

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

‘I had to Learn on My Own’: Intersection of Gender and Disability in Teaching Adapted Physical Education in Philippine Special Education

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Abstract

The implementation of Adapted Physical Education (APE) in the Philippines faces significant challenges that are viewed through a gendered lens. The Special Education (SPED) teaching field is predominantly female, and girls with various disabilities face compounded and intersecting barriers to participation. This study explores the lived experiences of female SPED teachers in teaching APE to girls with diverse special educational needs. A phenomenological qualitative design was employed. Five female SPED teachers from the Division of Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, were selected via total population sampling and participated in in-depth interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Key findings revealed significant challenges, including a lack of specialised APE training, inadequate facilities, and difficulties in differentiating instruction for a diverse student population. Gender-specific barriers, such as the lack of private changing areas and tailored strategies for engaging girls with varying disabilities, were prominent. Facilitators included administrative support, collaboration with multidisciplinary teams, and teacher resilience, which involved developing adaptive, gender-responsive strategies. The study underscores the urgent need for enhanced professional development focused on gender-responsive pedagogies that address the spectrum of disabilities, improved resource allocation for gender-sensitive and disability-specific facilities, and stronger institutional support. These findings offer critical implications for creating truly equitable and inclusive APE programs that meet the unique needs of all learners, especially girls with various disabilities.

Keywords:

adapted physical education, women educators, challenges, facilitators, special education, gender, disability, Philippines

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Introduction

Physical activity is vital for fostering inclusion, well-being, and physical function in all children (Carbone et al., 2021). However, children with disabilities experience substantial restrictions to participation, fitness level, and increased risk of obesity when compared to their peers (Murphy et al., 2008). Girls with disabilities experience additional barriers to participation, as socio-cultural factors and a lack of gender-responsive programming create unique barriers for girls. Adapted Physical Edu-

cation (APE) helps address these differences by providing students with personalised, well-structured instruction (Winnick & Porretta, 2017). In the Philippines, APE is often delivered by Special Education (SPED) teachers, a primarily female profession, both in the Philippines and globally. Therefore, understanding the experiences of female SPED teachers can help elucidate the best ways to offer APE instruction to girls with disabilities.

While it is a significant activity, delivering APE experiences effectively is

difficult for several reasons. Teachers often do not have adequate training in APE (McNamara et al., 2021) and are unprepared to meet the specific physiological and motivational needs of girls with different disabilities. Limited resources, such as adapted sports equipment and accessibility (Morley et al., 2005; McNamara & Rizzo, 2023), along with high teacher-to-student ratios, restrict personalised teaching (Bondebjerg et al., 2023). Furthermore, societal misconceptions can further limit participation opportunities (Shields, Synnot, & Barr, 2012), an issue often magnified for girls. While facilitators such as continuous professional development (Block et al., 2021), multidisciplinary collaboration (Sherrill, 1986), and supportive government policies exist, a critical gap remains in understanding how these factors interplay within the unique context of female SPED teachers instructing girls with disabilities in the Philippines.

Existing Philippine literature on APE remains limited, focusing primarily on general attainment, module development, and implementation challenges (Cubillo, 2024; Estrella, 2020; Martinez, 2021). A specific investigation into the gendered dynamics of APE instruction is notably absent. A thematic assessment of the available literature identifies three interrelated areas of research: structural and pedagogical problems in APE; the gendered landscape of APE and SPED; and the facilitators of its implementation.

Systemic and Pedagogical Challenges in APE

Several systemic issues continue to impede optimal APE administration. Teachers typically receive insufficient pre-service and in-service APE training, leaving them unable to meet the physiological and motivational needs of children with various impairments (McNamara et al., 2021). This training gap is exacerbated by inadequate resources, such as adapted sports equipment and accessible facilities (Morley

et al., 2005; McNamara & Rizzo, 2023). Furthermore, high teacher-to-student ratios limit the ability to provide tailored teaching, which is critical for children with SPED needs (Bondebjerg et al., 2023).

The Gendered Landscape of APE and Special Education

The SPED educators are primarily female, a tendency seen both internationally and in the Philippines. This feminisation of the profession intersects with the experiences of female learners with disabilities, who face additional barriers to physical activity participation due to sociocultural norms, body image concerns, and a lack of gender-responsive programming (Shields, Synnot, & Barr, 2012). While previous APE research recognises basic participation barriers, the specific ways in which gender influences the instructional environment for both educators and learners remain unexplored.

Facilitators and the Philippine Context

Despite the aforementioned challenges, facilitating factors such as ongoing professional growth (Block et al., 2021), multidisciplinary collaboration (Sherrill, 1986), and supporting government policies exist. However, there is still a major gap in knowing how these factors interact in the specific context of female SPED instructors teaching girls with disabilities in the Philippines. The current Philippine literature on APE is minimal, focused mostly on general implementation issues, module creation, and program assessment (Cubillo, 2024; Estrella, 2020; Martinez, 2021). A study on the gendered dynamics of APE instruction is noticeably lacking.

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: feminist pedagogy and social inclusion theory. Feminist pedagogy offers a critical framework for investigating how gender dynamics influence teaching and

learning (hooks, 1994). This lens focuses on how educational approaches may accidentally promote or fight gender inequities. In this study, feminist pedagogy informs a navigational investigation of how female SPED instructors navigate institutional constraints and devise strategies to meet the special needs of their female students, questioning gender-blind approaches to APE education. Social inclusion theory adds to this by providing a framework for understanding the many overlapping barriers to participation, such as those linked to disability, gender, and socioeconomic position (UNESCO, 2024a).

This perspective contributes to understanding how facilitators, such as administrative support and multidisciplinary collaboration, can build more inclusive environments that meet both disability- and gender-specific demands. Together, these frameworks form a solid conceptual platform for investigating female SPED teachers' lived experiences and the gendered reality of APE implementation.

Research Questions and Significance

To address the observed gap, this phenomenological study is guided by the following research questions:

- a) How do female SPED teachers characterise their experiences teaching APE to girls with special educational needs?
- b) What gender-specific concerns do female SPED teachers encounter while implementing APE for girls in the Philippines?
- c) What gender-responsive practices do female SPED teachers employ to ensure successful APE instruction for girls?

This study examines the lived experiences of female SPED teachers, placing it at the nexus of APE implementation, gender studies, and inclusive education. It directly tackles the gap by shedding light on how gender, of both the educator and the learner, influences the implementation of APE in a particular Global South environment. This study seeks to provide

critical insights for developing targeted support mechanisms and improving the quality of inclusive physical education for a disadvantaged, sometimes disregarded student population.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of female APE teachers. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows for an in-depth study of the essence of participants' experiences through their own lens (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the Division of Science City, Muñoz, to capture a comprehensive view of the specific phenomenon. Total population sampling was utilised, involving all five (5) female SPED teachers from public elementary schools within the division. The inclusion of only female participants was an intentional methodological decision to ensure a grounded, homogeneous perspective on women's experiences in implementing APE, thereby directly addressing the research's gender-centric questions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was specifically designed to elicit rich descriptions aligned with the research questions, including prompts about: a) their personal experiences and feelings in teaching APE to girls; b) perceived differences in engaging male and female students; c) specific challenges related to the gender of their students (e.g., privacy, socialization, equipment needs); and d) strategies they developed or adapted to teach girls with various disabilities effectively. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Filipino to English where necessary to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase methodological framework. The study was supported by NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software, which enabled systematic data arrangement, coding, and retrieval during the thematic analysis process. The phases included: a) familiarizing with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; b) generating initial codes that identified significant statements relevant to the research questions; c) searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes (e.g., "Gender-Specific Infrastructural Barriers," "Relational Teaching Strategies for Girls"); d) reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflected the coded data and the entire dataset; e) defining and naming themes to capture the essence of each; and f) producing the report, weaving together the thematic analysis with extracts from the interviews.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Several measures were used to guarantee that the findings were trustworthy and rigorous. Peer debriefing involved regular discussions with two independent researchers who assessed the coding system and topic development, offering essential comments to reduce researcher bias. To evaluate the correctness and resonance of the interpretations, participants were given interview summaries and preliminary findings to review. Negative case analysis

was used to identify examples that challenged emergent trends, enabling further refinement and a nuanced understanding of the data. While a formal inter-rater reliability check was not routinely assessed, the initial coding of a subset of transcripts was evaluated by a second coder to ensure consistency in the application of codes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Division of Science City of Muñoz, Department of Education [IR2.1]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were used throughout the analysis and reporting. Data protection measures, including the secure encryption and storage of audio files and anonymised transcripts, were strictly adhered to.

Results

This phenomenological research focused on the experiences of SPED teachers delivering APE at Science City, Muñoz, Nueva Ecija. Through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), two overarching themes were generated, including considerable problems in teaching APE and essential facilitators that supported effective instruction. Table 1 presents the thematic map summarising the themes generated from the study.

Table 1. Thematic Map

Key Themes	Subthemes	Description	Representative Quote
Challenges in Teaching APE	Lack of Specialized Training	Teachers lacked rigorous APE training and relied on trial and error.	"My training background is in special education; however, we never learned about specific ways to incorporate physical education..." (P3)

Table 1. (Continued)

Key Themes	Subthemes	Description	Representative Quote
Facilitators in Teaching APE	Inadequate Facilities and Resources	Limited adapted equipment, inaccessible spaces, and the absence of gender-sensitive services/facilities.	"Our school doesn't have specialized sports equipment for students with mobility impairments." (P2)
	Diverse Student Needs and Gender Dynamics	Difficulty managing diverse physical, intellectual, and behavioral demands is exacerbated by gender-specific engagement barriers.	"Some of my students have different physical conditions... It's hard to balance their needs in one class." (P4)
	Administrative and Institutional Support	School leadership supports flexible scheduling, funding allocation, and involvement in training.	"Our principal supports APE by allocating a small budget for equipment." (P3)
	Collaboration with Peers and Multidisciplinary Teams	Collaboration with therapists and colleague teachers to create tailored strategies.	"I coordinate with a physical therapist who helps me design exercises for students with mobility challenges." (P2)
	Teacher Resilience and Adaptation Strategies	Creativity in restructuring tasks and developing low-cost adaptation solutions.	"I use balloons instead of balls for students who struggle with coordination." (P1)

Challenges in Teaching Adapted Physical Education

Lack of specialised training

The study revealed several initial themes regarding barriers to providing instruction, the lack of resources, the need for professional development, methods for engaging students, and support from schools, universities, and departments, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

A prominent obstacle that emerged was a lack of formal training in APE. Although participants had educational backgrounds and experience in SPED, they reported feeling unprepared to teach adaptive physical activities because they had

received no formal program training in this domain. This finding is consistent with previous research, which states, "the need for professional development in APE is apparent if educators are to be adequately prepared to consider the specific needs of students with disabilities, as they relate to individualised instruction" (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007, p. 182). Participants perceived this professional development gap as most obvious when addressing the special demands of female students regarding body image, socialisation, and concerns about inclusion measures.

My training background is in special education; however, we never learned

about specific ways to incorporate physical education into lessons for students with disabilities. This is knowledge I had to learn on my own through trial and error.

Most of the workshops we attend focus on academics. There's barely any training on adapted physical education, and we need that. (P3)

Inadequate facilities and resources

SPED teachers highlighted the limited availability of specialised equipment and appropriate facilities as significant barriers to effective APE implementation. Schools lacked adaptive sports equipment, accessible PE spaces, and assistive devices, making it difficult to accommodate the diverse physical needs of learners with special educational needs (LSENs). This finding aligns with the existing literature, which emphasises the role of infrastructure and resource allocation in inclusive physical education (Sherrill, 2004). Participants stipulated that the lack of private changing places and gender-sensitive facilities disproportionately hampered girls' involvement, an issue these female teachers faced in the absence of proper institutional support.

Our school doesn't have specialised sports equipment for students with mobility impairments. We try to modify activities, but it's really limiting. (P2)

The PE area is not wheelchair-friendly, so I have to adjust activities or sometimes hold classes indoors, which is not ideal. (P5)

One participant elaborated on the distinctive gender challenges:

It is difficult for the girls, particularly the older ones, because there is no private space for them to change. They feel timid, and their parents occasionally grumble. I have to ask

them to come to school dressed in their PE clothing, which is not always pleasant for them. (P4)

Diverse Student Needs and Behavioural Challenges

Managing students with varying physical abilities and behavioural challenges was another difficulty faced by SPED teachers. Some students required individualised support, but the absence of teaching assistants and large class sizes made differentiated instruction challenging. Teachers also struggled with engaging students with mobility impairments and intellectual disabilities, requiring adaptive teaching approaches that they were not always equipped to provide. The approaches to engaging girls, who participants indicated were frequently socialised into various forms of play and competitiveness, required special consideration in this particular challenge.

Some of my students have different physical conditions—some can run, some need assistance, and others can't participate at all. It's hard to balance their needs in one class. (P4)

Many of my students struggle with following instructions, especially those with autism and ADHD. PE requires a lot of movement, and it can be challenging to keep them engaged and safe at the same time. (P1)

When addressing the disparities in educating males and girls, one teacher stated:

The guys are normally more enthusiastic about the physical activities, but the girls occasionally hold back. They are bashful, especially if they believe the activity is 'for boys' or if they are concerned about how they seem while moving. I need to think of methods to help them feel comfortable and confident. (P2)

Facilitators in Teaching Adapted Physical Education

Administrative and Institutional Support

Despite the challenges, institutional support emerged as a key facilitator in APE implementation. Teachers who received support from school administrators, such as flexible scheduling, budget allocation for APE programs, and inclusion in professional development, found it easier to adapt their instruction. This aligns with Lieberman et al. (2020), who emphasise that school leadership plays a vital role in promoting inclusive PE programs. Supportive leadership was highlighted as critical to enabling primarily female teachers to effectively advocate for the resources required to engage all students, particularly girls.

Our principal supports APE by allocating a small budget for equipment. It's not much, but it helps us create more inclusive activities. (P3)

I was given flexibility in my schedule to modify PE activities for my students, which made a big difference. (P5)

Collaboration with Peers and Multidisciplinary Teams

Teachers also relied on peer collaboration and partnerships with therapists to enhance APE instruction. By working with physical therapists, occupational therapists, and fellow educators, they developed individualised exercise plans and adopted best practices. This supports research by Sherrill (1986, 2004), which highlights the effectiveness of multidisciplinary teamwork in APE settings. Participants identified this collaborative, relational approach to problem resolution as a recognised strength in their teaching methods, and it played an important role in establishing inclusive tactics that resonated with female students.

I coordinate with a physical therapist who helps me design exercises for

students with mobility challenges. It makes a huge impact. (P2)

Talking with other SPED teachers about their APE strategies really helps. We share ideas on what works and what doesn't. (P4)

Teacher Resilience and Adaptation Strategies

Many participants demonstrated creativity and resilience in overcoming instructional barriers. They modified traditional PE activities, created low-cost adaptive equipment, and tailored exercises to meet student needs. Their ability to innovate and adapt played a crucial role in making APE more inclusive and engaging. The compassionate and adaptive tactics mentioned were hallmarks of excellent teaching and crucial for fostering a secure, welcoming environment in which girls with disabilities can engage in lifelong physical activity.

Since we don't have proper adaptive sports equipment, I use modified versions. For example, I use balloons instead of balls for students who struggle with coordination. (P1)

I make sure to celebrate small victories. Even if a student can't fully participate, I encourage them to do what they can. Motivation is key. (P3)

A teacher explained a gender-responsive adaptation strategy:

For the females, I try to incorporate activities that are less competitive and more cooperative. I occasionally let them lead the warm-up so they feel more in charge. I also make sure to compliment their work in front of the class to build up their confidence. (P5)

Implications for APE in the Philippines

The findings highlight critical areas for improvement in APE implementation, particularly in the Division of Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija. Addressing the lack of specialised training, limited facilities, and resource constraints is essential to improving the quality of physical education for LSEs. Moreover, strengthening professional development programs, enhancing institutional support, and fostering collaboration among educators and therapists can significantly contribute to a more inclusive and effective APE framework.

The findings point to two targeted recommendations. First, professional development for the female SPED workforce should be enhanced to include training on gender-responsive pedagogies that effectively engage girls with disabilities. Second, policy and resource allocation must consciously address barriers that disproportionately affect female participation, such as ensuring privacy and providing appropriate equipment. These insights offer valuable implications for policymakers, school administrators, and educators, underscoring the need for systematic reforms to ensure that learners with disabilities have equitable access to quality physical education.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex and sometimes unseen efforts of female SPED teachers as they navigate hurdles and leverage the facilitators of APE instruction for girls with disabilities in the Philippines. The findings show that the issues confronting educators are not only educational, but also social, infrastructural, and gendered. This discussion analyses these findings, situates them in the wider literature, and proposes a conceptual framework for gender-responsive APE through the twin lenses of feminist pedagogy and social inclusion theory.

Interpreting Challenges Through a Gendered Lens

In line with previous research (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Sherrill, 2004), participants indicated a notable absence of specialist APE training. However, the current study goes beyond this finding by exposing how this training gap is exacerbated for female teachers who must additionally handle the gender-specific demands of their female students. Due to a lack of gender-responsive pedagogical training, teachers were forced to rely on trial and error to find ways to engage girls who were described as "shy" or afraid to engage. This is consistent with feminist pedagogy, which emphasises the necessity for educational procedures that actively oppose gendered socialisation (hooks, 1994). Without any preparation, these instructors were responsible for devising these tactics on their own, demonstrating a systemic oversight.

The highlighted infrastructure constraints, notably the lack of private changing spaces, indicate an important junction between disability and gender. According to UNESCO (2024b), the lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure in schools throughout the world has a disproportionate impact on girls' physical activity. Girls with impairments have an even greater challenge since they may require more support and time. The participants' experiences managing these issues without institutional help highlight how gender-blind policies may perpetuate marginalisation. The findings show that teachers were not just instructors, but also advocates, working with parents and administrators to find workarounds, a type of unseen labour that is frequently overlooked.

Another prominent challenge was managing multiple student needs, with teachers reporting that it was challenging to differentiate education for pupils with varying physical, intellectual, and behavioural characteristics. The inclusion

of gender dynamics, in which girls' involvement necessitated different motivating and social techniques than those of boys, provided another degree of complexity. This study supports the social inclusion theory's claim that many overlapping barriers must be addressed concurrently to achieve real inclusion (UNESCO, 2024c). The instructors' experiences show that a one-size-fits-all approach to APE is inadequate and that initiatives must include both disability and gender.

Leveraging Facilitators: Resilience, Collaboration, and Support

The facilitators identified, including administrative support, engagement with interdisciplinary teams, and teacher resilience, are crucial intervention points. According to Lieberman et al. (2020), supportive school leadership was identified as an important facilitator. When administrators contributed resources, even in small amounts, or allowed for schedule flexibility, instructors felt encouraged to experiment. This assistance is especially important for a female-dominated workforce, which frequently confronts extra structural impediments to lobbying and resource allocation.

Collaboration with therapists and peers was another important facilitator, demonstrating the interdisciplinary approach required for effective APE (Hutzler & Barak, 2017). The social and collaborative tactics reported by participants are con-

sistent with feminist educational ideas that promote connection, shared knowledge, and community-based problem solving (hooks, 1994). These approaches were not only efficient but also essential to create a supportive environment for both teachers and students.

Teacher resilience and adaptability emerged as a key topic, with participants demonstrating exceptional inventiveness in adapting lessons and using low-cost resources. However, this resilience must be seen not as an individual attribute, but as a response to institutional inadequacies. As Underwood et al. (2024) argue, reliance on individual teacher resilience in the absence of systemic support can lead to burnout and is ultimately unsustainable. The findings imply that, while resilience is a strength, it requires institutional support and professional growth to be effective in the long run.

Toward a Gender-Responsive APE Framework

Based on the results, this study proposes a conceptual model for a gender-responsive APE framework in the Philippine setting (see Figure 1). This model depicts the dynamics among identified difficulties and facilitators, highlighting the importance of the teacher-learner dynamic, its gendered influence, and the need for a supportive environment.

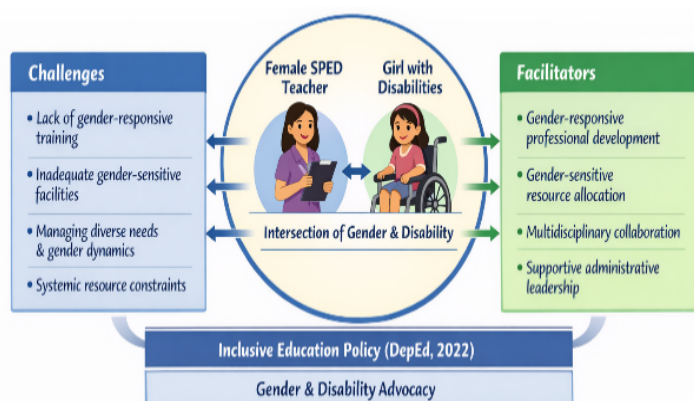


Figure 1. A Gender-Responsive Framework for Adapted Physical Education in the Philippine Context

This proposed model implies that effective APE instruction for girls with disabilities necessitates purposeful consideration of both gender and disability at all levels, from policy to practice. It challenges the gender-blind approach in most of the APE literature and provides a road map for systemic change.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest numerous focused recommendations. First, professional development for the female SPED professionals should include training in gender-responsive pedagogies that effectively engage girls with disabilities. This training should cover not only instructional tactics, but also social and cultural factors that affect females' engagement. Second, policy and resource allocation must intentionally address barriers to female participation, such as providing private changing rooms and adequate, accessible equipment. Third, institutional support systems, such as flexible scheduling, access to interdisciplinary teams, and opportunities for peer collaboration, must be enhanced to maintain teacher resilience and prevent burnout. Finally, the findings indicate the need for further research focusing on the voices of girls with disabilities to better understand their perspectives on APE involvement.

Conclusion

This study investigated the experiences of female SPED teachers conducting APE at the Division of Science City of Muñoz in Nueva Ecija. Using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it identified three major challenges: a lack of specialised APE training, insufficient facilities and resources, and the complexity of handling varied student demands, which is exacerbated by gender dynamics. Despite these significant hurdles, major facilitators emerged, including administrative and institutional support, engagement with

diverse teams, and teachers' incredible perseverance. Teachers displayed remarkable ingenuity and flexibility by altering activities, devising low-cost solutions to engage all learners, and implementing gender-responsive strategies to support their female students.

Participants noted a clear need for professional development focused on gender-responsive APE, more funding for gender-sensitive, disability-accessible facilities, and policy revisions to better support teachers and students. To help LSENs access equitable physical education, education institutions must embrace a multi-stakeholder approach that includes not only instructors but also school administrators, legislators, and allied health experts.

The findings of this study, interpreted through the lenses of feminist pedagogy and social inclusion theory, demonstrate that the challenges facing female SPED teachers are not merely logistical but are expressions of deeper structural inequities. Feminist pedagogy reveals how gender-blind institutional practices — from the absence of private changing facilities to the lack of gender-responsive training — place the burden of inclusion disproportionately on individual female teachers, whose adaptive resilience, however remarkable, cannot substitute for systemic change. Social inclusion theory further affirms that the overlapping barriers of gender and disability can only be dismantled through coordinated action across policy, infrastructure, and professional development simultaneously. The gender-responsive APE framework proposed in this study (Figure 1) offers one such integrated model, providing a practical roadmap for institutions committed to moving beyond good intentions toward structural equity in APE.

This study demonstrates that, in relation to this overarching mission, intentionality toward the gendered realities

of APE implementation, including the experiences of female educators and the barriers faced by female learners, is not an afterthought, but rather a priority for achieving true equality in adaptive physical activity.

Future studies should examine students' and parents' viewpoints to provide a more comprehensive view of APE experiences. Furthermore, longitudinal studies tracking the implementation of gender-responsive APE programs in inclusive education settings would provide important evidence on their long-term impact. By focusing on the voices of people at the intersection of gender and disability, the field of APE may move closer to its objective of developing fully inclusive and equitable learning environments for everyone.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly to improve language clarity, grammar, and phrasing. The authors carefully reviewed and revised the output to ensure accuracy and take full responsibility for the final manuscript's content.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. Any personal circumstances or interests that could influence the interpretation of the research have been disclosed.

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