



Challenges and Strategies of Physical Education Teachers in Multicultural Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The increasing cultural diversity in primary schools presents significant pedagogical challenges for physical education (PE) teachers. This study examines the difficulties experienced by PE teachers when working in multicultural learning environments and explores the strategies they employ to promote inclusive participation. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews and classroom observations involving two primary school PE teachers in culturally diverse. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring pattern and key themes. The findings indicate that language differences, varying cultural norms related to physical activity, and differing levels of prior sport experience influence classroom interaction and student engagement. Teachers responded to these challenges by adapting instructional methods, modifying activities, implementing cooperative learning models, and fostering culturally responsive communication. The study highlights the importance of intercultural competence and reflective teaching practices in creating equitable PE environments. These findings suggest that professional development programs should prioritize inclusive pedagogical strategies to better prepare teachers for multicultural classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity has become an increasingly prominent characteristic of primary education systems worldwide. Migration, globalization, and demographic shifts have contributed to classrooms composed of students with varied linguistic backgrounds, cultural traditions, and social experiences. Within this evolving educational landscape, physical education (PE) holds a unique position because it emphasizes interaction, cooperation, and embodied learning. However, these same characteristics can also intensify challenges when students bring different cultural understandings of physical activity, gender roles, communication styles, and participation norms (Cathrin & Wikandaru, 2023).

In multicultural primary schools, PE teachers are required not only to deliver curriculum content but also to navigate complex social dynamics. Differences in language proficiency may hinder instruction and limit students' ability to follow rules or express themselves during activities (Rohmah et al., 2023). Cultural perceptions of competition, physical contact, dress codes, and mixed-gender participation may further influence engagement levels. As a result, teachers must continuously adapt their pedagogical approaches to ensure that all students feel included and respected (Wibowo et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of physical education in diverse classrooms depends largely on teachers' intercultural awareness and instructional flexibility (Moreno-Murcia et al., 2021). Traditional teaching methods that assume shared cultural references may no longer be sufficient. Instead, educators must develop strategies that promote inclusivity, encourage mutual understanding, and accommodate varying skill levels and prior experiences. This requires reflective practice, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the ability to modify activities without compromising learning objectives (Wang & Wang, 2024).

Although previous studies have discussed multicultural education broadly, fewer have focused specifically on the experiences of PE teachers in primary school contexts. Given the physical, social, and cooperative nature of PE lessons, understanding these experiences is essential (Sumarjono et al., 2024). Exploring the challenges teachers encounter, as well as the strategies they implement, can provide valuable insights for teacher preparation programs and professional development initiatives (Gulya &

Fehervari, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to examine the challenges faced by physical education teachers in multicultural primary schools and to identify the strategies they use to foster inclusive and effective learning environments. Previous studies have discussed multicultural education broadly, but limited attention has been given to physical education in primary school contexts (Gulya & Fehervari, 2024; Shimon, 2025; Sumarjono et al., 2024). This study presents a novel contribution by specifically focusing on the unique pedagogical characteristics of physical education in multicultural settings, particularly its emphasis on physical interaction, cooperation, and non-verbal communication. Furthermore, this research provides empirical insights based on real classroom practices through the integration of interviews and classroom observations, allowing for a deeper understanding of how teachers adapt instructional strategies to accommodate cultural diversity. By highlighting context-specific challenges and adaptive teaching practices, this study contributes to the development of more inclusive and culturally responsive physical education in primary schools.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of physical education teachers' experiences in multicultural primary school settings. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for the exploration of perceptions, challenges, and instructional practices within their real-life context. Rather than measuring variables statistically, the study sought to interpret how teachers understand and respond to cultural diversity in their classrooms.

The participants consisted of two primary school physical education teachers working in schools characterized by culturally diverse student populations. Teachers were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that all participants had direct experience teaching in multicultural environments. This sampling strategy enabled the researcher to gather detailed and contextually relevant information from individuals who regularly navigate cultural differences in their professional practice.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews provided opportunities for teachers to describe the challenges they encounter, the strategies they apply and their reflections on inclusive

teaching practices. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide concrete examples.

Table 1. Data Collection

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Keywords
Challenges in Multicultural PE	Language barriers	Communication difficulties, instruction clarity
	Cultural differences	Student behavior, norms, values
Teaching Strategies	Instructional adaptation	Simplified instruction, demonstration
	Inclusive practices	Equal participation, engagement
Classroom Interaction	Teacher–student interaction	Feedback, engagement

Classroom observations were conducted to complement the interview data and to capture how inclusive strategies were implemented during physical education lessons. Observational notes focused on teacher-student interactions, instructional adjustments, communication methods, and student participation patterns. The combination of interviews and observations allowed for data triangulation, strengthening the credibility of the findings.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and observation notes were carefully reviewed, coded, and categorized to identify recurring patterns and significant themes. The analysis process involved several stages, including initial coding, grouping related codes, and refining broader thematic categories. This systematic procedure ensured that interpretations were grounded in the data.

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher maintained reflective notes throughout the analysis process and compared findings across data sources. Consistency between interview responses and observed classroom practices was examined to ensure reliability.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities and school information. Teachers were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed several recurring themes related to the challenges faced by physical education teachers in multicultural primary schools, as well as the strategies they employed to address these issues.

Language Barriers and Instructional Clarity

One of the most frequently reported challenges involved differences in students' language proficiency. Teachers explained that some students experienced difficulty understanding verbal instructions, particularly when complex game rules or safety procedures were explained. This occasionally resulted in confusion, reduced participation, or reliance on peers for clarification.

"... Some students do not fully understand my instructions, especially when I explain the rules in English. I often need to repeat or simplify my explanations." Teacher 1 A.P.

"... Students who are not confident in the language tend to follow their peers instead of participating actively." Teacher 2 K.M.

Classroom observations further supported these findings. Teachers were frequently observed repeating instructions, simplifying explanations, and using physical demonstrations rather than relying solely on verbal communication. These findings indicate that adaptive communication strategies, including repetition and visual modeling, are essential to ensure instructional clarity in multicultural physical education settings.

Cultural Norms and Participation Patterns

Teachers noted that students' cultural backgrounds influenced their attitudes toward participation in physical education. In some cases, gender-related expectations affected students' willingness to engage in mixed-group activities, while others showed hesitation toward physical contact due to cultural or personal values.

"... Some students are not comfortable with mixed activities or physical contact because of their cultural background." Teacher 1 A.P.

"... I noticed that some students prefer to stay passive because they are not used to this type of activity." Teacher 2 K.M.

These differences sometimes resulted in unequal participation levels, where more confident or culturally familiar students dominated activities. Observations also showed that teachers attempted to create inclusive environments by adjusting group compositions and encouraging

respectful interactions. These findings highlight the importance of culturally responsive teaching approaches to ensure equal participation among students from diverse backgrounds.

Variations in Skill Levels and Prior Experience

Another significant finding concerned disparities in students' prior experience and skill levels in physical activities. Some students demonstrated strong motor skills and familiarity with structured sports, while others had limited exposure.

"... Some students are already familiar with sports, while others are still learning basic movements." Teacher 1 A.P.

"... Students with less experience often feel less confident and tend to withdraw from activities." Teacher 2 K.P.

These differences sometimes led to frustration, disengagement, or reduced confidence among less experienced students. Classroom observations revealed that teachers addressed these challenges by modifying activities, adjusting rules, and organizing heterogeneous groups to balance skill levels. These findings suggest that differentiated instruction and flexible activity design are essential to accommodate varying student abilities.

Development of Inclusive Instructional Strategies

Despite the challenges, teachers demonstrated various adaptive strategies to promote inclusion in physical education classes. These included simplifying instructions, using visual demonstrations, and providing flexible participation options.

"... I try to modify the activities so all students can participate, even if they have different abilities." Teacher 1 A.P.

"... I focus more on teamwork and participation rather than competition." Teacher 2 K.M.

Observations confirmed that teachers emphasized cooperation, encouraged peer support, and created a positive classroom environment. These strategies contributed to increased student engagement and helped ensure that all students felt included regardless of their background or ability level.

The findings illustrate that multicultural diversity significantly shapes the dynamics of physical education in primary schools (Alfrey & Jeanes, 2023). Language barriers, cultural expectations, and differences in prior experience are interconnected factors that influence student

engagement. These results reinforce the idea that physical education is not culturally neutral; rather, it reflects social norms and values that may not be universally shared (Sari et al., 2023).

The prominence of language-related challenges suggests that effective communication in PE extends beyond verbal explanation (Kondo, 2022). Demonstration-based instruction, visual cues, and peer modeling function as essential pedagogical tools in diverse classrooms. This highlights the importance of multimodal teaching strategies in inclusive education (Delk et al., 2022).

Cultural norms surrounding gender roles and competition further underscore the need for culturally responsive pedagogy (Hernandez, 2022). Teachers who adopted flexible grouping strategies and cooperative learning structures were better able to minimize exclusion and create equitable participation opportunities. This indicates that inclusive practice requires intentional planning rather than spontaneous adaptation (Waszkiewicz, 2023).

Differences in skill levels also reveal the social dimension of physical education. When activities prioritize competition without modification, students with limited experience may feel marginalized (Adi et al., 2025). By adjusting rules and emphasizing collective achievement, teachers can transform PE into a space that promotes confidence and belonging (Abdalla & Moussa, 2024).

Overall, the results demonstrate that intercultural competence is a critical component of effective physical education teaching. Teachers must combine pedagogical knowledge with cultural awareness to respond appropriately to diverse student needs. The ability to reflect on one's own assumptions and adapt instruction accordingly emerges as a defining characteristic of inclusive practice (Hardovi et al., 2025).

These findings suggest that teacher education programs should integrate multicultural training specifically tailored to physical education contexts. Practical preparation in communication strategies, adaptive instruction, and culturally responsive activity design can better equip teachers to navigate increasingly diverse classrooms.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a specific multicultural primary school context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data obtained through interviews and classroom observations, which may be subject to researcher

interpretation.

In addition to the findings aligned with the research objectives, several unexpected findings also emerged. Notably, students' emotional factors, such as confidence, anxiety, and willingness to participate, were found to influence their engagement in physical education classes. These aspects were not the primary focus of the study but appeared consistently across both interview and observation data.

These findings indicate that, beyond instructional and cultural challenges, psychological and emotional dimensions also play a significant role in shaping students' participation in multicultural physical education settings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of physical education teachers working in multicultural primary school environments, focusing on both the challenges they encounter and the strategies they implement to promote inclusion. The findings demonstrate that cultural diversity significantly influences classroom interaction, communication, and student participation in physical education.

Language differences, varying cultural norms, and disparities in prior sport experience were identified as central challenges. These factors affect not only students' understanding of instructions but also their confidence, comfort levels, and willingness to engage in activities. However, the results also show that teachers are not passive in the face of these difficulties. Through instructional adaptation, cooperative learning structures, flexible rule modifications, and culturally responsive communication, teachers actively create more inclusive learning environments.

The study highlights that effective physical education in multicultural settings requires more than technical teaching skills. It demands intercultural awareness, reflective practice, and a commitment to equity. When teachers intentionally design lessons that acknowledge and respect diversity, physical education can become a space that fosters belonging, collaboration, and mutual respect among students from different backgrounds.

Ultimately, multicultural diversity should not be viewed as an obstacle in physical education but as an opportunity to enrich learning experiences. With appropriate strategies and institutional support, PE classes can contribute meaningfully to the development of inclusive school communities.

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