



From Placement to Meaningful Inclusion in Physical Education: A Critical Integrative Review and Inclusion-Enactment Framework

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Abstract: Background: Inclusive physical education (PE) is proclaimed as a rights-based and social-justice imperative but mainstream placement alone does not necessarily guarantee meaningful inclusion. The central issue is an inclusion enactment gap between the intentions expressed in policy or by teachers and the lived experience of learners. Methods: A critical integrative review of the diverse empirical, theoretical, and review literature relevant to inclusive physical education in schools was carried out. Three related questions concerning learner outcomes, mechanism of inclusion or exclusion, and power or intersectional conditions were used to interpret the synthesis, which was structured around six conceptual families. The review is offered as a theory building synthesis rather than an exhaustive account of the field because it was not founded on a preregistered or fully audited systematic search process. Results: Access, meaningful engagement, agency, belonging, and learning and flourishing were found to represent five analytically distinct learner outcomes. Teachers, pedagogy, peers, and system/context are the four interacting domains that determine these outcomes, while intersectionality and power function across all domains. The synthesis draws attention to persistent conflicts between learner-deficit explanations, structurally constrained teacher adaptation, inconsistent evidence supporting strategies such as Universal Design for Learning, and insufficient attention to student voice. Conclusion: The proposed Inclusion-Enactment Framework re-conceptualises inclusive PE as an outcome-mechanism-context problem, as opposed to a placement status. It is a diagnostic and hypothesis generating model and not a validated measurement instrument. Future research should focus on the learner experience, the mechanisms of change, intersectional designs, inclusive assessment, school-level implementation, long-term outcomes and greater geographical diversity.

Keywords: Inclusive Physical Education, Meaningful Inclusion, Belonging, Agency, Intersectionality, Inclusive Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is located within international rights frameworks, education policy and social-justice discourse (UNESCO, 2017, 2020). In physical education (PE), however, policy commitment does not necessarily translate into an inclusive educational experience. A learner may be physically present in a mainstream lesson while remaining peripheral to the central task, occupying a token role, receiving a visibly easier but disconnected activity, or experiencing peer relations that communicate non-belonging. These possibilities expose a central problem for contemporary inclusive PE: presence is observable,

whereas meaningful inclusion is relational, embodied, educational and unequally experienced. A substantial body of scholarship has documented teacher attitudes, perceived barriers and reported strategies for inclusion. Reviews centred on students with special educational needs and disabilities have identified broadly supportive teacher attitudes alongside persistent concerns about competence, resources, class size and perceived severity of disability (Qi & Ha, 2012; Rekaa *et al.*, 2019; Tarantino *et al.*, 2022). More recent scholarship has widened the analytical lens to diversity associated with disability, migration, religion, gender, sexuality, race and body size. Karamani *et al.* (2026), for example,

describe a recurrent pattern in which teachers endorse inclusion while also reporting constraints on enactment and identifying differentiation, choice, student-centred pedagogy and positive peer interaction as important practices.

This expanding literature indicates why another catalogue of attitudes, barriers and strategies would offer limited conceptual advance. Disabled students' accounts show that integrated settings can still reproduce low expectations, social isolation and ableist assumptions. Student-centred work on racism demonstrates that PE can reproduce racialised stereotypes and everyday racism as well as provide opportunities to challenge them (Abel *et al.*, 2024). Weight-inclusive scholarship questions obesity-centred PE discourses that may stigmatise students in larger bodies (Derbyshire *et al.*, 2024). Critical work on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) cautions against treating UDL as a settled evidence-based solution before PE-specific implementation and outcome evidence is sufficiently mature (Haeghele *et al.*, 2024; Lourenço *et al.*, 2025). Curriculum studies similarly show that social-justice intentions can remain difficult to translate into enacted practice (Gerdin *et al.*, 2025).

These developments shift the central question from whether PE teachers value inclusion to how inclusive intentions become, or fail to become, inclusive learner experiences. In this review, the term inclusion-enactment gap refers to the distance between policy commitment, teacher intention or formal placement, on the one hand, and learners' actual experience of access, meaningful participation, agency, belonging and educational value, on the other. The term overlaps with established distinctions between integration and inclusion, policy and practice, intended and enacted curriculum, and Haeghele's (2019) 'inclusion illusion' (Slee & Allan, 2001; Penney *et al.*, 2018). Its purpose is not to rename these established problems, but to connect them within a PE-specific analytical frame in which learner outcomes are the primary evaluative level. Accordingly, this review has three purposes. First, it critically integrates established and recent international scholarship on inclusion in school PE, with particular attention to what becomes visible when learner experience is considered alongside teacher-focused evidence. Second, it reframes meaningful inclusion through five interdependent but non-hierarchical outcomes: access, meaningful participation, agency, belonging, and learning and flourishing. Third, it develops an Inclusion-Enactment Framework that links these outcomes to teacher, pedagogical, peer and

system/context mechanisms while treating power and intersectionality as conditions capable of modifying every domain.

Therefore, the notion that placement alone is insufficient is not the unique contribution of the manuscript; that distinction is already well recognized. Organizing previously scattered issues around an outcome-mechanism-context logic is one of its contributions. The framework asks which learner outcome is affected, by what mechanism, in what environment, and for whom. As a result, inclusive physical education is assessed not only by who is assigned to a class but also by who is acknowledged as a legitimate participant, who has the ability to influence participation, who develops meaningful relationships and competence, and who leaves PE with an enhanced rather than diminished relationship with movement. The framework is offered as a conceptual and hypothesis-generating contribution, not as a validated scale or causal model.

2. Methods

2.1 Critical Integrative Review Approach and Interpretive Scope

This paper is positioned as a critical integrative review rather than a systematic review, meta-analysis or fully audited scoping review. Its purpose is conceptual integration across heterogeneous empirical, theoretical and review literatures. Accordingly, the review does not claim exhaustive coverage, prevalence estimates, pooled effects or a complete census of studies published through 2026. Methodological transparency is instead provided through explicit scope, concept families, evidence types, interpretive questions and limits on the claims that can legitimately be made from the assembled literature. The interpretive scope was organised around six concept families that recur across the literature represented in the review: (1) inclusive, integrated and adapted physical education; (2) disability, special educational needs and neurodiversity; (3) belonging, participation, agency and student voice; (4) race, ethnicity, migration, religion, gender, sexuality and body/weight stigma; (5) inclusive pedagogy, differentiation, UDL, cooperative learning and social-justice pedagogy; and (6) teacher learning, institutional support, curriculum and policy. Foundational sources were retained where they continue to structure contemporary debate, while recent empirical and review literature was used to examine current developments and contested claims.

Qualitative studies, surveys, mixed-method research, systematic and scoping reviews, conceptual analyses, curricular studies, and a few policy papers are among the evidence included in the synthesis. Evidence that synthesized multiple studies, focused on the learner experience, looked at inclusion or exclusion mechanisms, or made a theoretically significant contribution to understanding inclusive physical education was given more interpretive weight. The evidence should be seen as a purposeful conceptual selection rather than a comprehensive identification of all available studies because the manuscript lacks a database-specific search record, duplicate-removal details, and a systematic screening flow.

2.2 Interpretive Synthesis Procedure

Three related analytical questions were employed in the synthesis. First, which learner level outcome (i.e., access, meaningful engagement, agency, belonging, or learning and flourishing) is at risk? Second, which mechanism (i.e., peer relationships, educational design, teacher expectations and knowledge, or system/context) is involved? Third, what intersectional condition or power relationship might change how that mechanism functions? These enquiries offered a standard analytical framework for contrasting disparate sets of data without reducing them to a single effect estimate. The research agenda, four implementation domains, and five learner outcome dimensions were also developed with the assistance of these questions. By looking at common ideas and procedures covered in the chosen literature, the framework was gradually created. Every category was created to tackle a distinct facet of inclusion. Additionally, care was taken to make sure that no single indicator especially physical presence in a regular physical education class, was seen as adequate proof of significant inclusion. This process is interpretive rather than frequency coded or psychometric; the resulting constructs must be empirically validated before they can be utilized as measurement dimensions or causal pathways. The review was not conducted according to a pre-specified or fully documented search protocol. Therefore, claims such as “most studies” and statements about the frequency of particular themes are avoided unless they are supported by findings from an included systematic or scoping review. The paper mainly collects relevant and influential studies to build a theoretical comprehension of inclusive physical education. It does not aim to be a systematic account of the frequency of different findings across the field.

2.3 Substantive Scope and Terminology

This review focuses on physical education (PE) in schools, particularly mainstream primary and secondary schools. Selected adapted PE, alternative provision and broader health and physical education scholarship is included where it directly informs the conceptual problem. The review does not assume that inclusive PE, integrated PE, adapted PE and mainstream PE are interchangeable. Integrated or mainstream placement refers primarily to location, whereas inclusive PE refers to the quality of educational and social experience within and around that placement. Terminology varies across countries and scholarly traditions. The term SEND is used only where it reflects the language of cited studies or policy contexts; elsewhere, broader wording such as students with disabilities and/or special educational needs is preferred. Identity-first and person-first disability language both occur in the literature. This review preserves the terminology of the cited literature, employing 'disabled students' where a social model framework is analytically appropriate.

3. Results

3.1 From Physical Placement to Meaningful Inclusion

Placement is a common way to operationalise inclusive physical education: children who may have previously been segregated are taught in mainstream classrooms. Placement is important because being excluded from shared learning environments is a significant outcome in and of itself, but it is not a sufficient indicator of inclusion. According to [Haegele \(2019\)](#), integrated environments are presumed to be inclusive without proof that students feel socially or educationally included. This is known as the "inclusion illusion." Because ability is publicly displayed, bodies are highly visible, peer interaction is central to activity, and success is frequently organised around speed, skill, fitness or competitive performance, this issue is particularly important in physical education. This distinction is supported by recent learner centred evidence. In a phenomenological study of 31 students with special needs in Turkish middle and high schools in 2026, participants expressed a strong desire to be involved in shared activity but also described episodes of tokenism, spatial exclusion and limited legitimate participation ([Şahin & Karakaya, 2026](#)). The finding is analytically important because it shows that physical integration is compatible with limited participation and

belonging, thus distinguishing placement from the quality of enacted inclusion.

This review distinguishes five outcomes of meaningful inclusion. Access concerns practical entry into and use of the learning environment. Substantial engagement in the main learning task, as opposed to merely being present, is what constitutes meaningful participation. The ability of students to communicate their preferences, negotiate accommodations, and have an impact on how participation takes place is known as agency. Recognition, valued membership, and reciprocal social connections are all aspects of belonging. Learning and flourishing include both academic advancement and the degree to which physical education fosters competence, self-assurance, physical literacy, and long-term engagement with movement. Although they are linked, these dimensions are not interchangeable. A customized exercise might encourage students to participate, but if it makes them stand out from others, it might also undermine their sense of community. In a similar vein, peer support might increase involvement, but if students constantly rely on others for assistance, they might have less control over their activities. Giving students options can increase their engagement and independence. Some students, meanwhile, can use these options to avoid taking part in crucial educational activities. While students with lesser ability levels could feel discouraged by constant comparisons with their peers, highly competent students might benefit from competitive activities. These examples show that inclusion cannot be judged simply as present or absent. Different aspects of inclusion need to be examined together, as improvement in one area may not always lead to improvement in another.

The framework thus emphasizes the creation of learning environments that respond to differences between students rather than requiring students to adapt to a fixed curriculum. This approach raises important questions about education and ethics. When the focus is only on helping students adapt, existing teaching practices and curriculum expectations might not change. Conversely, an inclusive perspective asks the degree to which the curriculum acknowledges the equal importance of students of varied physical abilities, identities, and movement experiences and skills. It also acknowledges that teaching activities, assessment methods and classroom arrangements can be adapted to support meaningful participation.

3.2 Conceptual Derivation and Theoretical Boundaries of the Five Learner Outcomes

The five dimensions were developed by bringing together related concepts identified in the reviewed literature. They are proposed as a conceptual framework and have not yet been tested or validated as a measurement scale. Access derives from ecological and rights oriented work on environmental, material, and communicative conditions of participation. By determining whether students are actively engaged in a shared educational activity, meaningful participation goes beyond placement. Student voice, consequential choice, and control over decisions that impact participation are all sources of agency. Recognition, reciprocal ties, and valued membership are all indicators of belonging. Learning and flourishing extend beyond immediate classroom participation to encompass competence, confidence, academic advancement, physical literacy and future relations with movement. Although the dimensions are analytically different, they have an impact on one another. They should not be seen as phases that each student must go through in order to advance. Access may improve without belonging; belonging may coexist with insufficient challenge; agency may increase without improved learning; and a learner may report stronger belonging in one setting while experiencing greater physical access in another. The framework considers each of the five dimensions separately when assessing inclusion. Figure 1 shows how these outcomes can influence one another, but they do not necessarily develop in a fixed order.

The five dimensions are based on distinct theoretical approaches, although they are closely related. Access is based on ecological and rights-based methods that take into account how participation is influenced by both the learning environment and the learner. It does not consider reduced access to be solely due to disability. By assessing whether students are actively engaged and play significant roles in group learning activities, meaningful participation goes one step further. The freedom pupils have to express their preferences, make choices, and shape their participation is referred to as agency. Choosing from the options provided by teachers is not the only option. Iannucci and Parker (2022) explained that student voice can strengthen agency when teachers listen to students and make suitable changes to their teaching practices. Belonging is also more than simply being present with other students. It involves feeling accepted, respected and valued as a member of the group (Table 1).



Figure 1. Five analytically distinct and mutually influential learner outcomes of meaningful inclusion in physical education.

Table 1. Conceptual boundaries, indicative evidence and misleading proxy indicators for the five learner outcomes

Dimension	Conceptual basis	Core question	Indicative evidence	Common misleading proxy
Access	Ecological and rights-oriented accessibility; Haegele et al. (2018); O'Connor & McNabb (2021)	Can the learner enter and use the learning environment?	Accessible space/equipment; understandable instructions; safe entry to task	Physical presence alone is treated as inclusion
Meaningful participation	Substantive involvement in shared activity; Pocock & Miyahara (2018); Rekaa et al. (2019)	Is the learner engaged in the central learning activity?	Active role; adequate practice time; contribution to shared task	Token role or disconnected parallel activity is treated as participation
Agency	Student voice and consequential choice; Iannucci & Parker (2022); Mihajlovic & Giese (2026)	Can the learner influence how participation occurs?	Choice; voice; negotiation of adaptations; co-design where appropriate	Choice becomes permission to withdraw from valued learning
Belonging	Recognition, reciprocal relationships and valued membership; Rekaa et al. (2019); Juvonen et al. (2019)	Is the learner recognised and valued by peers and teacher?	Acceptance; reciprocal interaction; psychological safety; valued contribution	Compliance or absence of overt bullying is treated as belonging
Learning and flourishing	Educational progress, physical literacy and meaningful future movement; Durden-Myers et al. (2018); Brunsdon (2025); Hawes et al. (2026)	Does PE expand competence, confidence and future movement possibilities?	Progress; meaningful challenge; knowledge; physical literacy; positive movement identity	Enjoyment or attendance substitutes for educational progress

This understanding is consistent with Juvonen *et al.* (2019), who described social inclusion as a process shaped by relationships. Similarly, Rekaa *et al.* (2019) reported that students with disabilities may attend mainstream PE classes but still experience exclusion and a limited sense of belonging.

A greater variety of experiences are covered by learning and flourishing than by the other four aspects. As a result, it is important to distinguish between these two ideas. Improvements in students' knowledge, comprehension, and physical proficiency are referred to as learning in this evaluation. The term "flourishing" describes the wider advantages of physical education, especially its function in assisting pupils in forming a favourable and enduring bond with movement and physical exercise. This connection is supported by earlier studies on physical literacy and human flourishing (Durden-Myers *et al.*, 2018). Brunsdon (2025) also discussed flourishing as a possible aim of physical education. Similarly, Hawes *et al.* (2026) connected meaningful physical activity, physical literacy, embodiment, and flourishing within a common framework. In this review, the term learning and flourishing is used to refer to two related but different outcomes. The key concern of physical education is the knowledge, skills and understanding that students develop. Flourishing has a wider meaning and includes their personal development long term, well-being and positive relationship with physical activity. Intersectionality is not treated as a separate learner outcome. It is used as an analytical lens to understand how different social positions and institutional conditions may work together to influence the outcomes. This approach is based on the single-axis critique proposed by Crenshaw (1989). It helps to examine experiences that may not be clearly understood when social categories are studied separately. In physical education research, this approach is useful because factors such as disability, ethnicity, and gender can interact with one another and shape learners' experiences in different ways (Brazier *et al.*, 2025).

3.3 The Inclusion-Enactment Gap

Teachers typically favour inclusive education, but they also encounter practical challenges when putting it into practice, according to teacher-focused reviews. According to Karamani *et al.* (2026), these difficulties can affect other marginalised groups in addition to those with disabilities. This problem cannot be reduced to a teacher's lack of dedication. Teachers

frequently operate in institutional settings that make inclusive practice challenging. Inclusive teaching may be hampered by large class sizes, time constraints for instruction, inflexible facilities, competitive activity schedules, a lack of support personnel, and performance-based evaluation. Effective preparation, consultation, appropriate task design, and positive connections with students are typically necessary for meaningful inclusion. Teachers often make adjustments only when issues arise because they have little time and assistance. Because of this, inclusive practice may differ from teacher to teacher and may be highly dependent on each instructor's background and skill. This interpretation is also supported by curriculum analysis. According to Gerdin *et al.* (2025), social-justice goals might be expressed in HPE courses without receiving enough tangible backing for implementation. The end result is a coordination issue involving expectations, activity structures, peer norms, curriculum, assessment, leadership, staffing, facilities, and accountability rather than just a lack of teacher expertise. While professional learning is still required, teacher-oriented development may have limited durability if the conditions of practice are not altered. The inclusion-enactment gap thus reveals a multi-tiered implementation challenge that should ultimately be assessed in terms of learner experience rather than policy language, teacher intention or strategy adoption.

3.4 From Learner Deficit to Environment-Learner Mismatch

The inclination to see students as the primary cause of participation challenges is a significant issue in inclusive physical education research. Teachers frequently struggle to integrate kids with specific impairments, behavioural traits, or extra assistance needs, according to studies on disabilities. Studies including immigrant students, Muslim students, students with greater physical proportions, and other marginalized groups have revealed similar issues. Language problems, cultural customs, body size, and perceived lack of enthusiasm are occasionally mentioned in these research as obstacles to participation. These results aid in our comprehension of the real-world challenges faced by PE teachers. However, these difficulties should not always be attributed to the students. A learner-deficit approach focuses mainly on the limitations or difficulties of individual students. An ecological approach, however, looks at how teaching activity, physical environment, peer relationships and curriculum expectations can

create barriers to participation. 5 For example, in fast-paced team games, students need to respond quickly, communicate with teammates, move around the playing area, and make decisions in a short period of time. Some students may find these requirements challenging. However, teachers can reduce these difficulties by changing the playing area, the speed of the activity, rules, providing suitable equipment or assigning different team roles. Such changes may allow more students to take part in the same learning activity. This perspective implies that participant difficulties cannot be explained by student characteristics alone. The same student may be more or less participative depending on the activity, the available facilities, the teaching methods, the communication, the peer support and assessment practices. So the question should not be one of the individual characteristics of the student being the main problem, but about the interaction of the student with the learning environment. This difference is explained by figure 2. The left panel illustrates the learner-deficit approach, in which problems are largely attributed to the student. The right panel shows the

learner-environment mismatch approach, which points out that barriers can result from the interaction of student characteristics and environmental conditions. It also indicates that changes in these conditions may help reduce exclusion.

Ableism clearly shows how these conditions can influence students' experiences in physical education. Studies involving disabled students have shown that teacher expectations, activity structures, and peer relationships can affect their access to meaningful participation in PE (Haegele *et al.*, 2018; Dixon *et al.*, 2022; Mihajlovic & Giese, 2026). Similar issues can also be seen in other areas of inclusion. For example, weight-centred PE may present body size as a problem when weight loss, fitness testing, or ideal body standards are given too much importance (Derbyshire *et al.*, 2024). According to research on race, teaching all students equally might not be enough to eliminate racial inequality and prejudice in schools (Flintoff & Dowling, 2019; Abel *et al.*, 2024).

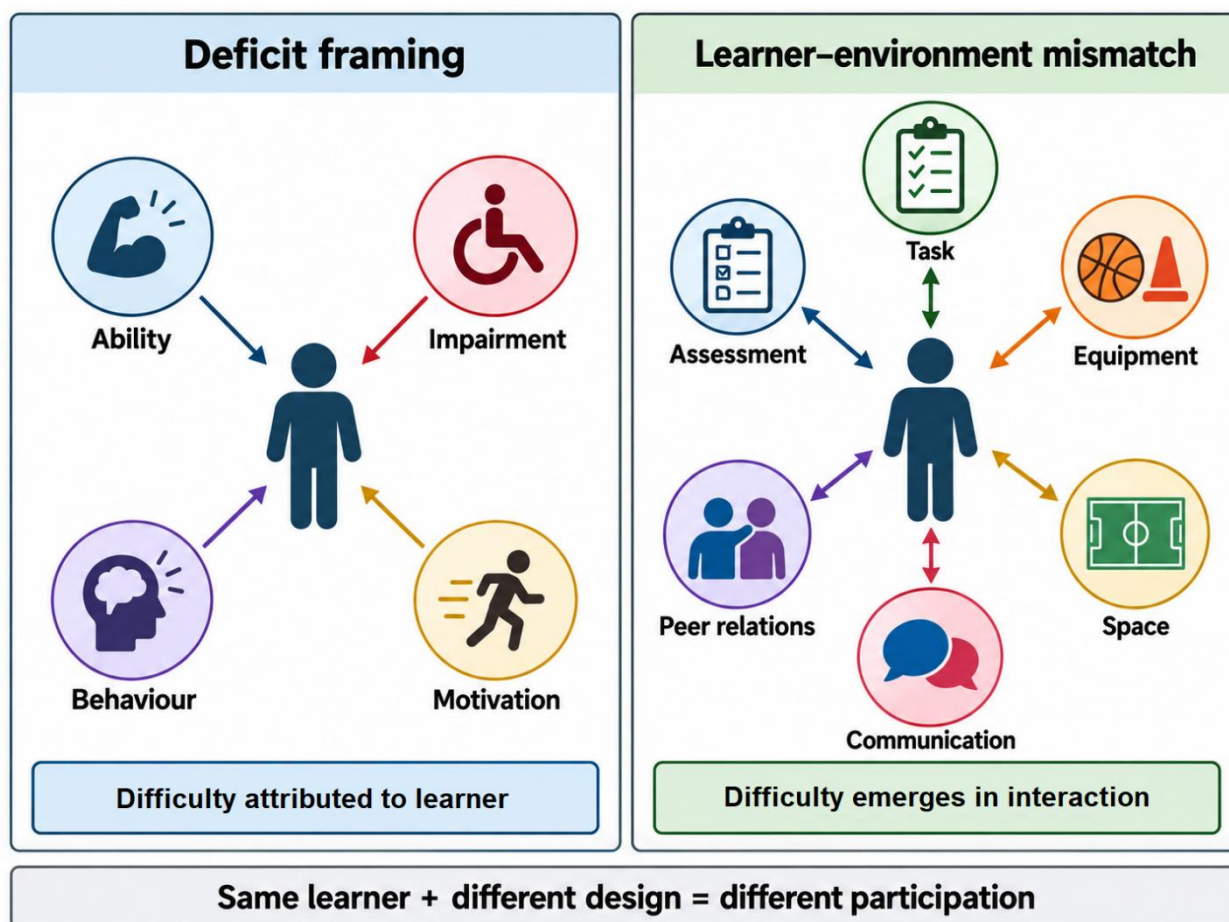


Figure 2. Reframing exclusion in physical education from learner-deficit explanations to learner-environment mismatch.

Research on gender and sexuality has also demonstrated that, despite their seeming neutrality, some widely used physical education activities and instructional strategies may perpetuate heteronormative presumptions and traditional gender norms (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022). Students still need specialized or extra support even if exclusion is understood as a mismatch between the learner and the environment. Instead, it encourages teachers and researchers to examine the conditions that create difficulties in participation. The focus is on understanding how learning tasks, peer interactions and the physical environment may contribute to exclusion. It also helps identify suitable changes that can improve participation while respecting students' dignity and maintaining appropriate expectations for their learning.

3.5 Inclusive Pedagogy: Mechanisms, Conditions and Unintended Consequences

Several teaching approaches have been suggested to improve inclusion in physical education. These include student choice, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, differentiation, activity customization, and teaching based on good relationships. But using these strategies by themselves does not guaranty that every kid will feel truly included. The way they are applied, the requirements of the students, and the environment in which instruction is conducted all affect how effective they are. Examining whether these strategies result in the anticipated advantages or unforeseen challenges is also crucial. One example is differentiation. To encourage student participation, teachers can alter the equipment, playing area, regulations, group configurations, or degree of difficulty of the activities. Such changes can improve access and offer learning opportunities that match students' abilities and needs. However problems can arise when a particular student is assigned over and over again to an activity that is significantly easier or totally different than the tasks done by classmates. This can lead to the student feeling isolated from the group or lower expectations of their progress. Differentiation should thus make it possible for students to work toward common learning aims while receiving appropriate support and challenges. It should not result in some students being regarded as outside the mainstream of learning. Florian's (2014) view of inclusive pedagogy is helpful here. Therefore, teachers should work to increase the learning opportunities available to all students, rather than creating completely different experiences for only some learners.

Cooperative learning and peer support can enhance students' sense of belonging when activities are structured so that all have a meaningful role. These strategies are most effective when students mutually support and depend on each other in a balanced manner. However, if a student is consistently positioned as a helper while another is consistently portrayed as dependent, the same tactics could lead to inequity. Therefore, the effectiveness of peer tutoring depends on role reciprocity, task design, social standing, and whether the supported learner maintains autonomy; it is not intrinsically inclusive. Student choice can lessen bullying, encourage cultural sensitivity, and offer worthwhile avenues for involvement. When marginalized students are frequently allowed to choose not to participate in central learning rather than being assisted in doing so, it can also turn into benign disengagement. Student autonomy should not be defined as allowing students to leave an activity without offering enough support. Students should be able to participate in significant learning activities with some degree of control thanks to meaningful choice. Teachers should maintain reasonable expectations for their students' learning and development at the same time.

The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is gaining popularity as a strategy for addressing variations in students' learning requirements. It pushes educators to give pupils a variety of ways to participate in activities, comprehend material, and show what they have learned. The main idea is to consider these differences during lesson planning rather than making changes only after students experience difficulties. However, Haegele *et al.* (2024) cautioned that UDL should not automatically be considered effective in physical education without sufficient supporting evidence. Furthermore, the pool of PE-specific interventions is still small: Lourenço *et al.* (2025) found 2,006 records in Scopus and Web of Science but kept 13 studies after screening and quality assessment. Although that review found positive participation and motor-skill outcomes across a variety of UDL-aligned interventions, consistent efficacy across PE contexts should not be assumed given the small number and heterogeneity of the included studies. Therefore, it is better to think of UDL as a testable design framework whose mechanisms, implementation fidelity, and learner outcomes need to be further assessed in real-world contexts. Relationship centered teaching can underpin several inclusive strategies. Students' perceptions of modifications as help or stigma, as well as their ability to express discomfort, preferences, or cultural limits, can be influenced by trust, rapport,

positive feedback, and student understanding. Strong relationships do not substitute for pedagogical competence; they influence how teaching decisions are perceived. Accordingly, Table 2 reframes commonly promoted inclusive practices as targeted questions that examine underlying mechanisms.

3.6 Peer Cultures, Status and Belonging

PE is unusually social and public-facing. Students are performing in front of peers, teams are visibly formed, competence is quickly compared and bodies are open to evaluation. Peer relations can thus produce inclusion or exclusion, irrespective of teacher intention. Karamani *et al.* (2026) identify peer interaction as both a facilitator and barrier, supporting the treatment of peer interaction as a central mechanism rather than a peripheral contextual variable. Belonging is more than liking. It is about being seen as a valid member of the learning community who brings something worthwhile. Competitive and ability stratified practices, where high status students dominate play and low status students are ignored, blamed or overlooked, can undermine such recognition. Mihajlovic and Giese (2026) illustrate how integrated PE can encompass both

experiences of belonging and experiences of exclusion for students with intellectual disabilities. Peer exclusion can also take the form of racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism, body shaming and language-based marginalization. Racial stereotypes and daily racism can affect students' experiences in physical education, according to Abel *et al.*'s (2024) systematic review based on student experiences. In a similar vein, Berg and Kokkonen (2022) found that even when teachers think they are treating everyone equally, heteronormative practices may have an impact on students' engagement and experiences. These results imply that inclusive education should take into account the social context in which students engage. Instructors must design activities that foster courteous communication, teamwork, and chances for students to assume various roles. Additionally, they must deal with actions that could discourage or exclude some students. These practices should be included in regular lesson planning rather than treated as additional activities. When cooperation, respect, decision-making and active contribution are considered important learning outcomes, teachers should provide opportunities to develop these qualities and assess them using clear and appropriate criteria.

Table 2. Mechanisms, potential benefits, enactment risks and evaluative questions for commonly promoted inclusive practices

Approach	Intended mechanism	Potential benefit	Risk if poorly enacted	Key evaluative question
Differentiation	Adjust task constraints while preserving the learning intention	Improved access and appropriate challenge	Publicly marks one learner as different or lowers expectations	Does the adaptation widen access without disconnecting the learner from valued learning?
Cooperative learning	Create positive interdependence and reciprocal contribution	Belonging, interaction and shared responsibility	Existing status hierarchies dominate group work	Are roles genuinely reciprocal and educationally meaningful?
Peer support/tutoring	Use structured peer interaction to support participation	Practice, feedback and social connection	Helper-dependent hierarchy; reduced agency	Does the supported learner retain influence and valued contribution?
Student choice	Increase autonomy and culturally meaningful participation	Agency, engagement and reduced spotlighting	Choice becomes routine withdrawal from central learning	Do choices remain connected to educational progress?
UDL-informed design	Anticipate variability before difficulties arise	Multiple legitimate pathways into learning	Framework label substitutes for evidence of learner benefit	Which design feature changes which learner outcome, and under what conditions?

3.7 Intersectionality and the Limits of Categorical Inclusion

Numerous research on inclusive physical education look at pupils according to personal traits such as body size, gender, colour, religion, sexual orientation, immigration status, or handicap. Our knowledge of inclusion has improved as a result of these studies. However, since a person might be a member of multiple social groups simultaneously, concentrating on only one trait at a time might not adequately describe students' experiences. Criticism of methods that look at social inequality through a single category gave rise to the idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In order to comprehend how many facets of students' identities interact with institutional and societal power relations, this review employs intersectionality. The aim is not simply to consider more categories, but to examine how their combined influence may shape students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in physical education. A disabled Muslim girl, a queer migrant student or a fat neurodivergent boy may experience PE through intersecting relations that are not captured by single-category analysis (Lleixà & Nieva, 2020; Brazier *et al.*, 2025). Brazier *et al.* (2025), for example, show how disability, ethnicity and gender intertwined in the PE experiences of girls in an English secondary school. Intersectionality is therefore not a request to add more demographic variables to otherwise unchanged analyses. It directs attention to how power operates through specific institutional and embodied contexts. In PE, norms of athleticism, masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality, thinness and able-bodied competence can overlap in defining the imagined 'ideal' participant. Learners positioned outside that ideal may encounter surveillance, lowered expectations, invisibility, pressure to assimilate or restricted access to valued forms of competence. An intersectional perspective also explains why uniform solutions may fail. For example, changes made to improve physical access may not fully address students' religious clothing requirements, safety concerns related to gender or language difficulties. Similarly, an activity involving both boys and girls may be open to all students, but some may still face barriers due to their cultural or religious backgrounds. A body-positive message may still exclude a disabled student if competence norms remain unchanged. Inclusion therefore requires contextual listening and analysis, not universal checklists. The evidence base is uneven across the diversity dimensions considered in this review. The current synthesis includes more scholarship on disability than evidence on socioeconomic inequality, Indigenous learners and a number of types of neurodivergence.

These areas should be viewed as priorities for inquiry, not as evidence domains of equal maturity.

3.8 Student Voice, Agency and Co-Design

A recurring gap in inclusive PE research is deciding which forms of knowledge are recognized as legitimate. In a 2026 scoping review of post-primary inclusive PE, Grogan *et al.* screened 953 records after duplicate removal and retained 29 studies; their synthesis concluded that PE-teacher perspectives continued to dominate the evidence base while pupils with special educational needs remained comparatively underrepresented. This imbalance is important because inclusion cannot be understood solely from teacher's intentions. Students directly experience the way a practice affects their dignity, social relationships, and learning. Recent student-centred research supports this view. Şahin and Karakaya (2026) found that students may strongly wish to participate, but at the same time experience token participation or an "inclusion illusion".

Student involvement can take different forms. At a basic level, students may be asked to give feedback only after important decisions have already been made. A stronger approach involves students earlier in the process. They can help identify barriers, express their preferences, suggest suitable adaptations, and provide feedback on their experiences. Iannucci and Parker (2022) explained that student voice becomes meaningful in PE when students are able to express their views and teachers are willing to listen and respond through changes in practice. Co-design can therefore be useful when the age of the students, their communication abilities, the curriculum, and the teaching context allow it. However, it should not be considered necessary in every situation. It also does not mean that professional responsibility is transferred from teachers to students.

Student agency becomes particularly important in these situations. This is especially true when any changes or adaptations may undermine their dignity or self-respect. For example, a teacher may provide a separate activity with the intention of protecting a student from failure. However, the student may experience the same arrangement as exclusion from the group. In another situation, a student may prefer a separate activity for a short period because it provides greater safety, confidence, competence, or meaningful interaction with peers. Therefore, the value of an adaptation should also be understood from the learner's experience and not only from the teacher's intention.

Mihajlovic and Giese (2026) demonstrate why integrated and segregated experiences cannot be evaluated by location alone. Future research should employ methodologies that are sensitive to diverse communicative profiles, such as visual methods, supported interviews, observation combined with participant interpretation and participatory approaches. The methodological principle is simple: claims to inclusion are undermined when those most affected are systematically least able to provide evidence.

3.9 Teacher Learning Beyond the 'More CPD' Solution

One of the most consistent suggestions in inclusive PE research is the need for more professional development. Teachers frequently claim that their training in inclusive physical education is insufficient. Concerns over their confidence and the limited applicability of broad inclusion training to practical physical education sessions are also voiced by them. These issues are significant, but increasing the number of continuous professional development (CPD) programs might not be enough to address them. Whether or when teachers alter their expectations, teaching strategies, student relationships, and classroom procedures will determine the outcomes of professional learning. Therefore, more student inclusion may not always follow from increases in instructors' expertise and self-assurance. Four connected fields of knowledge can be used to understand professional learning. First, design knowledge, which allows teachers to adapt equipment, playing space, group formations, assessment procedures and learning activities without compromising educational standards. The second is relational knowledge, which includes communicating effectively with students and their families, recognising situations that may carry stigma, and discussing appropriate accommodations. The third is critical knowledge, knowledge that helps teachers to understand how discrimination on the basis of disability, race, gender, body size and other social differences may be perpetuated through everyday teaching practices even when they seem neutral. The fourth is implementation knowledge and relates to the practical elements of inclusive teaching. This includes working with support staff, managing available teaching time, following school policies and developing practices that can continue even when individual teachers change. In order to describe many facets of professional learning, the current review highlighted these four topics. They have not yet received empirical validation as distinct

dimensions; instead, they are suggested as conceptual categories. According to a recent systematic study by Marcos-Rivero *et al.* (2026), inclusive education training can enhance practicing and preservice PE instructors' self-efficacy, attitudes, and views. Programs that included hands-on training and direct interaction seemed very beneficial. Gains in teacher attitudes and confidence, however, do not always translate into gains in classroom instruction. Further research is needed to examine whether these improvements are maintained over time and whether they lead to meaningful improvements in students' experiences of inclusion.

The four forms of knowledge are linked to the wider Inclusion-Enactment Framework. Design knowledge mainly supports pedagogical decisions. Relational and critical knowledge influence teacher practices and peer interactions. Implementation knowledge connects classroom practice with wider system conditions. Future research on professional learning should, however, evaluate the usefulness of different types of knowledge. Conceptual usefulness does not establish effectiveness. The way professional learning programmes are conducted is also important. General seminars may help teachers become more aware of inclusive education, but they may not always lead to changes in their everyday teaching practices. Lesson study, co-teaching, observation, coaching, school based inquiry, and collaborative planning may be more directly connected to the practical difficulties teachers encounter. These strategies, however, also require adequate staffing, leadership support, and time. Therefore, professional learning should be seen as both a systemic and an individual problem. The evaluation of professional learning needs to be more than just teacher satisfaction or self-efficacy. The more important question is whether professional learning leads to changes in teaching practice and student experience. Future research should consider its impact on lesson planning, participation patterns, peer interaction, student reported sense of belonging and educational progress.

4. Discussion

4.1 Inclusion-Enactment Framework for Physical Education

A multi-level framework for understanding inclusive physical education is supported by the review's findings. Five learner outcomes (i.e., access, meaningful involvement, agency, belonging, and learning and flourishing) are at the core of the framework. Four

interrelated domains (i.e., teacher, pedagogy, peers, and system/context) influence these outcomes. Instead of being viewed as distinct domains, power and intersectionality are viewed as cross-cutting conditions. This is because they can affect multiple processes across every area of the framework. Expectations, beliefs, critical awareness, interactions with pupils, and professional expertise are all part of the teacher domain. Curriculum implementation, task design, differentiation, UDL-informed practices, grouping, assessment, choice, and feedback are all included in the pedagogy domain. Friendship, cooperation, status, bullying, stereotypes, and social norms are all included in the peer domain. Policy, leadership, facilities, scheduling, class size, support personnel, family and community expectations, and resource allocation are all included in the system/context domain. These components are combined into a single framework in Figure 3. Instead of concentrating just on whether specific tactics are employed, it centers evaluation on the learner's experience. The non-linearity of the

framework is deliberate. An improvement in one outcome may not always translate into an improvement in another. The way that inclusion is experienced in practice may be influenced by a variety of factors that interact across the domains. For instance, despite having high standards for every student, a teacher can find it challenging to implement inclusive practices due to a large class size, time constraints, or inappropriate facilities. Similarly, peer-support activities may fail to yield the desired results if students' social status and influence inequalities are not addressed. Even if a school has an inclusive education strategy, its evaluation procedures could nevertheless prioritise a limited set of performance criteria and physical skills. These illustrations demonstrate why a single score or indicator cannot be used to evaluate inclusion. The suggested approach takes into account how various learner outcomes are impacted by peer connections, instructional strategies, and school environments. This method aids in determining the areas where children are still struggling and where inclusion is succeeding.

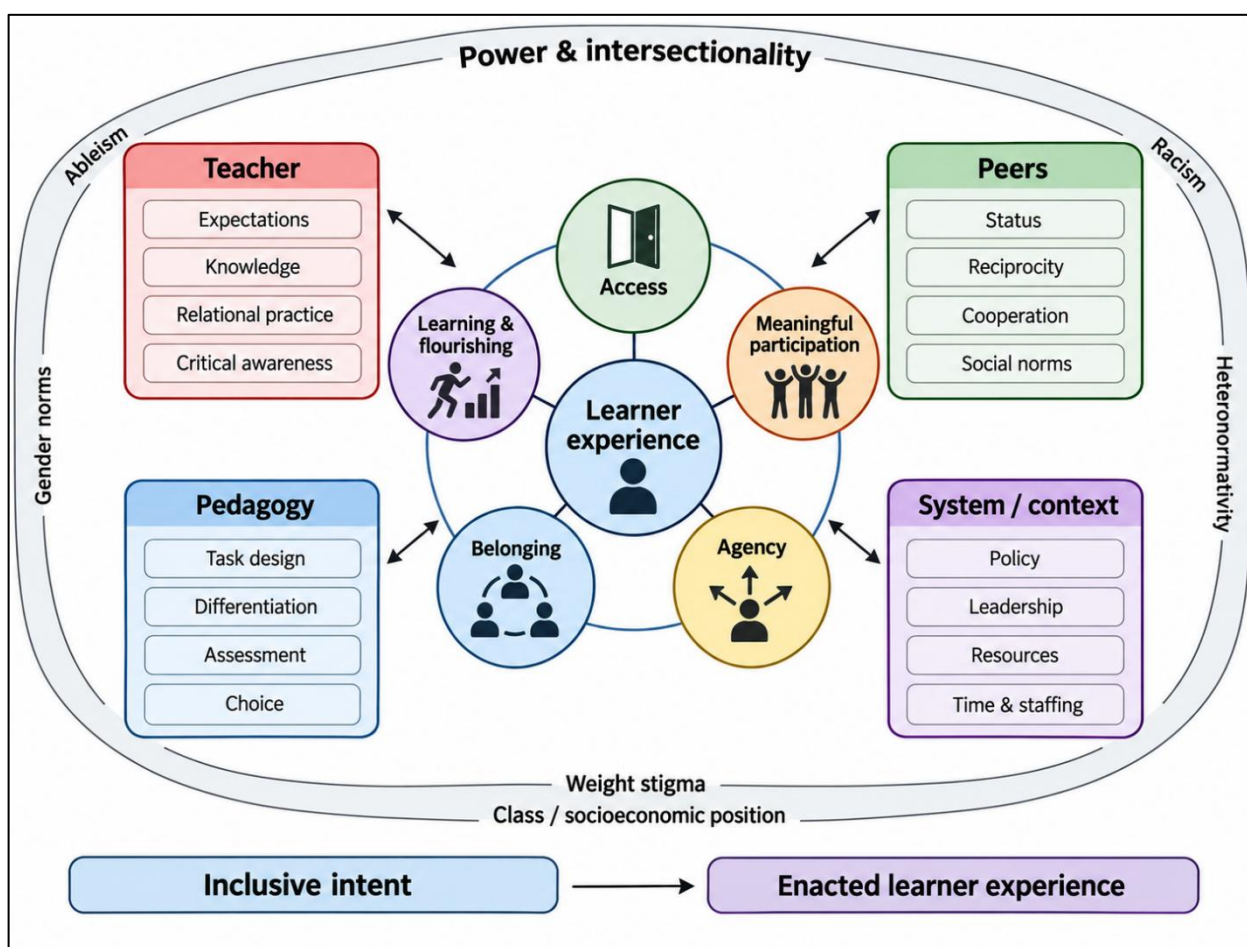


Figure 3. Inclusion-Enactment Framework for physical education: learner outcomes, interacting implementation domains, and cross-cutting power and intersectionality.

The forms of discrimination shown around Figure 3 are examples and do not represent every possible condition. Ableism, racism, gender norms, heteronormativity and weight stigma may also interact with social class and economic background to influence students' experiences.

4.2 Distinctive Contribution and Boundaries of the Framework

The framework does not present teacher attitudes, peer relationships, environmental barriers or the gap between policy and practice as new issues. These issues have been addressed in previous research in inclusive physical education. The main contribution of this framework is that it synthesises these issues and connects them to five learner outcomes. It looks not only at whether teachers use inclusive strategies, but also at how these strategies impact students' access, meaningful participation, agency, belonging, and learning and flourishing. It also looks at why these changes are taking place, who benefits and how the conditions around them shape the outcomes. The framework considers four related areas: teachers, pedagogy, peers and the wider school system and context. This provides a broader understanding of the factors that influence inclusion. It also differs from approaches that focus mainly on placing students in mainstream PE classes, as it gives greater importance

to the actual experiences of students within those classes. Power and intersectionality can alter the operation of every domain. The model is intended for diagnosis, conceptual comparison and hypothesis generation; its constructs, boundaries and proposed relationships require empirical validation before use as a measurement instrument or causal explanatory model. Table 3 summarises this diagnostic logic. In the analysis of all four domains, there should be a look at which physical abilities, identities, backgrounds and skills are generally deemed normal or acceptable in physical education. It should also take into account how discrimination based on disability, race, gender, sexuality, body size, and social class can influence students' chances to engage in meaningful learning activities.

4.3 Research Priorities for the Next Phase of Inclusive Physical Education

Future research of inclusive physical education should not be limited to repetitive identification of barriers to inclusion. There is a need to pay more attention to understanding how inclusion can be achieved in practice, what factors influence its effectiveness and whether improvements can be sustained over time. Based on the identified gaps in the reviewed literature, seven important research priorities are proposed.

Table 3. Inclusion-Enactment Framework: potential inclusion mechanisms, exclusion mechanisms and diagnostic questions

Domain	Potential inclusion mechanisms	Potential exclusion mechanisms	Diagnostic question
Teacher	High expectations; relational trust; critical awareness; responsive planning	Deficit beliefs; low expectations; unexamined bias; reactive adaptation	What assumptions about competence and normality shape teacher decisions?
Pedagogy	Anticipatory design; meaningful differentiation; cooperative learning; accessible assessment	Publicly stigmatising modifications; narrow activity traditions; performance-only assessment	Does the design widen legitimate pathways to valued learning?
Peers	Reciprocity; positive interdependence; shared norms; anti-bullying practice	Status hierarchy; exclusion; stereotypes; fixed helper/dependency roles	Who is recognised as a valued contributor?
System/context	Leadership; staffing; accessible facilities; planning time; coherent policy; family/community engagement	Large classes; inaccessible space; fragmented support; vague policy; resource scarcity	Are teachers and learners structurally enabled to enact inclusion?

First, the focus should be more on the students' experience. Future studies should investigate how students experience a sense of belonging, dignity, independence and educational value in PE lessons, in addition to teachers' views. Research methods should also be accessible to students with complex communication needs so that their experiences are not ignored. Grogan *et al.* (2026) found in their review of 29 studies that teachers' perspectives were still more often considered than students' experiences, thus supporting the need for this.

Second, research should investigate how inclusive teaching strategies work, rather than simply describe them as inclusive. We should not assume that Peer tutoring, cooperative learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiation are effective for inclusion without investigating their real impact on students. Research should specify how a strategy is implemented, for whom, under what circumstances, and through what mechanism it is expected to affect learner outcomes.

Third, use designs that are intersectional. In order to understand how disability, gender, race, migration, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, body size, language, and religion interact within particular contexts and institutional structures, researchers should look beyond categories that are mutually exclusive.

Fourth, examine inclusive assessment. Assessment is an underdeveloped mechanism through which PE defines valued competence. Research should look at whether assessment systems reproduce narrow performance standards or acknowledge other forms of learning, growth, and contribution.

Fifth, carry out implementation studies at the school level. To understand how inclusive practice is sustained, the field requires long-term research on the relationships among leadership, scheduling, staffing, facilities, curriculum, and professional development. While brief interventions can show promise, they provide limited evidence of durability.

Sixth, future research should explore the long-term effects of inclusive physical education. How students experience PE classes can affect their interest in physical activity and their desire to stay active outside of school. Positive experiences can help students build physical literacy, maintain interest in movement and enhance their overall well-being. Conversely, repeated experiences of exclusion may discourage some students from engaging in physical activities. Longitudinal studies

are required to understand these possible outcomes. Such studies should also deal with the difference between what students learn during PE lesson and how their attitude toward physical activity develops over the time. These outcomes should be investigated separately rather than assuming that improvements in one will automatically lead to improvements in the other (Durden-Myers *et al.*, 2018; Brunsdon, 2025; Hawes *et al.*, 2026).

Seventh, inclusive PE research needs to pay more attention to geographical diversity and different perspectives on knowledge. The majority of the literature included in this review comes from North America, the UK, and selected European countries. But the practice of education, cultural expectations, and the resources available vary from country to country. Thus findings from these regions may not be equally applicable to other settings. More research is needed from South Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and areas with scarce educational resources. The studies from these settings should evaluate if the existing approaches to inclusion are suitable to their local conditions. They should also identify where changes are needed and question assumptions that may not reflect local cultural and educational experiences. The seven research priorities are presented in Figure 4. Together, they highlight the need to move beyond identifying barriers towards understanding how inclusion works, evaluating its implementation, examining long-term outcomes and developing evidence from different educational and cultural contexts.

The principal research priorities emerging from the review, together with the corresponding methodological limitations, recommended research designs, and testable questions, are summarised in Table 4.

4.4 Implications for Policy, Practice and Teacher Education

The findings of this analysis indicate that inclusive physical education cannot rely solely on the enthusiasm and efforts of individual teachers. Schools and policymakers have a significant role in providing appropriate conditions for inclusion. Educational policies should ensure that schools have accessible facilities and proper equipment. Teachers should be provided enough time and assistance to create inclusive lessons together. Schools should also evaluate inclusion based on student real learning and involvement, rather than merely enrolling them in regular PE classes. Assessment

methods must recognize many types of learning, growth, and achievement. Support staff should receive

training related to physical education so that they can contribute effectively to inclusive teaching.

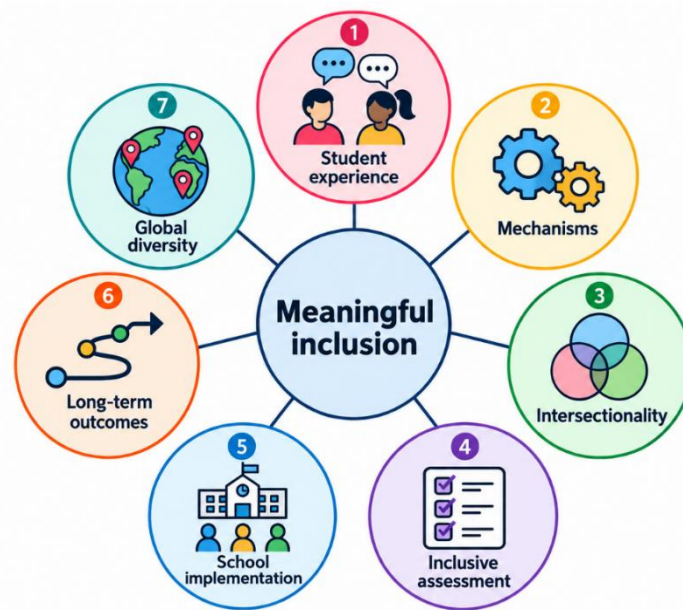


Figure 4. Research priorities for the next phase of transformative inclusive physical education.

Table 4. Research priorities derived from current limitations in inclusive physical education scholarship

Priority	Current limitation	Recommended research design	Key testable question
Student-centred evidence	Teacher perspectives remain highly visible	Participatory, accessible qualitative and mixed methods	Do teacher and learner assessments of inclusion converge?
Mechanism-focused pedagogy	Strategies are often labelled inclusive without adequate explanation of how they work	Process evaluation; comparative implementation studies	Which design feature changes which learner outcome, for whom, and under what conditions?
Intersectionality	Single-category designs remain common	Intersectional sampling and analysis	For whom does the same PE environment generate different outcomes, and through which intersecting conditions?
Inclusive assessment	Assessment is under-theorised	Design-based and validation studies	Do assessment systems recognise diverse competence, progress and contribution without lowering educational ambition?
School implementation	Short interventions and individual-teacher focus	Longitudinal multi-level case studies	Which organisational conditions sustain inclusive practice over time?
Long-term consequences	Immediate lesson outcomes dominate	Prospective longitudinal research	Do inclusive school PE experiences predict physical literacy, movement identity and participation beyond school?
Global diversity	Evidence is concentrated in high-income Anglophone and European settings	Multilingual, culturally responsive regional collaborations	Which mechanisms transfer across contexts, and which require culturally specific adaptation?

In planning lessons, teachers should also consider the different needs of students rather than make changes only when problems arise. When planning lessons, consider potential barriers related to activities, communication, equipment, space and peer interactions. Alternative ways of achieving the same learning objectives can then be provided. Also, these changes should be based on feedback from students. In the classroom, teachers can see students' interactions and engagement. They can, for example, look at who gets the opportunity to play, who gets to join in the conversation, who makes decisions and whose efforts are acknowledged. They should also pay attention to students who regularly need assistance or are allowed to remain outside the main activity. Such observations may help teachers identify forms of exclusion that are not immediately visible.

Teacher education programs should place a stronger emphasis on inclusive practices in all parts of physical education. Inclusion should not be taught as a distinct issue connected to disability. It should be included in curriculum preparation, instructional methodologies, and assessment processes. Preservice teachers require regular opportunity to organize, teach, monitor, and evaluate PE lessons with children of all abilities and backgrounds. These experiences can help children grasp the practical issues of inclusion. They should also consider if their teaching changes actually promote participation and learning. Such reflection should examine whether existing assumptions about physical ability, acceptable performance and student participation continue to influence their teaching decisions.

4.5 Limitations

This study was conducted as a critical integrative review and not a systematic review. Drawing on past reviews, seminal research and recent international studies that provide key insights into inclusive physical education. The main purpose was to collect relevant evidence and theoretical perspectives for a better conceptual understanding of meaningful inclusion in PE. The paper should not be taken to provide prevalence estimates of themes, or a complete census of studies published through 2026, in the absence of a database-specific audited screening record. Its principal strength lies in conceptual integration; its corresponding limitation is that relative frequency across the field cannot be inferred from the selected evidence.

A second limitation concerns uneven evidence density across dimensions of diversity. Evidence concerning certain types of neurodiversity, socioeconomic inequality, Indigenous learners, and various low-resource contexts is less extensive than the disability-focused evidence base. Evidence from a recent review shows the imbalance: only ten relevant papers were found when Brunssen *et al.* (2025) searched five databases for research on students with social, emotional, and mental health problems in physical education. This suggests a rather small and dispersed body of evidence for this demographic. Therefore, rather than being equally mature evidence domains, these later areas should be prioritized for future investigation.

A third limitation is language and visibility of published research. The vast majority of the main academic databases and citation networks contain studies published in English. Therefore, research in other languages and regions may be ignored. This could also explain the geographical imbalance observed in the present review. Where feasible, future scoping reviews should include studies published in multiple languages. Inclusion of researchers from other regions will help to better understand local terminology, physical activity practices, cultural differences and educational policies.

The fourth limitation concerns the selection and interpretation of literature. This review mainly focused on studies that made significant theoretical and conceptual contributions to inclusive physical education. It was not intended to identify and screen all available studies. Thus, the theoretical perspectives that were more dominant in the selected literature might have influenced the proposed framework. To study the applicability of the framework more empirical research is needed. In particular, future research should examine the relevance of the five learner outcomes, four implementation domains and the relationships between them in different educational contexts. There should be more focus on student groups and geographic areas that are not well represented in the current review.

5. Conclusion

Inclusive physical education cannot be evaluated solely by assessing whether students of all abilities and backgrounds attend the same class. It is also critical to determine whether the learning environment encourages all students to participate, develop skills, and feel valued. The current review highlights three significant findings. First, actual

presence does not guaranty inclusion. Students' experiences should be evaluated using five outcomes: access, meaningful engagement, agency, belonging, and learning and thriving. Each outcome contributes to a different perspective of how children experience inclusion in PE. Second, participation issues should not always be attributed to individuals' unique traits. Teaching activities, curricular expectations, assessment procedures, peer interactions, and existing power dynamics can all create impediments. Understanding how kids engage with these settings can aid in identifying improvements required to promote meaningful inclusion. Third, the efforts of individual teachers are insufficient to ensure inclusive physical education. Long-term changes require adequate teacher preparation, adaptable instructional approaches, strong peer connections, and ongoing school support. The suggested Inclusion-Enactment Framework brings these aspects together by investigating learner outcomes, the mechanisms that drive them, and the contexts under which inclusion occurs. It also recognises that improvement in one outcome may not necessarily lead to improvement in others. However, the framework remains a conceptual proposal. Further empirical studies involving different student groups, educational settings and countries are needed to examine the validity of its dimensions and the relationships between them.

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