



UNPACKING STUDENT-TEACHERS CONCERNS FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICAL PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHING IN GHANA: PERSPECTIVE FROM THE UNIVERSITY PREPARATION PROGRAMME

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Abstract:

The imperative to prepare teachers for inclusive classrooms has gained prominence globally, driven by policy reforms and curricular shifts that emphasize equity in education. In Ghana, physical education (PE) teacher training programs face unique challenges in equipping student-teachers with the skills and confidence required to teach inclusively. This study explores the concerns of PE student-teachers regarding their preparation for inclusive practical lessons in two Ghanaian universities. Using an exploratory qualitative design, focus group discussions were conducted with 20 level 300 student-teachers, proportionally selected to reflect gender representation. Thematic analysis revealed four major areas of concern: the absence of Adapted Physical Education (APE) coursework, limited practical exposure to inclusive settings, insufficient pedagogical training for inclusive instruction, and a rigid curriculum that fails to accommodate students with disabilities (SWDs). These concerns align with Fuller's Concern Theory, reflecting self-, task-, and impact-related anxieties. The findings highlight the need for curriculum reform, including the integration of APE, enhanced practical experiences, and inclusive pedagogical strategies. The study contributes to the global discourse on inclusive teacher education and offers actionable recommendations for improving PE teacher preparation in Ghana and similar contexts.

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1. Introduction

The teaching profession is shaped by a constellation of factors that influence teacher development, efficacy, and retention. Among these, teacher concerns, defined as the thoughts, emotions, and uncertainties teachers experience in response to their professional roles have emerged as a critical area of inquiry (Vieiral *et al.*, 2018). In the context of inclusive education, these concerns become particularly salient, as teachers are expected to adapt their instruction to meet the diverse needs of all learners, including those with disabilities.

Globally, the quality and relevance of teacher preparation programs have come under scrutiny, especially in light of inclusive education mandates. Researchers, policymakers, and accreditation bodies have raised questions about whether current programs adequately prepare teachers for the realities of inclusive classrooms (Chesley & Jordan, 2012; Ingersoll *et al.*, 2012). In physical education (PE), these concerns are magnified by the practical nature of the subject and the need for specialized strategies to accommodate students with disabilities (SWDs).

Previous studies have identified a range of concerns among student-teachers, including insufficient content knowledge, lack of classroom management skills, inadequate pedagogical training, and limited exposure to inclusive practices (Mawer, 2014; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Klein and Hollingshead (2015) found that inadequate teacher preparation was a significant barrier to successful inclusion in PE settings. Similarly, Sharma *et al.* (2008) demonstrated that coursework could reduce teacher concerns, particularly in contexts with supportive legislation and practical training components.

This study is grounded in Fuller's (1969) Concern Theory, which categorizes teacher concerns into three developmental stages: self-concerns (focused on personal adequacy), task-concerns (related to instructional responsibilities), and impact-concerns (centered on student outcomes). Self-concerns and task-concerns were the major categories that this study focused on. While this framework has been widely applied in general education, its application in inclusive PE contexts particularly in sub-Saharan Africa remains limited.

In Ghana, inclusive education is gaining traction, yet little is known about how PE student-teachers perceive their preparation for inclusive teaching. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the concerns of student-teachers in two universities that offer undergraduate PE training. By identifying and analyzing these concerns, the study aims to inform curriculum development and enhance the quality of teacher preparation programs.

2. Material and Methods

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to gain a nuanced understanding of student-teachers' concerns. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were selected as the primary data collection method due to their ability to generate rich, interactive insights. The research was conducted in two Ghanaian universities referred to as University 1 (U1) and University 2 (U2) which are the only institutions offering undergraduate PE teacher training in the country. These universities were selected based on their historical significance and curricular structure.

Twenty level 300 student-teachers participated in the study, comprising 4 females and 16 males. Participants were proportionally selected to reflect gender representation across the two institutions. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board (UCC IRB), and informed consent was secured from all participants.

FGDs were held in quiet, familiar lecture rooms to ensure comfort and minimize distractions. A semi-structured FGD guide, developed from existing literature and validated by qualitative research experts, was used to steer the discussions. Sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. Member checking and playback verification were employed to ensure data credibility and confirmability. Transcripts were anonymized and analyzed using thematic analysis. Researchers engaged in iterative reading, coding, and peer debriefing to ensure rigor. Themes were developed inductively and aligned with Fuller's Concern Theory to provide a theoretical lens for interpretation.

3. Results

Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed four overarching categories of concern expressed by physical education (PE) student-teachers regarding their preparation for inclusive practical teaching. These categories: Personal Concerns, Task Mastery Concerns, Management Concerns, and Extended Concerns reflect varying dimensions of readiness, confidence, and systemic challenges. Each theme is supported by direct quotations from participants to illustrate the depth and nuance of their experiences.

3.1 Personal Concerns: Competence and Equipment Limitations

Personal concerns centered on student-teachers' perceived inadequacy in handling inclusive classrooms, particularly in terms of pedagogical preparedness and emotional readiness. Many participants expressed uncertainty about their ability to accommodate students with disabilities (SWDs) due to limited exposure and training.

One male participant from U1 reflected:

"Even if you have SWDs in your class and you're preparing lesson notes for practicals, your formation and coaching points must address those students. But in our pedagogy, all

we did was for students without disabilities. So we may face challenges including SWDs in our practical lessons."

Another participant from U2 emphasized the relational aspect:

"My concern is how many of us are going out there to assess the needs of SWDs before teaching a skill. Are the supports available? Have they played football before? I may not be patient enough with some of these disabled people, and that is my major concern."

Concerns about equipment were also prominent. Student-teachers noted the absence of specialized tools and the lack of training on how to modify existing equipment for inclusive use.

A male participant from U2 stated:

"You have to modify their equipment and need certain tools to perform activities. Are the schools ready to provide these? We haven't seen or used any of these beforeit's going to be difficult."

Another student from U1 added:

"To be frank, I have not seen any of these special equipment before or how to use them. I wonder how I'll use them effectively in an inclusive lesson."

These responses suggest a significant gap in hands-on exposure to inclusive teaching tools and strategies, contributing to anxiety about future classroom implementation.

3.2 Task Mastery Concerns: Instructional Skills and Communication Barriers

Task-related concerns focused on the student-teachers' ability to deliver inclusive instruction effectively. A recurring theme was the lack of training in sign language, which participants viewed as essential for teaching students with hearing impairments (HI).

One participant from U2 proposed:

"My concern is having a PE practical lesson with HI students. Explaining drills using sign language will be difficult. I suggest we be taught sign language as a departmental course or include it in the APE course."

Opinions varied on how sign language should be integrated:

- *"It should be part of our special education course."*
- *"It should be a standalone course, not part of APE."*

These concerns reflect a broader issue of insufficient preparation in communication strategies tailored to diverse learners, particularly those with sensory impairments.

3.3 Experience and Exposure Concerns: Theory-Practice Gap

Participants consistently highlighted a lack of practical exposure to inclusive teaching environments. While theoretical knowledge was provided, opportunities to observe or engage in inclusive PE lessons were limited or nonexistent.

A female participant from U2 shared:

"We do more theory than practical in APE. We've observed lessons in segregated schools, but not inclusive ones. I don't know how abled SHS students will accept SWDs in my practical class. I wish we had visited inclusive schools to observe their lessons."

A male participant from U1 echoed this concern:

"Pedagogy here is more theoretical. The practical aspect is just teaching ourselves. When there's a student with special abilities, how do we handle that? Our training doesn't prepare us for that."

Another participant added:

"Lecturers only talk about theory. We haven't had any experience with SWDs or simulated activities. Until we practice with them, we won't know how to select appropriate activities."

These reflections highlight a critical disconnect between academic instruction and professional readiness, reinforcing the need for experiential learning components in teacher preparation programs.

3.4 Management Concerns: Curriculum Structure and Institutional Support

Management concerns focused on the structural and curricular aspects of the university preparation programs. A dominant theme was the absence of Adapted Physical Education (APE) as a formal course in University 1 (U1). Student-teachers expressed strong support for its inclusion, emphasizing the need for early and sustained exposure to inclusive teaching strategies.

A female participant from U1 remarked:

"With pedagogy, it's based on what we've been taught from level 100. But if it's meant to help us prepare lesson plans to include SWDs, then it should be part of our pedagogy and start from level 100."

She further emphasized:

"There should be credit hours allocated to APE. Since we'll meet SWDs in schools, it's important we learn how to handle people with disabilities."

Other participants echoed this sentiment, advocating for APE to be introduced as a standalone course or integrated into existing modules. A male participant noted:

"Disability is not lack of ability. If APE is encouraged or enrolled in university courses, it will really help."

Several student-teachers suggested that APE should be introduced at the undergraduate level to align with foundational courses and prepare them for inclusive practice. One participant stated:

"If APE is introduced from level 100, it will prepare us to know what we need to do to include SWDs in practicals."

Others proposed flexible integration strategies, such as embedding APE content into existing courses or dedicating short sessions within practical modules. A male participant suggested:

"We can just integrate it into what we're already learning. In any practical lesson, spend about thirty minutes teaching us how to adjust when we have SWDs."

Participants from University 2 (U2) also highlighted the late introduction of inclusive concepts and called for earlier awareness. One male participant noted:

"Inclusiveness comes in too late. We should have foreknowledge from the moment we arrive."

Concerns extended to the lack of inclusive representation in practical sessions. A female participant observed:

"When we do practicals, because all of us are able-bodied, they don't consider those who are disabled. Teaching APE alone isn't enough; we need to learn how to teach soccer to someone using crutches or throwing from a wheelchair."

Suggestions for curriculum enhancement included splitting APE into phased modules across levels 100, 200, and 300, with a dedicated practical component. One participant proposed:

“APE should be split into three phases, one in each level. One should be solely practical, focusing on teaching SWDs in PE.”

Others recommended modeling APE after existing coaching modules like “Skills and Tactics,” and incorporating collaboration with Special Education (SPED) departments during practical sessions.

A female participant offered a broader critique:

“PE shouldn’t be seen as solely for able-bodied students. If we know there are SWDs in schools, we should learn from them while we’re in class.”

These insights accentuate the need for institutional commitment to inclusive education, beginning with curriculum design and extending to practical implementation.

3.5 Extended Concerns: Disability Awareness and Inclusive Assessment

Extended concerns addressed broader issues beyond the immediate preparation program, including disability awareness, societal attitudes, and inclusive assessment practices. Participants emphasized the importance of early sensitization and systemic support for inclusion.

A male participant from U1 stated:

“Right from basic school, students should be made to know the importance of including persons with disabilities in practical PE lessons. We should be sensitized on how best to include SWDs and be made aware that APE is available at the master’s level.”

Another participant from U2 highlighted the need for flexible assessment strategies:

“Most curriculum designs include ways to assess lessons. Since we’re advocating for inclusion, the curriculum should allow us autonomy to assess SWDs appropriately so they’re not left out.”

These comments reflect a desire for a more inclusive educational culture—one that recognizes the value of diversity and equips future teachers with the tools to support all learners. The data suggest that a well-structured APE program, embedded across multiple levels and supported by practical exposure, could significantly enhance student-teachers’ readiness for inclusive PE teaching.

4. Discussion

This study explored the concerns of physical education student-teachers in Ghana regarding their preparation for inclusive practical teaching. The findings revealed a

complex interplay of anxieties and expectations that reflect both individual readiness and systemic limitations. These concerns, ranging from personal competence and instructional challenges to curriculum design and broader disability awareness, align closely with Fuller's Concern Theory, which categorizes teacher concerns into self-, task, and impact-related domains.

Student-teachers expressed deep personal concerns about their ability to teach inclusively, particularly in relation to students with disabilities (SWDs). Many felt unprepared to modify lesson plans or adapt equipment, having never interacted with specialized tools or inclusive teaching environments. This echoes Fiorini and Manzini's (2014) findings, where PE teachers cited a lack of instructional resources and unsuitable spaces as major barriers to inclusion. However, the emotional dimension, such as the fear of not being patient enough or lacking relational skills, adds a layer not often emphasized in previous studies. It suggests that teacher preparation must go beyond technical training to include emotional and interpersonal development.

Task-related concerns were equally prominent. Student-teachers highlighted the absence of training in inclusive instructional strategies, particularly communication tools like sign language. This mirrors Jones (2009), who found that pre-service teachers often lacked confidence in using research-based methodologies tailored to diverse learners. Participants in this study proposed integrating sign language into the curriculum, either as part of Adapted Physical Education (APE) or as a standalone course. Such suggestions align with Christophersen *et al.* (2016), who emphasized the importance of equipping teachers with tools to reduce concerns and improve efficacy. The emphasis on communication barriers in this study reinforces the need for inclusive pedagogy to be both content-rich and context-sensitive.

A recurring theme was the gap between theory and practice. Student-teachers reported that their training was largely theoretical, with minimal opportunities to observe or teach in inclusive settings. This finding is consistent with Fitzgerald (2012), who argued that PE teachers are often trained without meaningful exposure to inclusive environments. Behrstock-Sherrat *et al.* (2014) similarly stressed the importance of high-quality practical experiences in preparing effective teachers. The current study not only confirms these concerns but also reveals a sense of reluctance among student-teachers to include SWDs in future lessons due to this lack of exposure. This reluctance is not rooted in resistance to inclusion but in a perceived lack of competence, which could be addressed through structured practicum experiences.

Concerns about curriculum design and institutional support were particularly pronounced among participants from University 1, where APE was not part of the undergraduate program. Student-teachers advocated for its inclusion, suggesting phased modules across academic levels and integration into existing courses. These recommendations go beyond the findings of Klein and Hollingshead (2015), who identified inadequate preparation as a barrier to inclusion, by offering concrete strategies for curriculum reform. The call for collaboration between PE and Special Education

departments further emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary approaches to inclusive teacher training.

Finally, extended concerns revealed a broader awareness of systemic issues. Student-teachers emphasized the importance of early sensitization to disability inclusion, not just at the university level but throughout the educational system. They also called for flexibility in assessment methods to accommodate SWDs, reflecting a desire for autonomy and responsiveness in inclusive teaching. These insights align with Tant and Watelain (2016), who argued that inclusive PE is shaped by adaptable curricula and collaborative professional preparation.

Taken together, the findings of this study contribute to the literature by extending Fuller's Concern Theory into the context of inclusive PE in sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting emotional and relational dimensions of teacher concerns, and offering curriculum-level recommendations grounded in student-teacher feedback. They emphasize the urgent need for teacher education programs to evolve in response to the realities of inclusive classrooms not only in Ghana but in similar educational contexts worldwide.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the concerns of physical education student-teachers in Ghana regarding their preparation for inclusive practical teaching. Through qualitative analysis of focus group discussions, five key themes emerged: personal competence, task mastery, practical exposure, curriculum management, and systemic awareness. These concerns reflect a multifaceted challenge in preparing future educators to meet the demands of inclusive education.

The findings affirm the relevance of Fuller's Concern Theory in this context, demonstrating that student-teachers' anxieties span self-, task-, and impact-related domains. While some concerns align with global literature, such as the lack of instructional resources and limited practical experience, others reveal context-specific gaps, including the absence of Adapted Physical Education (APE) in undergraduate curricula and minimal exposure to inclusive teaching environments.

Importantly, the study highlights that student-teachers are not resistant to inclusion; rather, they are eager for structured, practical, and pedagogically sound training that equips them to teach all learners effectively. Their voices highlight the urgency of reforming teacher education programs to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and to foster inclusive mindsets from the earliest stages of training.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance inclusive physical education teacher preparation in Ghana:

- 1) Universities offering Physical Education teacher education should integrate Adapted Physical Education (APE) as a core component of their curriculum, encompassing both theoretical and practical dimensions, to ensure student-teachers are equipped with inclusive instructional strategies.
- 2) Programme coordinators and curriculum developers within the two departments should design and implement structured practicum experiences that allow student-teachers to observe and engage in inclusive teaching environments, thereby bridging the gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice.
- 3) Lecturers responsible for pedagogy and special education courses in the two departments should embed sign language and other inclusive communication modalities into their instructional frameworks to enhance student-teachers' confidence and competence in managing diverse classroom settings.
- 4) Heads of departments and faculty leads in Physical Education and Special Education should initiate and sustain collaborative teaching models that promote interdisciplinary training and visibly model inclusive practices during practical sessions.
- 5) Finally, academic planners and policy developers within teacher training institutions should ensure that principles of inclusive education are introduced at the foundational level of training, thereby fostering progressive development of awareness and pedagogical competence throughout the program.
- 6) Further studies should evaluate the impact of revised curricula on teacher efficacy and student outcomes. Also, a comparative research across regions or countries could enrich the understanding of inclusive PE training globally and inform best practices.

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Author's contribution

Regina Akuffo Darko was principally responsible for the conceptual framing and composition of the Introduction, Methodology, and Discussion sections of this manuscript. She also curated and provided the empirical dataset utilized in the analysis. Jane Mwangi and Lucy Joy Wachira, in their dual capacities as research supervisors and academic reviewers, critically evaluated and endorsed the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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