

A Comparative Review on Inclusive Physical Education: Bridging the Global Ideas and Indian Realities

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Abstract:

Inclusive Physical Education (IPE) is a process that unites students with special needs to regular education classrooms and enables them to develop physical competence and be socially included, and to reach their full potential, and that of their peers. IPE has its roots in international documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Salamanca Statement (1994), which demand pedagogical restructuring, universal design, and positive peer relationships. This comparative review examined how European/North America and Indian views on IPE differ and how there are common barriers to inclusive PE in both regions despite other contextual differences. While teachers showed support for inclusive theory, struggle to implement inclusive practice because of a lack of available adaptable equipment and demands for various games. On the other hand, in India, government policies such as the RPWD Act (2016) and National Education Policy (NEP) (2020) have mandated IPE. However, many challenges aroused while implementing IPE, including large class room capacities, infrastructures, cultural biases, and an academic focus. In order to challenge this obstacle, some promising initiatives has been taken in India, yet, these programs do not address the issue of integrating disabled students into regular classroom settings. The similarities between the two regions indicated that there are some needs for professional development and curriculum flexibility. Whereas, the differences indicated that while other countries have well-established models of inclusive PE, there are some gaps still remains between policy making and practice in India.

Keywords: Adaptive Education, NEP 2020, Education Barriers, Education Policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research Inclusive physical education (IPE) is an innovative educational philosophy that brings together students with disabilities into mainstream physical education classes. It creates opportunities for their physical competence, social belonging, and total development, along with that of their non-disabled classmates. Internationally recognized frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) describe IPE as more than merely placing students with special abilities into physical education classes. This requires restructuring pedagogy, flexible curricula, universal design, and positive peer relationships. Despite the theoretical basis for IPE (primarily in Europe and North America), some evidence indicates a gap between aspiration and applicability. International examples of IPE demonstrate that although IPE is philosophically accepted and has been widely advocated in theory, its practical application is significantly compromised. Research has shown that teachers endorse inclusion in theory yet face numerous barriers, such as insufficient pre-service training, scarce resources, rigid team-sport curricula, and exclusionary peer dynamics. In fact, student teachers in Europe have defined inclusion in relation to participation rather than structural reform (Marron & Morris, 2018), while research in North America highlights the successful

use of peer tutoring as one approach to enhancing inclusivity despite attitudinal barriers (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015).

Perspectives in India, framed by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, define IPE as a constitutional requirement to promote adaptive sports and accessibility in physical education (Kumar, 2025). However, IPE has made little progress in India because of several unique challenges: large class sizes (40 to 60 students), chronic shortage of infrastructure (80% of schools are not accessible), cultural stigma compounded by caste and gender issues, and teacher training based primarily on traditional approaches (Lab, 2024; Singh, 2025). Although there are promising nascent initiatives (for example, Khelo India Para Sports), physical education continues to be de-emphasized in favor of academic pressure.

Therefore, this comparative review bridges these contexts and identifies common obstacles (i.e., training gaps, resource deficiencies) as well as differences in perspectives towards IPE (that is, European pedagogical sophistication versus India's policy-practice gap). Understanding these distinctions is essential for developing effective scalable inclusive physical education solutions to meet the requirements of 2.68 crore people with disabilities (Census 2011) and the UN Sustainable Development Goal.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

To analyze international (European/North American) and Indian perspectives on inclusive physical education (IPE) and identify similarities and differences in barriers, best practices, and policy implementations necessary for achieving equitable implementation of inclusive physical education.

3. PREPARE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE ON IPE

Before Although the international literature you provided illustrates a consensus among countries regarding the concept of inclusive physical education (PE) as a human rights-based ideal, its implementation of inclusive PE is reported to vary greatly across and within countries with respect to the actual teaching of students with disabilities in general PE classes (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2009). Studies across Europe document that many teachers support inclusion "in principle," but are hesitant to commit to implementation due to concerns related to a variety of barriers (e.g., limited training in adapted/inclusive methods, limited availability of adapted equipment, and overcrowded curricula with few opportunities to implement modifications to traditional team sports) (Karamani et al., 2024; Kudláček et al., 2010; Marron & Morris, 2018). Studies in Ireland and Switzerland illustrate that beginning student teachers tend to equate inclusion with "participation" or "keeping everyone busy," while more experienced European researchers advocate for a transition to universal design and "inclusive pedagogy" that transforms task structures, space, assessments, and social relations to enable greater equality of opportunity for all learners regardless of ability status (Marron & Morris, 2018). The movement-based activities of early childhood physical education in Greece, which aim to facilitate social integration and intercultural education, are dependent on teacher support, collaboration with specialists, and a willingness to question deficit views of disability (Barla, 2025). The qualitative syntheses of studies conducted across multiple regions (including Europe, North America, and elsewhere) emphasize that when teachers are prepared, resourced, and supported to adapt activities to meet individual needs and promote positive peer interaction and student participation in decision-making processes, inclusive PE can positively impact social belonging and skill development for all learners. However, when these conditions do not exist, students report experiences of marginalization, low expectations, or tokenistic "integration" rather than inclusive PE (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2009).

4. INDIAN PERSPECTIVES ON IPE

In India, inclusive physical education is rapidly evolving as a constitutional right and a means of holistic development for all the learners. However, inclusive PE currently exists as an aspirational goal rather than

a typical classroom experience for teachers. National policy statements, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, formally mandate that schools ensure equitable access to physical education and sports for children with disabilities, emphasizing accessible physical spaces, qualified instructors, adaptable curricula, and reasonable accommodation. More recent Indian scholarly contributions to inclusive PE present inclusive PE as a “crucial aspect” of contemporary education that should support the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of all learners(Singh, 2025). Nonetheless, existing documentation highlights significant gaps between policy and practice, including shortages of adapted equipment, inaccessible playgrounds, overly congested curricula, and limited teacher preparation in adapted or inclusive instructional methods. Social/cultural factors, including stigma associated with disability, a performance-oriented view of sports, and a priority on academic subjects over physical education, further limit the meaningful participation of children with disabilities, particularly in larger government schools and lower-resource environments. Simultaneously, ongoing initiatives nationally and at the state level (for example, Kerala’s endeavors to develop accessible infrastructure and teacher training, paraspot programs, and NGO-supported adaptive sports programs) reflect an increasing awareness in India that inclusive PE is not simply a matter of physically integrating children with disabilities, but also a process of structuring pedagogy, environment, and assessment to provide children with and without disabilities with the opportunity to learn, play, and interact with each other on a more equitable basis Units.

5. CONVERGING PERSPECTIVES IN INDIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES TOWARDS IPE

There are considerable similarities in the perspectives of international and Indian scholars on inclusive physical education (IPE), illustrating that similar gaps in implementing IPE exist globally, despite vastly different economic and social environments. Scholars in both areas (European studies from the UK, Ireland, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015; Marron & Morris, 2018; Singh, 2025) and Indian analyses (Kumar, 2025; Singh, 2025) support IPE as a fundamental ethical and developmental imperative, stressing social inclusion, empathy building, and total development of students with and without disabilities. Nonetheless, similar barriers exist in both areas: limited pre-service training for teachers, limited resources (infrastructure and specialized equipment) for adapting instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and inflexible curricula (dominated by team sports) that cannot accommodate modifications (Marron & Morris, 2018; Singh, 2025). Similarly, attitudinal barriers exist in both areas: stigma and low expectations for students with disabilities, and exclusionary behaviours from nondisabled peers. However, positive peer tutoring and differentiated instruction yield social benefits (Barla, 2025; Haegele & Sutherland, 2015; Lab, 2024). Furthermore, both areas have similar policy mandates (the Salamanca Statement in Europe [file:5], and the RPWD Act 2016 and NEP 2020, but have failed to enforce them to achieve meaningful inclusion, resulting in tokenistic inclusion rather than an inclusive pedagogy. Both areas have documented best practices in using universal design, collaborative support, and community involvement to address inclusion, as illustrated by European peer models (Block et al., 2013) and Indian para-sports initiatives. These similarities reinforce the necessity for continued teacher training, malleable curricula, and monitoring to translate policy aspirations into equitable practices and provide rich opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.

6. DIVERGENT VIEWPOINTS BETWEEN INDIAN AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Despite the similarities in international and Indian perspectives on inclusive physical education (IPE), there are significant differences between the two areas, rooted in differences in socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructural environments that either augment or diminish the magnitude of the global barriers. For instance, European countries (for example, the UK, Ireland, and Switzerland (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015; Kudláček et al., 2010; Marron & Morris, 2018) have implemented robust policy-enforced and funded models that provide structured teacher training and universal design pilot projects, whereas India struggles with aspirational laws (for example, the RPWD Act 2016 and NEP 2020) that have no teeth and

thus are unimplemented due to chronic underfunding, bureaucratic red tape, and a lack of commitment (Kumar, 2025; Singh, 2025). Culturally, post-Salamanca campaigns in Europe to reduce stigma and promote progressive teacher attitudes and peer acceptance of students with disabilities contrast with the deeply ingrained societal stigma, caste-gender intersections, and performance-focused ethos in India that downplay the value of PE for academics and perceive disability as deficit-based. Another difference lies in the number of students in classrooms: in Europe, 20-30 students per class enable differentiation, whereas in India, 40 to 60 students per class exacerbate exclusion (Klavina & Kudlacek, 2011; Singh, 2025). Furthermore, European countries have adapted to support inclusive PE (e.g., accessible gymnasiums; Marron & Morris, 2018), whereas 80% of schools in India lack ramps to provide accessible physical spaces. Finally, innovation differs as well; European peer-tutoring models focus on creating equity (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015), whereas India's para-sports (e.g., Khelo India) focus on finding elite-level talent but do not integrate it into inclusive classroom PE. Lastly, the level of research depth varies significantly: Europe offers methodologically rigorous studies that foreground student voices (O'Brien et al., 2009), whereas Indian contributions remain largely nascent and descriptive of policy (Singh, 2025). These contradictions between European and Indian perspectives point to a 'trapped integration' model in Europe and an 'implementation gap' in India. Together, they underscore the need for tailored solutions in India and for a concerted effort to bridge the knowledge gap in European contexts.

7. CONCLUSION

The comparative lens of this study provides the foundation for future action plans for India. India could model its training approaches after those used in Europe adapted to address the large numbers of students in each classroom. In the next phase, educational research should be prioritized on empirical studies in India using longitudinal designs and intersectional analysis. A cross-country pilot studies should be also implemented to begin bridging the gap between policy and practice. Successful implementation of IPE will require shifting the paradigm of viewing disability as a deficit or limitation, to viewing it as a source of diversity and empowerment for teachers to be agents of change and evaluating the effectiveness of IPE programming based on the extent of student participation in sports and physical activities, sense of belonging, and engagement in lifelong physical activity. The creation of a system of global knowledge sharing will provide the mechanism for transforming IPE from rhetoric to reality and empower all students to lead healthy and active lives into their future.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declared that there is no conflict of interest exist in this study for publication process.

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