabilities, to the maximum extent possible, should be educated in the general education environment with their typically developing peers. Any alternative placement selected for the student outside of the general educational environment should occur only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in general education classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily. Furthermore, alternate placements must maximize opportunities for the student to interact with peers without disabilities, to the extent appropriate for the needs of the student (IDEA, 2004).

Physical Education Placement Options

According to IDEA, physical education (including adapted physical education [APE]) is a direct service, and it can be provided in a number of placement options. Placement options are discussed and decided during IEP or committee on special education (CSE) meetings by the multidisciplinary team, including parents, classroom teachers, administrators, special education teachers, physical educators, and adapted physical educators. The chosen placement should relate to what is most educationally beneficial to the student. More specifically, students with disabilities must be educated in an environment where they are able to work successfully and

safely in the general physical education curriculum toward their IEP objectives (Columna, Davis, Lieberman, & Lytle, 2010).

In order to meet the varying needs of students with a wide range of disabilities, a variety of physical education placement options should be made available on a continuum. Placements can range from integrated physical education (i.e., where students with and without disabilities are educated together) to receiving physical education services in a self-contained or one-on-one setting. A number of examples exist for specific placement options in physical education. For example, Columna and colleagues (2010) provided a comprehensive continuum of APE/PE placement options. These include: (1) integrated physical education with no support or modification; (2) integrated physical education with modifications; (3) integrated physical education with consultation from an APE professional; (4) option three with additional self-contained instruction; (5) self-contained physical education a set number of times per week/month combined with integrated physical education services (total physical education time must meet state requirements); (6) reverse mainstreaming (peers without disabilities go to self-contained class to assist); (7) self-contained classes in school; and (8) self-contained classes outside of school (Columna et al., 2010). It is important to keep in mind that APE is the service provided, *not* the placement (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2018).

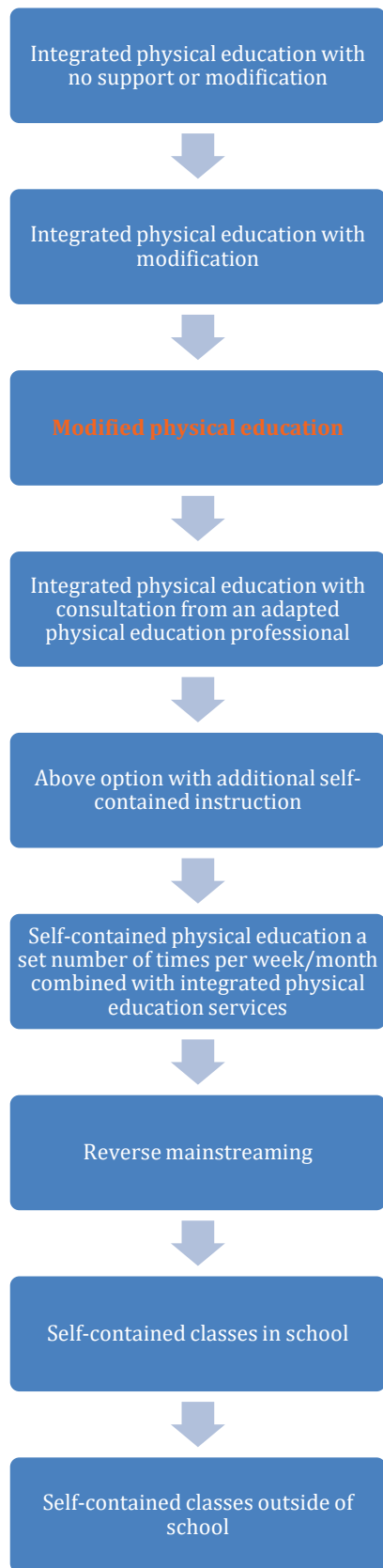


Figure 1.
Continuum of placement options in physical education with modified physical education included

Adapted physical education can be delivered in all of the above placements.

Although more than these eight placement options do exist, students with disabilities are often inappropriately placed. Various placement options, in addition to the general classroom, must be provided to meet the individual student's unique needs. This article explores another option, the *modified physical education class*, which could lead to increased placement successes that benefit not only the student with a disability, but also his or her peers in the physical education environment. Because modified physical education is related to inclusion, it is essential to first understand the importance and benefits of inclusion in physical education (see Figure 1 for a sample continuum of placement options that includes modified PE).

Inclusion

Inclusion, the instruction of students with and without disabilities together in integrated classes with proper accommodations and supports (Block, 2016), is a standard practice in many schools around the world (Hodge et al., 2009; Hodge, Lieberman, & Murata, 2012). The fact is that currently approximately 3.5 of the 5.8 million students in public schools in the United States between the ages of six and 21 years old receive special education services in inclusive classes (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2014).

Appropriately implemented inclusive physical education using evidence-based strategies has been found to benefit students both with and without disabilities. Research examining the perspectives of physical education teachers (Casebolt & Hodge, 2010) and of students with disabilities (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015) describes how properly implemented inclusion can foster positive social interactions between students with and without disabilities. Furthermore, physical education teachers have described how participating in physical education and achieving the goals set by the teacher in inclusive physical education can enhance the self-esteem of students with disabilities (Hodge, Ammah, Casebolt, LaMaster, & O'Sullivan, 2004). Inclusive physical education has also been shown to positively influence peers without disabilities by improving their attitudes toward and awareness of individuals with disabilities. Forms of supportive interactions between students with and without disabilities, such as demonstrations, verbal assistance, physical assistance, and encouragement, are essential for friendship development—another benefit of inclusive physical education (Sato, Hodge, Murata, & Maeda, 2007; Seymour, Reid, & Bloom, 2009).

As with most educational practices, appropriate implementation is crucial to the success of inclusion. While appropriately implemented inclusive practices can produce positive outcomes, poorly conceptualized inclusive environments can lead to students with disabilities being isolated or made fun of (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015; Healy, Msetfi, & Gallagher, 2013). Unfortunately, a number of barriers can make inclusive physical education challenging for physical education teachers and students. For example, despite the development of evidence-based (research based) practices in inclusive settings (e.g., peer tutoring) and published suggestions on strategies to include students with disabilities (e.g., Brian & Haegele, 2014), physical education teachers tend to struggle with developing inclusive programming (Lieberman, Houston-Wilson, & Kozub, 2002). While inclusive physical education can provide a

Table 1.
Barriers to Modified PE

Barrier	Solution
Not enough teachers to cover this type of class	Plan ahead and put it on the teachers' schedule before the master schedule is complete. This should not be an afterthought; it should be made a priority due to the specific needs of these students.
Not enough space in the building	Share space in the gym, hold some classes outside when appropriate, and alternate gym space when possible.
Not enough time in the schedule	Hold the modified class at the same time as the general PE class, if possible. Hold the modified PE class during a study hall or a free period.
Students without disabilities may balk at the placement or not understand its significance	Ensure a clear explanation of the purpose and setup of the class through brochures, flyers and class meetings so everyone understands the purpose and objectives of this unique and important placement.
The administration may not see the value in this type of environment if they are not familiar with the disability or the benefits of the placement	Be very clear during the CSE or IEP meeting regarding the specific physical education needs of the child and how they can be met in the modified setting. Be clear that the general PE setting will not meet their unique needs.

number of benefits, physical education teachers may struggle with meeting the needs of all students with the programs that are currently set up. These programs, which can take place in large classes that are noisy and distracting environments, are often not conducive to learning for students with some disabilities such as autism, anxiety disorders, visual impairments, learning disabilities, or at-

tion deficit disorder. It may also be problematic when environments provide little opportunity for skilled practice. See Table 1 for the barriers to modified placement. Because of some of the challenges in inclusive physical education, modified physical education should be considered as a viable option on the continuum of supports and placements.



This modified class provides more turns, individualized instruction, space and opportunities for meaningful social interaction.



This modified class offers students more variety of equipment due to the smaller size of the class, as well as more individualized instruction, fewer distractions, and more opportunities to socialize with the students in the class.

Modified Physical Education

Modified physical education consists of a small inclusive class of 10–20 children with and without disabilities. This placement option has been successfully used by districts all over the United States for years to accommodate the needs of children with some disabilities. This placement has also been referred to as unified physical education and buddy or peer physical education. It is still considered an inclusive class, as it is composed predominantly of children without disabilities. All students in this placement are working on the same curriculum as their same-age peers. Modified physical education has been utilized for years, but it is often overlooked as an option. This placement is beneficial for many children with or without a disability. Due to the fact that this placement is so conducive for so many children in schools, this article strives to unify the term and its use to ensure appropriate placement for more students. See Table 2 for a description of several potential benefits associated with this model.

Because modified physical education may be new for physical education teachers, administrators, coaches and parents, there may be hesitation in adopting this placement option. This reluctance may be increased by potential barriers such as those presented in Table 1. It is noteworthy here that, although the modified physical education placement makes a lot of sense for many children, teachers may experience pushback from the school principal and/or the

head of the PE department. Scheduling and finding time may also be a particular challenge.

Figure 2 provides a number of solutions to implementing modified physical education to help solve some of these potential barriers. To this end, its implementation can be seamless if teachers take a proactive and positive approach. Parents may also be able to help convince administrators of the inherent benefits of this type of opportunity—such as fewer distractions, more opportunities to participate in skilled practice, and increased socialization—and encourage them to ensure this placement for their child if it is appropriate.

Importantly, like in other inclusive classes, the physical education teachers will still teach utilizing evidence-based and best practices, such as universal design for learning (UDL; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2018). Universal design for learning is the purposeful planning for heterogeneous groups in each and every class. Examples may include providing a variety of instructional strategies; various sizes, shapes and colors of equipment; a number of ways to execute skills; and a number of ways to assess and showcase students' skills and abilities. With a smaller class the entire spectrum of options in a UDL class would still be available and each child's needs would be met. Figure 2 provides a number of additional considerations for setting up a modified physical education class. This can be applied to children of all ages.

Table 2.
Benefits of Modified Physical Education

Student Needs	Benefits of Modified PE
Children who have a hard time in large groups due to noise or distractions	There are fewer children so there are fewer distractions and reduced noise.
Children with visual impairments who need a quieter environment in order to access what is happening in the environment	There is less noise due to a smaller number of students for this class. In addition, because children are carefully selected they are sensitive to the needs of the students with disabilities.
Children with emotional distress who need a calmer environment	It can be calmer and less stressful.
Children who experience a developmental delay and who need added practice	The participants will get more turns to practice skill development.
Children who need to work on socialization	Since the children will be pre-selected and will be provided information about the group, they will know the social and emotional needs of their peers.
Children with learning disabilities	This placement can offer a more multisensory approach to ensure the learning of all children.
Children with intellectual disabilities	This placement can offer a more multisensory approach to ensure the learning of all children.

Discussion

As noted in federal law, a continuum of services enables students with disabilities to be educated with their typically developing peers to the maximum extent appropriate in the LRE. This continuum of services encompasses specially designed instruction, supplementary aids, and services in a variety of settings as determined appropriate by the IEP team (Winnick & Porretta, 2017). However, well-meaning educators may be overlooking the LRE best suited for particular students in physical education. Some school officials will misinterpret the law and place students with disabilities directly in one extreme or the other — either a self-contained physical education class or a full-sized integrated PE

class with no modifications — without any consideration for other possibilities for the LRE.

For example, in the opening scenario, Jeramiah was placed in the general physical education class without regard for his previous placement and his unique needs. In another example, Kayla, an incoming sixth grader who is diagnosed with spina bifida, was placed in a self-contained physical education class without taking into account her ability levels. She uses a wheelchair, yet she can use crutches and can stand for activities such as batting, serving a volleyball, and shooting a basketball. She has been in class with her able-bodied peers for seven years and wants to continue to be with them, but the class size in middle school is 45–50 students, and she

Figure 2.
Setting up modified physical education classes

There are several ways to set up this modified class:

1. The children can be pre-selected by the physical education teachers and the classroom teachers. This pre-selection can be determined by attendance, patience, disposition, skill level, compassion and desire.
2. The children can be given the option of a modified class and self-select to be in that setting for one class a week or every PE class.
3. The modified class can be a smaller part of a larger class in the same gym or a different gym.
4. The participants can rotate or be permanent, depending on the situation.
5. The participants in the modified class can be a part of “advanced PE” and this could be an additional class they attend each week.
6. The modified class could be chosen each unit based on the interest and desires of the children with and without disabilities.
7. The students with disabilities could invite the modified class and choose friends they feel would be best for this setting.
8. The modified class can be explained and the participants can apply to be in the modified class. This application would have a justification as to why they want to be part of this special group.
9. The paraeducators who are assigned to the children with disabilities would still attend the class just like they would in the inclusive class or in the classroom with the same level of support when necessary.

is fearful that she will be pushed over or will trip someone with her crutches in these large classes. The situation is frustrating for her and for her parents, who want her to get the best educational opportunities possible. In order to change each of these students' physical education placements, their adapted physical educator, parents and multidisciplinary team need to make recommendations that she be placed in a different setting. The IEP team would have to agree that this purposeful placement option (e.g., modified physical education) would be the LRE and then make the necessary changes to her schedule.

Modified physical education is a good option that can provide more opportunities for skilled practice and more time to play sports for all students. Due to the smaller number of students in the class, students can play a variety of sports, such as sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, and wheelchair tennis. Furthermore, modified physical education can provide students with increased social interactions with friends, as well as opportunities to improve sport skills. Many children without disabilities do not like PE due to the competitive nature of classes, being compared to peers, and large class sizes. Many students without disabilities would thus also opt for and welcome this modified class. By offering students with disabilities physical education services in this placement, schools may be able to have more flexible scheduling, which is important in carrying out an inclusive service-delivery model.

For many students with disabilities, the key to success in a modified physical education class lies in having appropriate assessment, adaptations, accommodations and modifications made to the instruction and other activities offered in the classroom. One of the many benefits of a modified physical education class is the increased participation in skill development, games and activities that are delivered in a way that is effective, meaningful and motivational to students. These are all aspects of learning that can happen best with peer interactions and can be enhanced within a class structure to produce positive social and emotional development in students. Increasing social interaction and collaborative activities between students with and without disabilities can lead to valuable experiences while providing the support services students require.

Conclusion

If a student with a disability can be satisfactorily educated in a general physical education class (with needed supplementary aids and services), then that physical education placement option can be that student's LRE. Nevertheless, the IEP team may determine that the student cannot be educated satisfactorily in the general physical education, even when supplementary aids and services are provided. In cases like these, an alternative placement must then be considered. One such placement that can provide the benefits of inclusive physical education without the large groups and distractions is modified physical education.

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