Teachers’ Experiences with the Inclusion of
Students with Special Needs in Physical Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences of Ontario certified teachers with the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education. Data was gathered through the process of convenience sampling and semi-structured interview, from four teacher participants. Following the interviews, a rigorous analysis revealed three important themes. The first finding explored connections between professional development, number of years teaching, and the amount support from other professionals and the effect on the confidence of teachers’ inclusive practices. This gave novel insight into the need for support in the physical space of the gym, and the need for professional collaboration. Challenges for implementation of inclusive physical education have us insightful information about the lack of adapted equipment in physical education environments. Lastly, teachers’ practices related to inclusive physical education were explored which provides examples of practical strategies that educators are currently using to support children with special needs in inclusive physical education programs. This research is important for all members of the educational community in order for schools to promote the benefits of physical education to all students.

*Keywords: Physical Education; Special Education; Inclusive*
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

In our current society, children are coming to school with varying types of abilities. This is creating a classroom environment that mirrors a more representative image of the diversity children are surrounded by in the world. There is a broad range of students with different abilities that need special education services within the educational system. Inclusion needs to be promoted in all subject areas, including physical education. The importance of physical education in students’ lives has been researched many times throughout the literature, and there continues to be a growing understanding of its benefits to children today (Goodwin, Watkinson & Fitzpatrick, 2003; Tovin, 2013). This chapter introduces a qualitative research study that is aimed at understanding teachers’ experiences with the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education. The chapter explains the purpose of inclusive physical education and addresses the key questions of the research study. Included is a brief summary of the study’s methodology and a discussion of my beliefs surrounding inclusion and physical education as a way to highlight the importance of this research topic.

1.1 Research Problem

It is argued that educators are struggling to provide inclusive physical education for children with special needs and accommodating their specific needs. It has been found that teachers lack the confidence to provide integrative strategies to successfully include children with special needs in physical education classes (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000).

Movement and physical education are essential for the healthy development of all children, especially children with special needs. Obesity rates for children with special needs are 38% higher than in children without disabilities, and this increases to 58% in adulthood (Klein & Hollingstead, 2015: Tovin, 2013: Woolfolk, Winne & Perry, 2015). A factor that plays a role in
these significant rates is that children with special needs are lacking movement and physical activity in their daily lives; these statistics clearly indicate that children with special needs need to have more access to physical education. Klein and Hollingshead state that quality inclusive education is not readily available for children who receive special education services. This is problematic and alarming when looking at all of the benefits physical education has for this population of students.

Physical education is an important factor in the growing needs of children within society today. American researchers Klein and Hollingshead (2015) examine the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which states that children with disabilities must be afforded the opportunity to participate in any physical education program that is available to their typically developing peers. Providing inclusive physical education to all students has many benefits for students with and without special needs. These benefits of physical education are limited for children with special needs if they are not getting the opportunity and support to be included in the program. There are many holistic benefits of physical education that apply to all students who engage with the subject. These benefits include knowledge acquisition and application, motor skill development, health fitness and social and emotional well-being (Goodwin, Watkinson & Fitzpatrick, 2003; Tovin, 2013). Many educators question if these goals are attainable for children with special needs and lack the confidence in providing physical education for these students. Physical education benefits are attainable for children with various special needs and it is important educators believe that all children are capable of participating in physical education in order for inclusion to happen.

In order to achieve the inclusion goals in a physical education environment, teachers need to have a positive attitude towards children with special needs. Hodge et al. (2009) signifies that
the beliefs of physical education teachers are important because these beliefs influence their teaching practice. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) explain that many teachers believe that they have sufficient time, skills, training and resources necessary for implementing inclusive programs. Subsequently, it is important to consider why this not translating into a higher quality of PE for children with special needs.

1.2 Purpose of Study

In order to further develop an understanding of the research problem, this study focuses on the ways in which elementary teachers are providing inclusive physical education to children with special needs. These issues are important for research because physical education is essential for all children to develop a healthy life style, and it provides developmental and learning enhancements for all children, especially those with special needs (Klein & Hollingshead, 2015). Grasping an understanding of teachers’ strategies and beliefs surrounding inclusive physical education of children with special needs will help to inform future practices that are beneficial for these students moving forward.

1.3 Research Questions and Methodology

The key research question that guides this study is: what are the experiences of elementary teachers with the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education? This question will further be explored through the following sub-questions: What are the benefits of physical education for children with special needs from the perspectives of their teachers? How confident are teachers in including children with special needs in physical education, and how have they been prepared to teach inclusive physical education? Additionally, what are the types of inclusion strategies teachers are using in physical education classes? These questions will help inform the research of the practices that are in place.
This qualitative research study explores the research questions using semi-structured interviews with elementary teachers to explore their experiences with inclusion for children with special needs in physical education. Qualitative research was used to grasp an understanding of teachers’ experiences and the pedagogical strategies being used. In order to select participants for the study, purposeful and convince sampling took place within my network of connections with teachers to fulfill the criteria necessary to collect data for the purpose of the study.

1.4 Background of the Researcher and Positionality

My interest in pursuing this area of research was informed by my own experiences with physical education, and several past experiences involving individuals with special needs and the level of physical education practices the individuals received. I believe that all children should experience the benefits of physical education and see physical education as an important aspect of a child’s development.

My view on the importance of physical activity has derived over the course of my life. I grew up in a middle class family, where I was granted with the opportunities of participating in many extra-curricular activities and sports involving physical activity. In addition to being highly active as a child, I carry this passion for physical activity and education through participation in the community. I am a swimming instructor and have a background of work with programs through Ryerson University called Rams in Training and Rising Rams where I taught the importance of physical activity to underprivileged youth in the Toronto area. In addition, I am a former varsity athlete where I played ice hockey at the university level. These experiences highlight my personal identity through sport and physical activity. As a result, my experiences with sport and physical activity allowed me to see the positive role it plays in development of students’ lives. Being a part of various types of teams has pushed me to excel in school, create
positive social relationships, taught me the importance of teamwork and time management skills, along with the true meaning of commitment. With this reference I believe that sports and physical activity play a large role in developing living skills, and overall well-being.

In terms of inclusive education, every child and individual has a right to equitable education, whether it is in a general education or physical education. All children, regardless of their ability, should have full inclusion when it comes to the education system. I have conflicting thoughts on the idea of full inclusion because I have worked in a developmentally delayed classroom, where children were segregated from their peers and had specified time for integration. Although this program did not include full inclusion, I was able to see the benefits of this program, which conflicted with my previous values on the concept of full inclusion. The children with special needs in this segregated classroom required a smaller teacher to students ratio in order to receive the greatest benefits from the program.

This developmentally delayed class had one period of physical education per week, which was the same allotted time as their typically developing peers in other classrooms. During their physical education class, the gym teacher let the students have free time with the equipment and did not provide any structure for the students to learn fitness skills. With her other typically developing classes, there was structure and a specific lesson for each grade. Although the students with special needs were given time to exercise, they were not included in a structured physical education class.

During a previous placement during my undergraduate study in early childhood education, I was working in an elementary school in a diagnostic kindergarten classroom. This classroom was also in a segregated room yet included times for integration. This particular class did not have a physical education period or subject, and never went to the gym. I found this to
limit the students’ development in gross motor skills and they were not able to experience the benefits of physical education. All other classes had at least two or three physical education periods during the course of the week. This lack of physical education time for the students with special needs has led to my concern in this area.

I have also worked as a swimming instructor for many years where I have taught children with special needs. By adapting the program and modifying the lessons for the individual students, the students were able to show progress in their swimming abilities and progress through swimming levels and reach personal goals. I find this to be very similar to physical education where the educators would be able to provide modifications and adoptions to the curriculum, physical environment and equipment. My swimming experience has led me to deem that children with special needs are capable, and should be seen as capable, in participating in physical education and meeting learning goals. This can be achieved through an adapted lesson or modified program within an inclusive physical education program. In addition to developing an appreciation of diverse abilities, this experience led me to value inclusive physical education as a personal professional goal.

1.5 Overview of the Paper

This study investigated the experiences of elementary school teachers with inclusion in physical education, by using a qualitative approach that included semi-structured interviews. The study adopted purposeful and convenience sampling methods to locate teachers to participate in the research study. Chapter two reviews the literature with a focus on inclusive physical education, the benefits, disadvantages and challenges of inclusive physical education, teachers’ beliefs surrounding the topic of inclusive physical education, and the existing strategies that have been researched for the implementation of inclusive physical education. The third chapter,
describes the research approach and procedures, the data collection methods, the participants that were interviewed, and ethical review procedures. Chapter four, reports on the research findings gained from the interview process. The final chapter highlights insights and their implications for the educational community, including recommendations for further study.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction / Overview

The focus of this literature review is an introduction to inclusive physical activity in the classroom for children with special needs. It examines the benefits and challenges of inclusive physical activity, and teachers’ beliefs surrounding the inclusion of physical education and its accessibility to students with special needs. It can be argued that educators are struggling to provide inclusive physical education for children with special needs. Teachers’ lack the confidence to provide integrative strategies to successfully include children with special needs in physical education classes. There are many benefits of physical education that children with special needs are limited from receiving if they are not getting the support needed to be included in the program. It is important that teachers have a positive attitude towards children with special needs in order to fully include all children in the curriculum area of physical education. Investigating teachers’ experiences with inclusion practices and strategies used in physical education classrooms is the focus for this research study. These issues are important to research because physical education is important for all children to develop healthy life styles and provides developmental and learning enhancements to all children, especially those with special needs.

2.1 Inclusion

In our current society, children are coming to school with varying types of abilities. This is creating a classroom environment that mirrors a more representative image of the diverse world they are surrounded by. There is a broad range of students with different abilities that need special education services within the educational system. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2000) categorizes students with special needs as those having a behavioral exceptionality,
communication exceptionality (autism, deaf and hard-of-hearing, language impairment, speech impairment), a learning exceptionality, an intellectual exceptionality (giftedness, mild intellectual exceptionality, developmental exceptionality), a physical (physical exceptionality, blind and low vision) or a combination of these exceptionalities. According to United Nations’ (2006) *Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, “disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (p.1). In this document, the United Nations also states that “persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live” (p. 17). With such a high level of diversity within the learning environment it is critical that educators, administrators and community members come to understand the rights that children have and the concept of inclusion.

Inclusion in Canadian educational practice has been the result of a long and sometimes contentious evolution. As the conditions for accepting or including children with learning disabilities into regular classrooms and care-taking settings has changed, so have the educational processes that support them. Driving forces of this change came from both inside and outside of Canada. Bill 82 stands as a landmark in special education in Ontario, and its principal provisions remain in the *Education Act* (1980). In accordance this bill describes that school boards are responsible to provide, or to agree with another board to provide, special education programs and special education services for their exceptional pupils.

The terms inclusion, inclusive education or inclusive schooling, began to appear in the school system in the 1990s and referred to the idea that all children should be educated together
in the same educational system (Peters, 2007). Defining quality inclusion is important to implementing quality educational programs for students with learning disabilities. Gal, Schreur and Engel-Yeger (2010) define inclusion as, “the philosophy of acceptance and belonging to the community so that a class is structured to meet the needs of all of its students” (p.89). Goodwin, Watkinson and Fitzpatrick (2003) state that inclusion within classrooms is promoted because all children are accepted and belong within the mainstream of the school and community. This philosophy of inclusion is connected to human rights and equal opportunities (Gal, Schreur & Engel-Yeger, 2010).

Equal opportunity is a human right for all students, “inclusion is made compulsory by legislation towards inclusion right” (Gal, Schreur & Engel-Yeger, 2010, p. 89). Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) state that United Nation policies, “affirm the right of all children to be valued equally, treated with respect and provided equal opportunities within the mainstream system” (p.192). “The World Health Organization (WHO) claims that an accessible human and physical environment is necessary for furnishing equal opportunities for the participation for people with disabilities” (Gal, Schreur & Engel-Yeger, p.90).

Much of the research agrees that children should be placed in the least restrictive learning environment, which means students should be educated with typically developing peers to a degree that will afford the children with special needs a meaningful experience and prescribe the best educational benefit (Gal, Schreur & Engel-Yeger, 2010: Leiberman, James & Ludwa: 2004, Goodwin, Watkinson & Fitzpatrick, 2003). When provided in an environment that serves to be the least restrictive for the child, it allows the students to have exposure and to interact with adverse environments, which can lead to improved social skills, and improved self-perceptions for students with and without disabilities (Leiberman, James & Ludwa, 2004). Not only does
inclusion support the increase in positive attitudes of children with special needs, it also supports an increase in the self-concepts, self-worth, and understanding of students without disabilities (Leiberman, James & Ludwa, 2004).

2.1.1 Inclusive physical education

Goodwin, Watkinson and Fitzpatrick (2003) define inclusive physical education as, “providing all students with disabilities the opportunity to participate in regular physical education with their peers, with supplementary aides and support services,” (p, 193). Zhang and Griffin (2007) state that the “goal of inclusive physical education is to engage every child and meet his or her individualized needs in a supportive environment” (p. 33). Klein and Hollingshead (2015) research the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which states that children with disabilities must be afforded the opportunity to participate in any physical education program that is available to their typically developing peers. When providing inclusive physical education to all students, many benefits are gained for students with and without special needs.

2.2 Benefits of Inclusive Physical Education

The importance of physical education in student’s lives has been researched many times throughout the literature, and there continues to be is a growing understanding of its benefits to children today. Woolfolk, Winne and Perry (2015) state that “schools have a role in promoting physical activity” (p. 47). Klein and Hollingshead (2015) explain the holistic benefits of physical education for all students, when researching physical activity and benefits associated with the subject area. These goals of physical education include knowledge acquisition and application, motor skill development, health fitness and social and emotional well-being (Goodwin, Watkinson & Fitspatrick, 2003, Tovin: 2013). Physical education enhances the development in
three crucial areas of learning; cognitive, psychomotor and affective development (Klein & Hollingshead, 2015). Many educators question if these goals are attainable for children with special needs. Goodwin, Watkinson and Fitspatrick explore the idea that all of the goals of physical education are attainable for children with special needs. This is important because educators have to believe that all children can learn in order for inclusion to happen.

Tovin (2013) and Klein and Hollingstead (2015) indicate that physical education prevents childhood obesity. Obesity rates for children with special needs are 38% higher than children without disabilities and this percentage increases to 58% when examining adulthood (Klein & Hollingstead, 2015; Tovin, 2013; Woolfolk, Winne & Perry, 2015). These statistics indicate that children with special needs need to have more access to physical education. Klein and Hollingshead (2015) state that quality inclusive physical education is not readily available for children who receive special education services. This is problematic and alarming when looking at all the benefits physical education has for this population of students.

Physical education has various purposes and benefits in the classroom, beyond just providing an opportunity for students to exercise. An increase in cognitive development occurs when there is regular physical activity within the classroom (Menear & Neumeier, 2015). When interviewing children with disabilities and their experiences with inclusive physical education, Coates and Vickerman (2010), recorded that the students signified that the many benefits include seeing friends, getting exercise, having fun, and most importantly developing teamwork skills. These benefits are important to understand the significance of equal participation and respecting each other and each other’s learning. This research was consistent with the research done by Klein and Hollingshead (2015) who indicate the multiple benefits of inclusive physical education, which include increasing blood to the brain, increasing mental alertness, maintaining
a positive attitude, and preventing illness. When studying children on the autism spectrum, Zhang and Griffin (2007) and Tovin (2013) indicate that inclusive physical education reduces aggression, self-stimulatory behaviors and increases physical fitness. Menear and Neumeier indicate that their findings support the inclusion of students with special needs in quality physical education programs. Physical educators should be prepared to advocate for appropriate inclusion for students with special needs. Additionally, “a teacher who does not see the benefits of the physical education program for students with disabilities will not be responsive to program modifications” (Goodwin, Watkinson, and Fitspatrick, 2003, p. 196). Although many aspects of inclusive physical education are beneficial for all students, research in this field also document the negative impacts of inclusion.

2.3 Disadvantages of Inclusive Physical Education

Though limited research could be found on the disadvantages of inclusive physical education some studies did show negative effects when inclusion was not implemented properly. Lieberman, James and Ludwa (2004) state that critics to inclusion argue that inclusion appears to be plausible in theory but it is rarely appropriate for children with disabilities.

When listening to the voices of the students with disabilities and their involvement with inclusive physical education, Coates and Vickerman (2010) stated that the students frequently reported negative experiences, such as bullying, lack of differentiation from teachers while explaining that “some teachers did not modify their lessons to accommodate their needs [as learners]” (p. 1518). Lieberman, James and Ludwa (2004) found that poorly implemented inclusion resulted in a negative impact on students’ active participation and social experiences; it also resulted in less activity time for all students and an increase in peer misbehavior. There is a great necessity for proper implementation of inclusive physical education for all students to
experience the many benefits of increased physical activity. Implementing inclusive physical activity poses as a challenge for most educators because of many factors that are involved.

2.4 Challenges to Implementing Inclusive Physical Education for Students with Special Needs

Children with disabilities receive less physical education compared to non-disabled peers (Coates & Vickerman, 2010). A research study about students with disabilities and their experiences with physical education found that, “ten percent of students indicate that they have not taken part in any sports,” within the curriculum (Coates & Vickerman, 2010, p. 1517). According to the results of the study conducted by Klien and Hollingshead (2015), “many teachers felt unable to deliver appropriate physical education to pupils with disabilities,” (p.164). It is possible that this could be occurring because the lack of knowledge surrounding the disability or the lack of knowledge about the specific child. Additionally, Klein and Hollingshead found “teachers identified several factors that would affect the success of inclusion; class size, inadequate resources, the extent to which all students would benefit from inclusion and the lack of adequate teacher preparation” (p.194).

Some challenges educators face in implementing inclusive physical education include myths about inclusion, teachers’ misunderstanding of the ‘least restrictive’ environment, and a lack of awareness of specific strategies to use for inclusion (Lieberman, James & Ludwa, 2004: Gal, Schreur & Engel-Yeger, 2010). Attitudinal barriers, environmental barriers, and administrative barriers are all challenges in implementing an inclusive physical education program (Gal, Schreur & Engel-Yeger, 2010: Hodge et al. 2009). Through their research study, Hodge et al. (2009) discovered that making connections with students with special needs and
managing disruptive behavior were all factors in presenting challenges to implementing inclusive physical education.

Many students with disabilities have difficulty interacting with peers. When researching strategies for including children on the autism spectrum, Tovin (2013) states that students with disabilities face challenges when interacting with their non-disabled peers during unstructured physical activities. Tovin also poses the challenge of bullying within the classroom environment, which threatens the participation of students with disabilities. This can further magnify the social impact of disabilities.

Teachers have to implement set standards that are laid out in the curriculum documents. “Although all students are expected to meet the learning standards, instruction that allows students with disabilities to achieve the standards presents a challenge for teachers” (Lieberman, James & Ludwa, 2004, p.37). Teachers need to overcome these challenges to meet the needs of all students and provide an inclusive physical education program that benefits all children. Hodge et al. (2009) concludes from their research that teachers desire relevant training and need help from specialists before they were willing to implement a fully inclusive classroom.

### 2.5 Teachers’ beliefs about inclusive education and inclusive physical education

Several studies have been conducted to study teachers’ attitudes and beliefs surrounding the issue of inclusion and physical education. Gal, Schreur and Engel-Yeger (2010) state that, “teachers’ attitudes to disabilities and to inclusion have proved a crucial variable in the success of inclusion” (p.91). Zhang and Griffin (2007) agree with this statement by explaining “to successfully include students with disabilities, you must first believe that it can be done” (p.33). Along with these conceptions of beliefs, Hodge et al. (2009) signify that, “the beliefs of physical education teachers are important because beliefs influence practice” (p.402). Avramidis, Bayliss
and Burden (2000) surveyed teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion and discussed the connection between the respondents’ perceptions of the skills they possessed and their attitudes towards inclusion.

Goodwin, Walkinson and Fitzpatrick (2003) conclude that there is a “significant positive correlation between favorable teacher attitudes and years of teaching students with disabilities and a negative correlation with years of overall teaching” (p.200). Gal, Schreur and Engel-Yeger (2010) conducted a study, which aimed at identifying barriers to inclusion. The authors conclude that, “various teachers’ characteristics proved significantly correlation with their attitudes to inclusion; these characteristics included teachers’ age, and years of experience, and work conditions (number of students, and working hours)” (p. 93). Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) found that the level of professional development and a teachers’ active experience of inclusion held significantly more positive attitudes towards inclusion. Hodge’s (1998) research is about the attitudes of teachers and also concludes that prospective teachers with past experiences teaching children with disabilities had significantly more favorable attitudes. The study also indicates that females’ attitudes were statistically more favorable than those of men’s towards teaching children with disabilities in physical education (Hodge, 1998).

Contrary to the results from these studies, Gal, Schreur and Engel-Yeger (2010) study teachers’ attitudes on the inclusion of students with disabilities and conclude that these attitudes vary. The study indicates that the higher a teacher is in age the lower the teacher’s positive attitude is when working with students with disabilities in physical education. Gal, Schreur and Engel-Yeger also found that a teacher’s age and the number of years teaching can result in an increase of negative attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities.
Hodge et al. (2009) and Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) study teachers’ overall attitudes towards inclusion. The authors state that there are positive beliefs of teachers towards the concept of inclusion. Although overall positive beliefs were seen, the teacher participants had negative feelings towards implementing inclusion. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) concluded that 2/3 of participants agreed with the concept of inclusion, yet only 1/3 of participants believed that they had sufficient time, skills, training and resources necessary for implementing inclusive programs. There is a large gap between these numbers. Hodge et al. (2009) expand on this concern and state teachers’ experience of knowledge and preparedness for individualizing instruction for children with special needs. Zhang and Griffin (2007) stated similar findings in their review of solutions to implanting inclusive physical education that, “few teachers have the training and experience to include children with autism in their classroom and frequently feel uncomfortable and frustrated when including one or more students within the general classes” (p. 33).

Educators are at the forefront of education and need to be prepared to challenge the issues of inclusion. “In order for inclusion to be effective, it is generally agreed that the school personnel who will be most responsible for its success relies on the teachers” (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000, p. 192). Since there is a lack of confidence in teachers found in the above studies, the authors suggest a significant change needs to occur in order to implement inclusive physical education accurately. According to the studies Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) examine, general educators have not developed an empathetic understanding of disabling conditions, nor do they appear to be ready to accept students with special needs. Schools and educators need to examine strategies to put in place in order to have benefit of physical education available to all students.
2.6 Strategies for Implementing Inclusive Physical Education

The primary goal is to engage all students to fully participate in physical education classes (Zhang & Griffin, 2007). In order to achieve this goal, many strategies need to be implemented. Through examining the research done, many similar strategies were presented. Klein and Hollingshead (2015) and Hodge et al. (2009) offer the idea that the need for collaboration between the community, school personnel and families is a primary goal for implementing successful inclusive physical activity. An adapted environment and novel techniques need to be learned by educators in order for inclusion to take place. The staff needs to have an accurate understanding of physical education programming in order to develop adaptations and accommodations for each student.

2.6.1 Collaboration.

Collaboration needs to be present in order to successfully implement inclusive physical education. Klein and Hollingshead (2015) and Hodge et al. (2009) both explain the need for professional collaboration with clear and constant communication between special educators, physical educators and parents. Administration should “make available and hold teachers accountable for participation in professional development workshops” (Hodge et al., 2009, p. 416). Goodwin, Walkinson and Fitzpatrick (2003) state, “from a pragmatic point of view, partnerships among students, parents, paraprofessionals, administrators, and other professions may be a necessary part of inclusive education” (p.203). This partnership between multiple parties is necessary in order to fully understand the needs of the students and implement successful strategies for optimal learning to take place.
2.6.2 Environment and techniques.

Zhang and Griffin (2007) examine solutions to include children with special needs in physical education. They state the need for individualized instruction, repetitions, adapting the lesson to the interests of the students, along with having unique and novel equipment options for students to engage with. Lieberman, James and Ludwa (2004) agree with many of these strategies and indicate that modification, instructional approaches, and the disability awareness of peers are all key strategies for implementing inclusive physical activity. In order to provide a smooth transition into the physical environment, detailed schedules of activities need to be provided at the start of each physical education class, which include predictability and visual supports (Tovin, 2013 and Menear and Neumeirer, 2015). Goodwin, Walkinson and Fitzpatrick (2003) state “further investigation is needed into the pedagogic strategies and instructional techniques” (p. 202). Although much research has been done on the topic of techniques, teachers’ experiences with these specific techniques need to be examined in order to get a better understanding of the strategies that are being used.

2.6.3 Programming.

The curriculum is a large area of programming which teachers need to be knowledgeable about and have a grasp on how to implement the learning goals of each student. It is important to recognize that all students are going to learn in different ways. “An organized and purposeful approach to teaching requires an understanding of the goals and objectives of the instructional program as well as a working knowledge of the curriculum” (Goodwin, Walkinson & Fitzpatrick, 2003, p. 200). There needs to be an adapted curriculum and specific teaching strategies to successfully include children with special needs (Menear & Neumeier, 2015). Having an adapted curriculum requires physical education to be added onto a student’s
Individual Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is developed to provide a child who has a disability specialized instruction and related services in order for the child to improve and benefit from optimal learning. According to Klein and Hollingstead (2015), physical educators need to be a part of the Individual Education Plan for students with special needs in order to provide a successful program with multiple benefits for each individual student. In order to adapt a program for an individual child, an educator needs to “evaluate each child’s specific needs through observation, as well as consultation with family members and other health care providers” (p.33). Having knowledge from consultation allows the teachers to provide a program for the child that will be the most beneficial for his or her learning.

2.6.4 Peer partners.

Many researchers indicate that much of the success of inclusive physical education is due to the peer-tutoring program (Lieberman, James & Ludwa, 2004: Zhang & Griffin, 2007: Klein & Hollingshead, 2015). Peer tutoring involves a partnership between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers. Zhang and Griffin indicate that employing peer tutors offers a successful way to developing positive social interactions between all students. The researchers indicate that, “sometimes it helps to assign two peers to a student with autism to provide more interactions and demonstrate turn-taking” (p. 37). Children with disabilities often have trouble with social skills and interacting with other peers. By having peer tutors, it not only helps the child with a disability, but it also teaches students without disabilities to be accepting within the classroom and the greater society.

2.7 Chapter Conclusion

The research reviewed in this chapter indicates that there are many benefits to inclusive physical education if school staff implement the program properly. Extensive research has been
done to indicate the strategies for implementing inclusive education generally and coping with the challenges that arise; these help to shed light on improving inclusive physical education for students with special needs moving forward. Further research needs to be conducted to examine the permanency of attitudes of the teachers.

Instead of using a survey approach which was used in the majority of the research examined in this chapter, a qualitative approach is needed in order to deepen and further understand attitudes of physical education teachers and identify their experiences and teaching strategies. As the majority of the studies reviewed focused on interviewing physical education teachers in a variety of grades, my research study is needed better understand the experiences and practices of teachers in an elementary school age group. This study aimed at researching the experiences that elementary teachers have with the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education in order to fill the gaps of the existing research.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction / Overview

In this chapter I explain the study’s research methodology, rationale, and relevance to the research purpose and question that studied elementary teachers’ experiences with inclusive physical education. The methodology explains how information was gained in order to grasp a full understanding of elementary school teachers’ practices and strategies they use. This section starts by describing the research approach, the procedures this study took, and the data collection and the instruments used. Next, an explanation of the participant sampling and the recruitment process is discussed. This section gives reasons and details of the data analysis and interpretation procedures and explains the ethical considerations of the study. The strengths and the limitations that are relevant to this study are explored. Conclusions are made regarding the summary of the key methodological decisions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate the experiences of teachers regarding inclusion in physical education. A qualitative approach is needed in order to deepen and further the understanding of attitudes of physical education teachers and their existing experiences with their own strategies of implicating an inclusive classroom. The nature of the approach allowed for a rich, descriptive investigation of the experiences of teachers in all of its complexity (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007). This is essential to the purpose of the topic because it aimed at exploring the involvement of teachers with inclusion and the strategies they used to provide an inclusive environment. These details could only be obtained through the collaboration between the researcher and the participants of the study during the process of an interview. In order to develop trust with the participants, Creswell (2013) stated that the study needed to
empower individuals. The study aimed at understanding the strategies of the teachers to inform future practice that is best suited for all students regardless of their own personal abilities.

This type of approach was needed to eliminate the researchers’ meaning of the issue and rather focus on the teachers’ experiences with the topic. A qualitative research approach best suited this understanding because in the process the researchers “kept a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue” (Creswell, p.4). The purpose of the study aimed at finding the practices and involvements of teachers working with children with special needs while addressing the complexity of the issues at hand. In order to get the most thorough understanding of the topic, great details needed to be explored. Creswell described that the reason we conduct a qualitative interview is to grasp the “need for a complex, detailed understanding of the issue and “this detail can only be established by talking with people directly… allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find” (p.48). This aspect of the qualitative research study is essential to the purpose of the study and informed the procedures that involved semi-structured interviews with teachers.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary source for data collection used in this study was the semi-structured interview protocol. Consistent with the nature of qualitative research, interviews consisted of closed and open-ended questions. Turner (2010) explains the significance of an interview and states, “each of the questions will allow the examiner to dig deep into the experience and/or knowledge of the participants” (p. 757). The semi-structured interview process allowed educators to elaborate on their experiences and opinions, while providing, as much detail as they believed was appropriate. The purpose of the closed-ended questions was to acquire basic information, such as teacher background and work experience. Open-ended questions were used
to develop a better understanding of the experiences and practices of teachers supporting the inclusion of children with special needs in a physical education environment. A full list of the interview questions that were used can be found in Appendix B. The research questions were designed to grasp a complex understanding of the participants’ unique experiences. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed into text. The recordings were kept for future reference, and all names were kept anonymous throughout the study.

Turner (2010) elaborates on the purpose of an interview procedure and states, “interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic” (p. 756). This in-depth aim of the interview procedure was essential in developing theories around the experiences of teachers. The semi-structured format allowed me to design and plan an interview that attended to my research focus and questions. Turner additionally states that in an interview procedure, “I could ask questions or change questions based on participant responses to previous questions. The questions were structured, but adapting them allowed me to explore a more personal approach to each alumni interview” (p. 755). By being able to adapt to the participants’ responses, it provided a deeper understanding of their own beliefs, attitudes, and strategies used in providing inclusion in physical education.

3.3 Participants

This chapter introduces the sampling criteria that was established for participant recruitment for the semi-structured interviews. Later on in this chapter, the protocols for teacher recruitments to conduct the interviews are discussed. A section is included to introduce each of the participants that were interviewed.

3.3.1 Sampling criterion

This study aimed at researching the experiences that elementary teachers have with the
inclusion of children with special needs in physical education in order to fill the gaps of the existing research. When reviewing the literature and the existing research, a gap in the research was apparent when exploring the strategies teachers used when implementing inclusive physical education. This research study was needed to extend the scope of experiences and strategies used in physical education promoted at including all children. The teachers interviewed had to be teaching at the elementary level. Participants needed to have fifteen years or more in the teaching profession, and needed to have experience working with students with special needs in physical education in order to find out what strategies they had adopted, and if these particular strategies had been successful in providing inclusion for all students. This study examined the involvements of elementary classroom teachers and their comfort and confidence levels with inclusion.

### 3.3.2 Participant procedures

The sampling for this study relied on purposeful and convenience sampling. In the purposeful sampling technique, the researcher “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). This selection of interview participants is needed to fit the stated criteria in order to fully investigate elementary teachers’ experiences with inclusion in physical education.

I am immersed in a community of mentor teachers who have connections to other teachers that fit the criteria necessary for the requirements for this study. Relying on existing contacts and network, participants were recruited that had the necessary criteria needed in order to understand elementary school teachers’ backgrounds in working with students with special needs in physical education. Teachers were contacted within my network of connections and
provided them with an overview of this research study. An email was sent to mentor teachers and briefly stated the purpose of the research study. I let them know that I was seeking participants and asked if they could be of any assistance in helping to locate participants for this study.

### 3.3.3 Participant biographies

The four participants of the present study are professionals in the field of education in the Greater Toronto Area, Canada. They are all classroom teachers at publicly funded Ontario schools, each with at least fifteen years’ experience in the classroom, and have practice working with students with special needs in physical education. The participants will remain anonymous through pseudonyms.

- **Helen**
  Helen is currently a Full-Day Kindergarten teacher in her fifteenth year of teaching. She has experience teaching students from kindergarten to Grade eight in physical education, and has about six years of experience teaching health and physical education. She has taken additional qualifications in special education.

- **Sarah**
  Sarah currently teaches grade 8 in her fifteenth year of teaching. She also has experience teaching grade 4-8 in health and physical education. She has taken her special education part one, and health and physical education intermediate basic qualification.

- **Nicole**
  Nicole is currently a Full-Day Kindergarten teacher in her twentieth year of teaching. She has experience teaching grades k-8 in physical education, and prefers teaching the elementary age group. Nicole has her special education part one.

- **Tracey**
Tracey is currently a grade six teacher, as well as the physical education teacher for grade 3, 7 and 8. She is in her twentieth year teaching. She has experience teaching kindergarten to grade eight in physical education. Tracey has her degree in health and physical education, as well as her part one and part two additional qualifications.

3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with elementary school teachers who have had experience working with children with special needs in physical education classes. Each participant was interviewed once, using a voice recorder. The interviews were no longer than one-hour long. According to Creswell (2013), “data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for data analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding” (p. 180). Once the interviews were completed in order to prepare and organize the data, I immersed myself in listening to the recorded data several times in order to transcribe the data for the purpose of analysis. Following the data analysis procedure described by Creswell, I transcribed the data than began coding the transcripts using the research questions as an interpretive tool. Ryan and Bernhard (2003) describe the process of coding through finding key words, looking for word repetitions, comparing and contrasting, and to look for what is missing. Through the process of coding, themes were found within the data. Creswell (2003) reports that within data analysis the researcher must make meaning of the data and group the data into themes. Findings were reported in the form of themes and were identified and described, which included supporting quotations from my interviews.

In order to make sense of the data Wolcott (1994) refers to the process of data interpretation at which, “researchers transcend factual data and cautious analysis and begins to probe into what is to be made of them” (p.36). Through this interpretation of the data, it was
important to look at the implications it had for future practice. It was reported on how it
connected back to the previous work and literature and shared further questions and insights on
the topic. The research findings were reported, and the significance it had on the study, what it
means for future practice for the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education
classes.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

The ethical review for this research was granted under the approval procedures for the
Master of Teaching Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). A consent
form (See Appendix A) was sent to each participant for review prior to the interview, and was
discussed and signed prior to starting the interview. This was to ensure that the participants were
fully aware of the nature of the study and their rights. According to Creswell (2013), researchers
“need to be sensitive to vulnerable populations, imbalanced power relations, and placing
participants at risk” (p. 56). In order to protect the participants against any risks, the participants
were informed that they did not have to sign the consent form and that the study was not
mandatory to participate in. The participants were made aware of their right to “pass” at any
point during the interview, or retract information they have said, or to withdrawal from the study.
The interviews took place at an agreed upon location. Anonymity was essential for this study.
Teachers may not give their honest opinion if they feel it would jeopardize their future career or
reputation. All participants’ names were changed and pseudonyms were used to protect the
participants’ identity. Pseudonyms helped protect the participants of any risks from participating
in the study. The data gathered was used for the purpose of the study only. The interviews were
recorded for the purpose of future reference, but participants were informed that they have the
right to decide what is utilized for the study. All data (audio recordings) was stored on my password-protected computer/laptop/phone and will be destroyed after 5 years.

Participants’ experiences are needed in order to gain insight for future practices with inclusive physical education. It is important that participants are acknowledged for the work they have contributed to the study. “Giving back to participants for their time and efforts in our projects—reciprocity—is important, and we need to review how participants will gain from our studies” (Creswell, 2013, p. 55). Each participant was offered a copy of the transcribed interview and a copy of the final report upon completion. This ensured that the participants’ experiences were accurate and aimed at providing a balanced power relation between me as the researcher, and the participants in the study.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The scope of the research limited the participants that could be interviewed for this study. For this research study, the ethical parameters that we had that were approved for the Masters of Teaching Research Paper involved only interviews with teachers, and consequently it was not possible to interview students or parents, or to conduct surveys or classroom observations. Roulston (2010) discusses limitations to solely providing interviews states that, “interviews alone are an insufficient form of data to study social life” (p. 203). Creswell (2013) also states that, “qualitative researchers gather multiple forms of data … rather that rely on a single source of data” (p.45). Roulston further discusses the problems associated and concludes that, “research participants might respond to interviewers’ questions. These include misinformation, evasion, lies and fronts” (p.203). It would have been useful in having the experiences of students with and without special needs to grasp a better understanding of their feelings towards physical education. It also would have been beneficial to be able to observe inclusive physical education
classes to get a better understanding of successful strategies that have been adopted.

An additional limitation stemmed from the two-year timeline prescribed by the Master of Teaching program. Without this time constraint, ongoing interviews would be able to be conducted over time. In order to fully examine inclusion within physical education it would have been useful to conduct observations and conduct the interviews overtime to see the ongoing benefits of the inclusive physical education program. I acknowledge that while the findings informed the topic at hand, they cannot generalize the experience of teachers more broadly speaking. Despite these limitations, there is much value rooted in the research approach and methods.

Several areas of strength are embedded in the small-scale, semi-structured, qualitative research approach that was selected for this current study. The significance of interviewing teachers allowed me to hear from them in more depth than a survey could allow for, and it also created space for teachers to speak to what matters most to them when it comes to the topic at hand. Turner (2010) validates this strength by stating, “the data provided by participants are rich and thick with qualitative data” (p.756). In this way, the interviews validated the teacher’s voice and experience, and provided an opportunity for them to make meaning based on their lived experiences. Turner signifies that this “open-endedness allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up” (p.756).

3.7 Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, this study adopted a qualitative research approach that used semi-structured interviews as a means of procedure. This method was used to best explain how information was gained in order to grasp an understanding of teachers’ experiences on inclusion
in physical education. In order to select participants for the study, purposeful and convince sampling took place within my network of connections to mentor teachers to fulfill the criteria necessary to grasp the accurate information given the purpose of the study. Next, chapter four reports the research findings on the findings that emerged through the data analysis of the four research interviews with elementary teacher participants Sarah, Helen, Tracey and Nicole. The findings will be discussed on how they assist in understanding teachers’ experiences with the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction / Overview

This research study aimed to shed light on the experiences of teachers regarding the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four elementary school teachers with the pseudonyms; Sarah, Helen, Tracey and Nicole. The study adopted purposeful and convenience sampling methods to locate teachers to participate in the research study. Each participant met the criteria of being in the field for fifteen years or more, and each participant had worked in a physical education setting that included children with special needs. This chapter reports findings extracted from the data analysis of the conducted interviews. According to Creswell (2013), “data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for data analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding” (p. 180). Following this procedure, the interviews were subsequently coded and analyzed, reducing the data into three themes. The broad themes emerged from this analysis included:

1. Teachers’ confidence in providing inclusive physical education.
2. Challenges for implementation of inclusive physical education.
3. Teachers’ practices related to inclusive physical education.

These themes also have sub-themes that further illustrate the participants’ experiences with inclusive physical education. Teachers’ confidence in relation to implementing inclusive physical education was related to three main areas; a teacher’s level of professional development in physical education, the number of years in the field of education, and the collegial support received when implementing inclusive physical education. Teachers spoke to two main challenges in implementing inclusive physical education; which included the concern for the
safety of each student, as well as the lack of specialized equipment within the physical education program. Lastly, the participants had adapted successful strategies in physical education, to make it inclusive to all students. These strategies include: the rich structure of the lessons within the physical education program, the teachers’ ability to make modification and accommodations based on the individual needs of their students, and the social benefits of physical education when implementing a peer partner strategy. Each theme will be introduced and elaborated upon using the voices of participants. Subsequent analyses will discuss the findings within the context of relevant literature. Finally, future implications for practice will be discussed.

4.1 Teachers’ Confidence in Providing Inclusive Physical Education

This theme explores the factors that affect the confidence of teachers in implementing physical education. Three sub-themes will be discussed in the context of, (1) professional training, (2) years in practice, and (3) collegial support. Each sub theme will be related back to the confidence levels experienced by each participant in providing inclusive physical education. There was no association between the teachers’ additional qualifications and professional development within the field of physical education and their level of confidence to implement an inclusive practice. Contradicting previous research, the amount of years teaching, also seemed to have no association to the confidence of the participants. Participants indicated the support received by other educators greatly affect their confidence in their practice. The support provided by collegial staff members and its relation to confidence levels was in agreement with existing research.

4.1.1 Professional training

There was no clear indication of the amount of professional training in physical education a teacher had received and its effect on a teachers’ confidence in providing inclusive physical
education to all students. While participants came from many different teaching backgrounds related to professional development, each participant varied between their relationship of their professional development and their confidence in their practice.

Levels of confidence were analyzed in comparison to each participants’ level of professional development. Helen, who has not taken any additional qualifications in health and physical education, stated she had not been well prepared for inclusive physical education. When responding to a question pertaining to confidence in implementing inclusive physical education, Helen explains, “Well I am confident myself. But… that being said it’s still, it’s still tricky.”

Nicole, who has not had any additional training in health and physical education, explained, “I am getting more confident with experience.” The next participant, Sarah, who has completed additional qualifications in health and physical education, added, “I had training in Phys. Ed. and in special needs. But I don’t ever remember there being a cross over between the two of them.” When asked about her confidence level in teaching inclusive physical education Sarah responded, “I would say for the most part [I feel confident].”

The final participant Tracey who has her undergraduate degree in health and physical education, and who has also taken additional qualifications on the subject, explained when thinking about her general education program, “I think [in the general education program] we had a couple of days teaching physical education, but I don’t think there was a whole lot addressed about special needs.” When asked about her confidence level, Tracey noted “Nope. (Laughs). I don’t think I am all that confident with anything. I think there is always something to learn.”

When looking at the level of confidence in providing inclusive physical education to all students, responses varied. The teacher with the least amount of professional development
indicated she felt confident in providing physical education to children with special needs, and the teacher who had the most professional development did not feel confident. This contradicts Zhang and Griffin (2007) who state “few teachers have the training … to include children with autism in their classroom and frequently feel uncomfortable and frustrated when including one or more students within the general classes” (p. 33). The participants’ level of confidence in relation to their professional development also refutes research conclusions made by Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000), stating that teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, the level of professional development and a teachers’ active experience of inclusion held significantly more positive attitudes towards inclusion.

**4.1.2 Years in practice**

Looking for other associations between teaching background and confidence the number of years the participant had been teaching was examined. The criteria for the study indicated teachers must have fifteen or more years of teaching experience and needed to have worked with students with special needs in a physical education setting. Each participant had between fifteen to twenty years of teaching experience and all four participants frequently work with students with special needs. Helen and Sarah were both in their fifteenth year of teaching, and they both indicated that they felt confident in providing inclusive physical education. Nicole, who had been teaching for twenty years indicated that she was getting more confident throughout the years. Lastly, Tracey who had also been in the field of education for twenty years was the only participant who indicated she was not confident in providing inclusive physical education. This aspect of years of teaching experience seemed to have no association to level of confidence. The participants’ years teaching and their confidence levels varied. This contradicts research by Gal, Schreur and Engel-Yeger (2010) who studied the attitudes of teachers working with students
with disabilities who found that an increase in a teacher’s age and the higher the number of years teaching can result in an increase of negative attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities. The importance of studying the attitudes of these educators, was the ways in which it reflected their confidence, and their views on including students with special need in their programs.

Through the qualitative interview, other issues were raised when speaking about supports needed to successfully implement inclusive physical education. Participants voiced that the amount of support that is given to them as educators within a physical education class was a large factor affecting a teachers’ confidence.

4.1.3 Collegial support

It was clear throughout all four interviews that the teachers valued the support of other staff members in the physical education environment in order for inclusion to successfully occur. Helen, who originally stated she was confident in providing inclusive physical education to all students indicated she received “no support” during implementation. She also explained she sees that “[the] gym [is where] teachers are probably getting the least amount of support in schools.” When asked about the kinds of support needed to be successful, she indicated “well, if you have a principal that is um, you know, supportive, and has EA support with students with physical needs, that would be great. It would almost be necessary.” The participant elaborates on the importance of support when she states, “if you don’t have the support of the admin and the office and you don’t have back up, for an EA, it’s a dangerous place, it really is.”

The necessity of the support provided in the physical space of the gym is consistent with research undertaken by Hodge et al. (2009) who concluded that teachers desire and need help from specialists before they are willing to implement a fully inclusive classroom. Tracey and
Sarah are also both in agreement that in order to successfully provide inclusive physical education to all students, essential support need to be made available. Tracey mentioned, “I do rely heavily on the [educational assistant] when they are bringing in the kids who are needier. The behavior I have no trouble with, but it’s the physical… needs that I rely on the [educational assistants].” Sarah further explains the significance of supports by saying:

   Usually if somebody is incredibility, you know needs a lot of support, often sometimes they will come with an [educational assistant], so if that is the case, it makes my life even easier because the [educational assistant] will actually work with them to facilitate the drills, or to get them to cooperate fully.

She further explains the topic of support and states, “so I think when the supports are in place and people are listening to what the teacher needs, it can be amazing. And if it is not, it can actually be bad for everybody.”

Support can also mean different forms of collaboration, for example, between teachers, special education teachers, parents and other members of the learning team. Nicole mentioned she found it necessary to:

   Follow a lot up with the SERT [special education resource teacher], like we come up with strategies all the time. Lots of meetings with the parents, all the time, lots of meetings with the SERT after school to think of strategies that would work for the student, so you can make it better [for the student].

This is supported by Klein and Hollingshead (2015) and Hodge et al. (2009) who explain the need for professional collaboration with clear and constant communication between special educators, physical educators and parents. Collaboration needs to be present in order to successfully implement inclusive physical education. The interviews indicated support is indeed
a factor related to teachers’ confidence in their inclusive programming and in the success of themselves as educators and in their students.

4.2 Challenges for Implementation of Inclusive Physical Education

Although the teachers’ varied in their confidence levels, all four teachers spoke to a number of challenges that occur in the physical education program that they have to overcome to provide a program that meets the needs all students. This theme centers on two main challenges that the teachers in the study identified when implementing an inclusive physical education program. The participants indicated that safety can become a concern when working in physical education. Relatedly, the participants discussed the issue of specialized equipment in schools.

4.2.1 Safety

Participants noted that the large physical space made it difficult to manage students’ behaviours and the large spaced caused concerns for students’ safety. Sarah expressed her concern over safety issues:

I taught a gym class once where I have a student with a behavior IEP and he went off in the middle of a class and ran off. And I was stuck with 32 grade 6’s and it was a massive safety risk, because I wasn’t supported effectively.

In order to overcome the safety risk that was presented, the participant referred back to the support that is necessary for the inclusive program to be successful. If the support is not in place, it creates a huge safety risk for all students.

Helen expresses her concerns for safety and ideas around how to overcome the challenge. “So it is very important to keep a very structured environment, to make sure that everybody understands the safety rules before you get gym classes going and go over safety rules frequently for the behaviorally challenged.” Nicole maintained the same challenge of safety, and stated her
strategies to overcome the concerns. “Now I try and keep it really well organized, basically for safety too in the gym.” Each participant acknowledged that safety is a serious issue in inclusive physical education, and they are providing strategies to overcome their concerns.

The participants’ concern of safety risks that pose a challenge when implementing inclusive physical education are in accordance with Menear and Neumeier (2015) who express the need for and consideration of safety when planning activities and teaching strategies to include students with autism spectrum disorder. While it is important to identify challenges in implementing inclusive physical education, it is also essential that teachers are reflecting on ways in which they have been successful in providing strategies to overcome these challenges.

4.2.2 Equipment

When speaking to the challenges in implementing inclusive physical education, participants acknowledged the importance of adapted equipment and the constraints in finding and utilizing such equipment. Helen discussed her learning in her additional qualification course in special education and said, “we were introduced to a bunch of special types of equipment that you might see in a school, for kids with physical special needs. Have I never seen that equipment? Not ever.” She began to reflect on other schools and programs she had been employed at. “I have been in four schools and I have never seen any of it in any of the schools. So in my AQ course and that was the only place I saw the specialized equipment.”

Sarah noted in her interview, “sometimes there is an issues with equipment, you know, if there is a special sort of equipment someone might need, we might not have it just because of constraints financially with the school.” When reflecting on the adapted equipment in her school’s physical education resources, Nicole also stated, “there is no special equipment in the gym that I know of... I have borrowed a few things from the special needs room.” Nicole was
able to collaborate with other educators in the school to find specific resources and equipment that students needed in the gym, relying once more on collegial support.

Statements by both participants allude to the fact that the use of adapted equipment can actually promote inclusive education for a student. Their opinions overlap with research done by Lieberman, James & Ludwa (2004) who explain that “using strategies such as … adapted equipment can enhance the inclusive environment of a classroom (p. 37).” The participants acknowledged the importance of the equipment, however, challenges were perpetuated due to the lack of access to it in many cases.

4.3 Teachers’ Practices Related to Inclusive Physical Education.

Each of the participants discussed and described many overlapping strategies aiming to include children with special needs in physical education. Three sub themes will be discussed which reflect the approaches related to implementing inclusive physical education; (1) structure of the lessons, (2) individual needs, and (3) peer partners and the social benefits of physical education. The educators were aware of the curriculum expectations and had inclusive ways to structure their lesson in order to increase participation. To provide an inclusive approach to physical education, individuals strengths need to be considered, and each teacher participant indicated that it is essential to work need by need in terms of inclusive strategies. Lastly, each participant spoke to the importance of peer mentors as a beneficial strategy in order for students with special needs to experience the lasting benefits of physical education.

4.3.1 Structure of lessons

Goodwin, Walkinson and Fitzpatrick (2003) indicated that “further investigation is needed into the pedagogic strategies and instructional techniques,” (p. 202). To contribute and further this research, a large portion of the interview surrounded the question, “what are the
teaching strategies you use in order to provide inclusive physical education to all students.” This question was essential in developing knowledge that contributed to previous research.

The participants indicated there were many instructional methods and strategies that need to be employed in order for an inclusive physical education program to run smoothly. Each participant had a great understanding of the curriculum. The teachers’ knowledge of the curriculum reflected work done by Goodwin, Walkinson & Fitzpatrick (2003), when they explained, “an organized and purposeful approach to teaching requires an understanding of the goals and objectives of the instructional program as well as a working knowledge of the curriculum,” (p.200). Each participant shared similar strategies and techniques. In explaining her instructional strategies, Tracey suggested:

Start off small, so we never start off with, let’s say we are doing volleyball for example, we’d never start off with playing a game, we would start off with smaller skills and build up, hopefully increasing their confidence and for [the students with special needs] to realize that a lot of the other kids are having just as much difficulty as they are.

Similar to Tracey’s approach, Sarah explains, “try to make sure you are getting a continuum for what you can do … starting out with skills that are very adaptable ensures all students are set up to be successful in an environment that is safe and supportive.” Nicole explains one of her techniques that is also closely related to the pedagogical approaches of Tracey and Sarah, “I like to start out with non-competitive games, like more group cooperative games and stuff in the gym to try and help everybody have success.”

Helen affirmed this pedagogical approach and proclaimed, “whether from the classroom you learn the little activity, and then you can take it to the gym and feel safe and successful in there and then out to a play area where you can feel safe and successful with the same activity.
So start small and work up.” By starting off small and working your way up, all students are able to acquire the movement skills to transfer to other areas of life.

4.3.2 Individual needs

Throughout all four interviews, participants highlighted the importance of knowing your students, and working to structure an environment that best supports each student’s individual needs. Participants were very similar in their beliefs when discussing adaptations and modifications that need to be done in order to make sure physical education is inclusive to all students. In order to adapt lessons and meet the needs of all students, knowing each individuals’ strengths, interests, and needs is key.

The participants indicated that modifications or adaptations need to be made, and that these changes need to be done on an individual basis. When speaking to the adaptations and modifications in her own classroom, Tracey disclosed that they are “based on individual needs and what their needs are, you have to make some modifications.” Sarah agreed when she points out, “you have to go on a need by need basis, and you really need to see what they can do, and don’t assume that they can’t do something, so give the shot first before you start changing things.” These teachers are in agreement to the existing research conducted by Menear and Neumeier (2015) suggesting, there needs to be an adapted curriculum and specific teaching strategies to successfully include children with special needs.

Researchers Klein and Hollingstead (2015) concluded, that in order to adapt a program for an individual child, an educator needs to “evaluate each child’s specific needs through observation, as well as consultation with family members and other health care providers” (p.33). Sarah agreed with the importance of consultation. She, however, offers a strategy that goes beyond the consultation of family members and health care providers., as suggested by Klein
and Hollingstead. Sarah foregrounds the importance of the voice of the students:

Talking to the kid can be very useful, so if you sit down with the kid and ask, how can I help you, what can I do? They can be usually pretty honest about what they can and can’t do, and what they would like to try and do.

Getting to know students and challenging biases is an important part of all aspects of physical education. Tracey contended this by explaining it is essential to an inclusive classroom to, “remember to talk to the kids, and establish relationships when you can ... always very important not to make assumptions when people walk through your door.” She further explains, “I always start off expecting from [students with special needs] what I would expect from anybody else and then just modify as we go.”

Nicole speaks to the importance of knowing your students, their needs, strengths, but also speaks a lot about their interests. “I just think special needs kids like to do preferred activities, at least you can really grab their attention if you get their interests.” Adapting the program to fit the interest of your students is very beneficial in creating a program that suits many needs. This is supported by Zhang and Griffin (2007) who examined solutions to include children with special needs in physical education. The researchers state the need for individualized instruction, repetitions, adapting the lesson to the interests of the students, along with having unique and novel equipment options for students to engage with.

4.3.3 Peer partners and social benefits of physical education

All four participants spoke to the social benefits of the physical education program. The participants were united in their explanation of a peer support strategy to promote social benefits, and all included this strategy in their own practice.
The buddy system was a common strategy many of the participants used in their physical education environment. Sarah explains, “get a buddy system. Buddy [the student with special needs] up with another peer who can help them, and be supportive and encouraging and really fostering a supportive, encouraging environment in your class.” The strategy of a buddy system aligns with work done by Zhang and Griffin (2007) who indicate the importance of a buddy system by demonstrating that peer tutors offer a successful way to develop positive social interactions between all students. Nicole’s commentary also agrees with this pedagogical strategy. “We can partner them up, or in a large group that can help, they can participate, and they feel, and I think it really helps their self-esteem too.” Tracey also uses the peer support strategy and said “include the kids, so lots of team stuff, and buddy them up, buddy them up with a student that’s going to be um, considerate of those kids.” Helen also indicates, “you’re looking to put a really well developed peer support with them.”

4.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the main themes that were brought up in all three interviews. The examined themes were: Teachers’ confidence in providing inclusive physical education’, ‘Challenges for implementation of inclusive physical education’ and ‘Teachers’ practices related to inclusive physical education’. These themes were connected to the research questions of the study, and gave a voice to the interview participants.

Factors were examined that influenced a teachers’ confidence in providing physical education to all students. The participants with the least amount of professional development within physical education seemed to have to most confidence in providing inclusive physical education. These results conflicted with the research conducted by Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000), explaining that teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, the level of professional
development and a teachers’ active experience of inclusion held significantly more positive attitudes towards inclusion. The participants’ years of practice in the field of education appeared to have no association or connections to their level of confidence in the field. Collegial support however, increased the comfort level and confidence of the participant when implementing an inclusive physical education program. Analyzing the confidence levels of teachers in terms of inclusive physical education was important in identifying factors that would cause an educator to be more successful and comfortable in their programming. While it is evident that support is necessary to successfully include all children, further research needs to be conducted on how to make these supports more available for teachers. The lack of relationship between the level of professional development in the field of physical education, and the confidence levels of teachers in providing inclusive practices in that area, furthers the question of the experiences of the teacher. Are the types of experiences in practice more influential than additional qualifications on the level of confidence of the teachers? More research needs to be done on the relationship between inclusive education and the experiences a teacher as had to influence their practice and confidence.

Next, it was clear that teachers’ experience two main challenges when implementing inclusive physical education. The concern for safety posed as a large challenge for many of the participants. Adapted equipment was seen as essential by majority of participants, but became a challenge when the resources were not made readily available. Questions arise when thinking about equipment in physical education programs. How do schools receive and allocate funding for these additional resources to promote the inclusion of all students in the physical education programs? It is important for teachers to address the challenges and concerns they face when
implementing inclusive physical education in order to reflect on their practices and improve their strategies used in practice.

Finally, teachers applied three main strategies to implement an inclusive physical education program, which aimed to meet the needs of all students. All participants understood the need to structure the physical education program with a gradual continuum of skills, which makes every activity and lesson adaptable to suit the needs of all children. All participants concluded that lesson and program modifications or adaptations needs to be implemented on an individual basis. Every child is going to be different in terms of ability and needs. Lastly, teachers’ all promoted the strategy of peer partners in order to increase the social benefits and success of their inclusive program. These positive strategies make the case for why all students would benefit from teachers’ incorporating an inclusive physical education program. It is important to look at strategies that successful inclusive physical education programs are adopting in order for other programs to develop.

Initially this study was aimed at researching the experiences of teachers that would inform the current literature regarding inclusion of children with special needs in physical education. The study provided strategies that educators are using for implementation but also dove into challenges they had to overcome in order to have a successful program. Confidence levels seemed to be positive only when receiving support from other staff members. Going forward, more research needs to be done on how to better support teachers in including students with special needs in physical education, and how to make these supports better assessable to all teachers.
Next in Chapter 5, broad and narrow implications for these findings will be discussed. Recommendations will be presented and potential areas of further research will be given and explained.
Chapter Five: Implications

5.0 Introduction / Overview

The present study was designed to learn more about teachers’ experiences with the inclusion of students with special needs in physical education. The findings serve to support the extant literature pertaining to inclusive physical education and specifically, to document strategies teachers are currently using to include all children. This chapter summarizes research findings, highlights the present study’s implications for various stakeholders, provides recommendations, and suggests directions for future research.

5.1 Key Findings and their Significance

Following interviews with three educators, a rigorous analysis revealed three important themes: (1) teachers’ confidence in providing inclusive physical education, (2) challenges for implementation of inclusive physical education, and (3) teachers’ practices related to inclusive physical education.

The first theme, teachers’ confidence in providing inclusive physical education, explored connections between professional development, number of years teaching, and the amount support from other professionals and the effect on the confidence of teachers’ inclusive practices. The necessity of the support provided in the physical space of the gym is consistent with research conducted by Hodge et al. (2009) who concluded that teachers desire and need help from specialists before they are willing to implement a fully inclusive classroom. Klein and Hollingshead (2015) and Hodge et al. (2009) also explain the need for professional collaboration with clear and constant communication between special educators, physical educators and parents. We need to examine teachers’ experiences working with students with special needs in order to understand their confidence in providing inclusive strategies. Teachers advised that
collegial support increased their comfort and confidence levels when implementing inclusive physical education.

The second theme, challenges for implementation of inclusive physical education, serves to remind us that teachers need to overcome many challenging situations in the physical environment of the gym in order to develop a successful program for all students. The concern for safety posed as a large challenge for many of the participants. Adapted equipment was seen as essential by the majority of participants, but became a challenge when the resources were not made readily available. It is important for teachers to address the challenges and concerns they face when implementing inclusive physical education. These challenges are important to examine in order to improve strategies that could be used in inclusive practices. School systems as an institution need to realize that these challenges do exist and approach them proactively in order to support inclusive practices.

The third theme, teachers’ practices related to inclusive physical education, provides examples of practical strategies that educators are currently using to support children with special needs in inclusive physical education programs. The structure and adaptability of the lesson and activity was essential for all the participants. These adaptations need to be implemented according to the needs of the individual students, understanding that there is a range of needs, and that all students are unique individuals. Peer partners was voiced as a key strategy in order to increase the social benefits and success of their inclusive program for all students. These positive strategies strengthen the physical education program, which allows all students to benefit from an inclusive physical education program.
5.2 Implications

The present study has important implications for educational reform. In broad strokes, this study should serve as a reminder to policymakers and curriculum planners that physical education provides a multitude of benefits for all students. The programming needs to be inclusive, in order for all students to benefit from the practice. The study provides novel insight into the issue of the lack of specialized equipment in physical education classrooms, and policy makers and principals should take heed. Participants allude to the fact that the use of adapted equipment can actually promote inclusive education for a student. Their opinions are consistent with research done by Lieberman, James & Ludwa (2004) who explain that “using strategies such as … adapted equipment can enhance the inclusive environment of a classroom (p. 37).” The participants acknowledged the importance of the equipment. Challenges were perpetuated due to the lack of access to it in many cases. If this specialized equipment is lacking and not made readily available for the use of physical education teachers across Ontario, then this could be affecting the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education programs.

Additionally, physical education programs that are not inclusive will prevent students with special needs from receiving the same benefits as their typically developing peers. If children with disabilities continue to receive less physical education compared to their non-disabled peers continues, as seen in the literature (Coates & Vickerman, 2010), then the rate of obesity among children with special needs could see a potential growth (Klein & Hollingstead, 2015; Tovin, 2013; Woolfolk, Winne & Perry, 2015). The potential implications of the increase rate of obesity could be drastic on our upcoming generations health of our students with special needs.

Knowing that students with special needs have higher obesity rates and less time in physical education programs, it becomes vital to our students’ health to solve this issue. The
implications of strategies and themes found in the present study could be straightforward and manageable actions that have the potential for a large benefit to the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education programs. Hopefully the adoption of these practical strategies can be used in order to create a future where there is a positive shift in inclusive physical education.

The present study also has two specific implications for teachers working in elementary education in a physical education setting. First, consistent with the conclusions of Zhang and Griffin (2007) the present study finds that participants are adopting strategies that are working to include students with special needs in their physical education programs. Knowledge of practical inclusive strategies from elementary physical education are beneficial for future physical education teachers. Being knowledgeable of strategies that are promoting inclusion, will assist teachers in creating a classroom that is working to benefit all students’ success. The implications of having a positive physical education class helps to foster a more positive school environment as a whole. Being educated about the everyday actions and strategies in physical education in order to include all students in the practice is an assessable way to provide the positive benefits and continuous impact for all students, including those with special needs.

Findings from the current study imply that in order for teachers to feel more confident and comfortable in providing inclusive physical education, the necessary support needs to be in place. Since the necessity of the support provided in the physical space of the gym in in strong demand, the implications of the present study suggest that collaboration between teachers, administration, parents, and specialists in the field is necessary in order to successfully implement inclusive physical education. Support provided to physical educators is indeed a factor related to teachers’ confidence in their inclusive programming and in the success of
themselves as educators and in their students. If physical educators do not receive the support they need in order to feel confident and comfortable to provide inclusive strategies, and overcome their challenges, the program will not meet the needs of all students and successfully provide the same education for all students.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications of the present study point specifically to several recommendations for Ministries of Education, school administrators, and teachers. Three recommendations will be outlined below: (1) Allocating funding for adapted equipment, (2) engaging in reflective practice, and (3) providing professional development and support for teachers in a physical education environment.

Adapted equipment was seen as essential by majority of participants, but became a challenge when the resources were not made readily available. Questions arise when thinking about equipment in physical education programs. Schools need to allocate funding for these additional resources and specialized equipment to promote the inclusion of all students in physical education programs. It is recommended that ministries of education and principals make it a priority to distribute funding for the adapted and specialized equipment for all schools.

It is important for teachers to address the challenges and concerns they face when implementing inclusive physical education in order to reflect on their practices and improve their strategies. The present study provides many practical strategies that are being adapted in the field by physical education teachers in order to make these classrooms inclusive to the needs of every student. All students and classes differ in terms of needs, and the strategies that work for their own individual students. The findings from this study make it essential that physical educators need to start making small and manageable changes in their teaching strategies. These strategies
need to be reflective in terms of the success they are creating for their students.

Recommendations of actions that could have a positive impact include: making observational notes about your students’ strengths needs and interest, and creating goals and success criteria for how all students, including those with special needs, are doing in physical education.

School administrators need to acknowledge the role that support plays in physical educator programs. Educators desire relevant training and need help from specialists before they are willing to implement a fully inclusive classroom (Hodge et al., 2009). Educators are at the forefront of education and need to be prepared to challenge the issues of inclusion. It is recommended that school administration provide professional development workshops in order to make educators more aware of potential practical, inclusive, physical education strategies. It is important and recommended that specialists in physical education, as well as special education, be present in schools for ongoing support and collaboration between these specialist and educators, in order to better support all students.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

The present study has served to expand upon the existing literature, and it has also highlighted the need for further study. The study provided strategies that educators are using for implementation but also dove into challenges they had to overcome in order to have a successful program. Confidence levels seemed to be positive only when receiving support from other staff members. In future research endeavors, it is recommended that a greater emphasis be placed upon how to better support teachers in including students with special needs in physical education.

Furthermore, the voices of students with special needs should be studied to ensure that the strategies and programs that schools are providing are meeting their individual needs. Student
voice from those with and without special needs would have a large impact on the research of the perceived benefits, and the success of existing strategies and programs. Often times students are able to indicate their own strengths and have a better idea of what is going to work best for their own physical learning journey.

In addition, further research can be done on the practices of teachers who are able to successfully establish inclusive environments for students with physical disabilities in schools and explain in-depth what that looks like. It would be beneficial for existing research to be complimented by observations of the implementation of inclusive strategies. There needs to be direct observation in order to deem the strategies successful.

5.5 Concluding Comments

There continues to be a growing understanding of physical education in students’ lives and its benefits to children today. The present research study was aimed at understanding teachers’ experiences with the inclusion of children with special needs in physical education. The findings can be of importance to physical education teachers, newly educated teachers, and professional development teams who could focus on strategies to create an inclusive environment within the physical education classroom. Acquiring knowledge about practical strategies that are promoting inclusive physical education programs could be valuable to all elementary teachers.

Grasping an understanding of teachers’ strategies and beliefs surrounding inclusive physical education of children with special needs will help to inform future practices that are beneficial for these students moving forward. Physical education is an important factor in the growing needs of children within society today. Providing inclusive physical education to all students has many benefits for students with and without special needs. These benefits of
physical education are limited for children with special needs if they are not getting the opportunity and support to be included in the program. We now know how important inclusive physical activity is for students with special needs. The present qualitative research can be used as a lens into the future of inclusive practices. The implications and further recommendations could be positive for our future generation and health of all our learners.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

INCLUSIVE PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Date:

Dear _______________________________,

I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on ways in which teachers are providing inclusive physical education to children with special needs. I am interested in interviewing teachers who are working at the elementary level, who do not have additional qualifications in health and physical education and teachers who have experience working with children with special need in physical education. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 60-minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my Research Coordinator Angela MacDonald You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a

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maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Researcher: Kaitlyn Mullett

Course Instructor: Angela MacDonald

Consent Form:

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kaitlyn Mullett and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: ___________________________________________
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn teachers’ experiences with inclusion practices and strategies used in physical education for the purpose of finding successful strategies that are being used to inform future practice. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your experiences with inclusion practices in physical education. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What grades do you teach or have taught in physical education?
3. What is your experience teaching physical education?
4. How have you been prepared in the general education program to teach students with special needs in physical education?
5. Do you have any special qualifications pertaining to special education or health and physical education?

Teacher Practices

1. What are your experiences teaching students with special needs in physical education?
2. What are the teaching strategies you use in order to provide physical education to all students?
3. How have you been supported in providing these strategies?
4. Are you making any adaptations or modifications to the physical education program to meet the needs of all students? If yes, explain some of the adaptations or modifications you have made?
5. Have you used any resources that you found helpful in implementing inclusive physical education?
6. How do you determine leaning goals for students with special needs in physical education?
Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

1. What do you believe are the benefits of physical education?
2. How are children with special needs experiencing these benefits?
3. What are your beliefs about full inclusion of children with special needs in physical education?
4. Do you believe children with special needs are getting equal opportunities in physical education compared to their typically developing peers? If yes, how is this being accomplished? If no, why not?
5. Are you confident in providing inclusive physical education to children with special needs?

Supports and Challenges

1. What challenges do you face when implementing inclusive physical education?
2. How do you overcome these challenges you face?
3. What support do you need from other support staff in providing an approach that best suits all children in physical education?

Next Steps

1. What advice would you give to beginning teachers in order to fully include every student in physical education?
2. What goals do you have as an educator to improve your practice in inclusive education?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.