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# 'I mean I hate to say it's sink or swim, but ... ': college course instructors' perceptions of the adapted physical education content that they prioritize and teach

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## ABSTRACT

As most physical education teacher education programs provide little preparatory coursework on disabilities, it is unsurprising preservice physical educators often struggle to effectively include students with disabilities. Given upwards of 95% of students with disabilities are taught in integrated physical education classes, it is imperative teachers are prepared for this inevitability. Though it is moderately understood that preservice physical educators receive little preparation, what remains unknown is what those preparatory courses provide and what the rationale is behind their construction. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine introductory adapted physical education (APE) course instructors' perspectives towards the purpose of this course, the content delivered, and their rationale for the included content. Based on interviews with seven faculty (4 males and 3 females), three themes were constructed: 'It is learning that this may fail', '[Our] purpose is to expose them', and 'We cover ... broad strokes'. These findings highlight APE faculty's recognition that their course alone is not enough to prepare future physical educators to effectively provide students with disabilities a quality physical education experience. Overall, teachers largely emphasized the practical components of the course and heavily relied on medicalized definitions of disability. The results from this study deepen the understanding of how introductory APE courses are currently being taught across the United States and provide suggestions for ways to improve course development.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Adapted physical education; physical education teacher education; preservice teacher; service learning; disability models

In the United States of America (U.S.), Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) college programs are tasked with the responsibility of preparing preservice physical educators to teach students with disabilities (Kwon, 2018; Piletic & Davis, 2010). Without sufficient preparation, future physical educators are likely to struggle in adapting instruction to meet the needs of their students with disabilities (Block et al., 2016; Kwon, 2018; Piletic & Davis, 2010). General physical education (PE) teachers have often reported they are inadequately prepared to instruct students with disabilities and need added training in this area (Block et al., 2016; Hutzler et al., 2019). This glaring inadequacy in the preparation of general physical educators is problematic, as the US Department of Education (2018) reported that

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in 2015 approximately 94.8% of the 6 million students ages 6 through 21 that received special education services were educated in integrated settings with their typically developing peers for at least some portion of the school day. Indeed, PE, along with art and music education, is one of the first classes where integration into the 'general' curriculum occurs (Alquraini & Gut, 2012).

Although this experience is meant to increase a student's sense of belonging and optimize skill acquisition (Murphy & Carbone, 2008), as well as provide opportunities to build social skills (Sherrill, 2004), in practice, students with disabilities experience exclusion within the classroom and a lack of belonging (Rekaa et al., 2019). Equally, teachers that struggle to include students with disabilities often report negative beliefs about including students with disabilities (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). This increase in negative beliefs is likely due to the limited preparation within PETE programs and the experience, or lack thereof, working with students with disabilities (Tant & Watelain, 2016). As PETE programs commonly only require one course in adapted physical education<sup>1</sup> (APE; Kwon, 2018; Piletic & Davis, 2010), it is evident that preservice physical educators are not prepared to engage *all* their potential students. Although physical educators share the goal of inclusion (i.e. a broad philosophy that guide educators to develop an atmosphere promoting acceptance and value for students; Stainback & Stainback, 1992), many view it as difficult to fully realize due to a lack of resources and training (Rekaa et al., 2019). Additionally, due to limited exposure as well as societal beliefs, physical educators often hold stereotyped and misguided understandings of disability and maintain negative assumptions of a student's ability based on that misconception (Rekaa et al., 2019; Tant & Watelain, 2016).

Although research suggests an array of positive benefits (e.g. positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and development of meaningful relationships) from APE service-learning experiences for undergraduate PETE students, very few studies have examined the content and delivery of APE college courses (e.g. Bishop & Driver, 2007; Hodge et al., 2003; Kwon, 2018; Taliaferro et al., 2015). Piletic and Davis (2010) surveyed 136 U.S. PETE faculty teaching an 'Introduction to APE' course. The PETE faculty were surveyed regarding course demographics, course content, and practicum experiences. The vast majority (69%) of PETE programs represented in this survey offered only one course in APE, and most students required to complete the APE course were PETE majors (95%). In addition, only 40% of collegiate instructors indicated having a doctorate in APE; suggesting someone not trained in its discipline to an expert level was teaching APE content. Through a broad review of evidence, the authors concluded that content taught in introduction to APE courses often focused on disability-specific information. In addition, they spent less time on content related to motor development and legal issues, which are important components of APE service delivery.

Although the studies discussed above provide an overview of the status of APE introductory courses, several limitations should be acknowledged. These two presented studies (Kwon, 2018; Piletic & Davis, 2010) used descriptive surveys mostly focused on questions about student and instructor demographic information. Therefore, these studies offer little context regarding the included content within APE courses; nor do they provide insight into the instructors' values towards the selected material. As university professors enjoy the academic freedom to design courses around the topics they deem 'important', it is vital to place this content within this context. Given the demonstrated need to (re)structure PETE programs to build competency in working with students with disabilities (Block et al., 2016; Hutzler et al., 2019), a critical analysis on the current APE training practices is needed to increase the likelihood that future physical educators are adequately prepared to provide a meaningful PE experience to their students with disabilities. Although introductory APE collegiate courses should be considered highly valuable courses to prepare future physical educators, there is currently little guidance on how to develop and implement these courses at the college level. Therefore, this study investigated the perspectives of introductory APE course collegiate instructors towards the purpose of this course, what content were delivered within the course, and their rationale for the included content. This study

is the first known study to directly examine the introductory APE college course instructors' perceptions towards these courses.

## Methods

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach, which allows researchers to provide a comprehensive summary of events while not drastically altering the words and events (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). This methodology was chosen as this approach allows for attaining a straightforward insight into a set of questions or phenomena relevant to practitioners and policymakers (Sandelowski, 2000). As with most qualitative description approaches, a naturalism lens was applied to the development and analysis of the investigation, which has been defined as 'a commitment to studying a phenomenon in a manner as free of artifice as possible in the artifice-laden enterprise known as conducting research' (Sandelowski, 2010, p. 79). Further, this approach allows researchers to select from a variety of techniques regarding sampling, data sources, data collection, and analysis. Given little research has examined the views of collegiate APE course instructors, there exists limited consensus about the necessary content to include within these courses. Therefore, it was decided an exploratory method that lessened researcher input, or the requirement of a theoretical framework would be most appropriate.

## Participants

A convenience sample of seven participants were selected for inclusion in this study (see Table 1 for an overview of participant characteristics). Participants were included if they were currently the instructor for an undergraduate introduction to APE course or a closely related course, such as an introduction to adapted physical activity (APA) course. Additionally, participants had to have taught the course for at least one semester; participants currently teaching their first semester of the course were not included. Six interviewees indicated they taught their classes in face-to-face (one taught a blended course) and each course syllabi indicated they used an APE-centered textbook as the primary text for their class. Prior to admission to the study, the course syllabi of potential participants were collected to confirm that each course had: (a) a course description related to APE; and (b) course objectives dedicated to teaching students with disabilities within a PE setting.

## Procedures

Prior to data collection, the following procedures were approved by the first author's Institutional Review Board. A list of the 100 most popular PETE programs from the website, 'stateuniversity.com',

**Table 1.** Interview participants' demographic data.

Pseudonyms	Position	Race	Gender	Semesters teaching APE course	Highest degree	APE teaching exp	Location
John	Assistant Professor	White	Male	2	PhD in APE	Yes	Wisconsin
Alex	Assistant Professor	White	Male	3	PhD in adapted physical activity	No	Iowa
Raymond	Graduate Assistant	Asian	Male	2	Master's in APE	No	Oregon
Leah	Associate Professor	White	Female	7	PhD in PE	No	Illinois
Ellen	Assistant Professor	White	Female	13	PhD in APE	No	California
Nicole	Full Professor	White	Female	30+	PhD in APE	Yes	Michigan
James	Lecturer	White	Male	6	Bachelor's in PE	Yes	Kansas

Note: Exp = Experience; APE = Adapted physical education; PE = Physical education; PhD = Doctorate.

was used as a precursor measure to develop a list of potential universities with an APE course and a PETE program. This list was used due to the lack of comprehensive listing of PETE programs across the U.S. (Piletic & Davis, 2010). To find the instructors of the introduction to APE courses, the investigators hand-reviewed the most relevant departments – primarily departments of kinesiology – within the identified universities. Once the instructors of the introduction to APE courses were found, they were emailed an invitation directly to take part in the study. If an instructor for the APE course was not identifiable, the invitation to participate was sent to the chair of the department and/or administrative assistant asking them to forward it to the faculty member who had previously taught the course.

This survey was used as part of a larger project. For the purposes of this study, participants were asked to provide demographic information (e.g. age, gender, average number of students enrolled in course) and their email in the survey. In addition, they were asked to share their course syllabi. Of the 100 departments/instructors contacted, 26 stated their institution did not currently offer an introduction to APE course. Of those that did participate, 26 completed the survey and only 7 agreed to participate in a semi-structured one-hour long interview. Due to the geographic separation of the authors and the participants, the first and third authors conducted interviews remotely. During data generation, the interviewing authors were in constant contact with each other and debriefed within 24 hours of each conducted interview. Prior to each interview, the authors bracketed their thoughts and post each interview, wrote analytic notes reflecting on what occurred. Each of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Due to distance and limited availability, each interviewee was invited for one interview. Each interviewee, however, was given the opportunity to read their corresponding interview to ensure their comments had been appropriately captured, and to allow for corrections, redactions, or follow-up.

### **Interview guide**

The interview guide focused on the instructor's background, format, and an overview of their introduction to APE course, and practicum experiences. The guide was developed by the first, second, and third author; each of whom has experience both as former educators, with two also having experience teaching APE content at the collegiate level. Once questions were developed, they were read for clarity and shared with five experts in qualitative methods and APE. See [Table 2](#) for a sample interview guide.

### **Data analyses**

The interviews, the course objectives, and descriptions of the syllabi were analyzed using an inductive category development method (Thomas, 2006). Inductive category development begins with determination of categories emergent in the data, followed by comparing them with old categories and forming new categories, and then into larger themes until consensus is reached for all data. Considering this method, two of the researchers initially coded transcribed statements from the data into categories reflecting similar motifs (e.g. excitement, passion) independently. Each category was then

**Table 2.** Interview guiding questions.

- 
- Describe the format of the introduction APE class you teach.
  - What is the overall objective you want your students to achieve after completing this course?
  - Describe some of the main topics you discuss in your class and your rationale as to why you cover these topics.
  - Can you describe the assignments you include in your class and your rationale for including these assignments?
  - Does your class have a service-learning component? If yes, can you describe the service-learning component?
  - How do you deliver the information for specific disabilities, how long do you spend on each disability, and what activities and assignments align with learning about these disabilities?
- 

Note: APE = Adapted physical education.

given a working title or description of the category. Each statement was then read individually and coded into either an existing category with similar codes, or into new categories. Once all statements were categorized, two of the researchers compared each reexamined code and discussed discrepancies until an agreement was reached. In the second round, the categories were reorganized into larger groups based on similar themes. For example, the categories of 'social justice' and 'empathy' were grouped together under 'attitude change' after reexamination because they reflected a similar unifying theme. After reexamining the categories and themes, the researchers reviewed each statement again within each category and discussed discrepancies. Statements were moved to other categories and themes, or to new categories, in a similar fashion until an agreement was reached among the researchers.

### **Trustworthiness**

To establish credibility within the data generation and analysis phases, the authors used triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Triangulation attempts to assess the accuracy of the data (Merriam, 1998). Interview responses were triangulated with the analysis of the syllabi. Additionally, analytic notes were used to explore the thoughts of the author prior to and after each interview; this allowed the authors to think reflexively about their coding process and situate identified themes more clearly. Member checking was used to limit potential biases of the authors during the interpretation of the data (Patton, 2002). Copies of the analyzed themes were distributed to the interviewees; interviewees were asked to offer reactions and opinions about the identified themes. Each of the seven participants responded, providing feedback of the data. This feedback was used to further strengthen each theme.

It is also important to acknowledge the positionality of the researchers, as exploring one's positionality can ensure 'transparency, honesty and criticality, which are hallmarks of quality in qualitative research' (Maher & Morley, 2020, p. 852). The first and third authors who conducted the interviews and data analysis are both white and abled-bodied. The first author identifies as male and is a PETE faculty member with a who teaches an introductory APE course. The third author identifies as female and is a doctoral student who has assisted with the implementation of the first author's introductory APE course. Although the interviews were conducted with their peers, being the focus of the interview was on their design and implementation of introductory APE courses, which the interviewers also had experience with, they may have felt fear of judgement. Possibly leading to a feeling of power imbalance, or remarks to cast their course in a more positive light. Finally, an expert in qualitative research agreed to review the interview transcripts and qualitative findings. This process, oftentimes called peer-debriefing, entails sharing and debriefing with professionals with enough expertise in the area to provide feedback on the themes to refine and, frequently, redirect the interpretation process (Erlandson et al., 1993). The reviewer found the interpretations of the data to be plausible and representative of the participants' statements.

### **Findings**

Three interrelated themes were developed from an analysis of the interviews and their course syllabi. The first theme, 'It is learning that this may fail', revealed the value placed on undergraduates gaining authentic experiences working with students with disabilities. The second theme, '[Our] purpose is to expose them', described a focus on exposing undergraduates to information and situations to facilitate empathy and attitude changes towards people with disabilities. The third and final theme, 'We cover ... broad strokes', portrayed the breadth of the content and experiences covered within the introductory APE courses, with the structure of the classes generally focusing on (1) APE instructional strategies and the supporting legislation, and (2) disability categories and characteristics.

### ***'It is learning that this may fail'***

Within each interview, the need and significance of having undergraduate students work with people with disabilities was distinct. For example, when asked about the overall objective of the course, Ellen stated, 'My philosophy is a very much hands-on approach. We want them to interact with a person with a disability. I feel like the best way is to learn by doing.' Leah also expressed the practicum was a driving objective for the introductory APE course:

I think the most important part of this intro to APE is the clinical experience as long as it's guided and supported with the knowledge and information about APE. It's hard for our students to grasp the need to understand that information until they work with a kiddo they bond with and they see specific individual needs and be able to make those changes and modifications even if they're little and see their success and I think that's the valuable part.

In fact, of those interviewed, six (85%) had practicum experiences where the undergraduates worked in either a small group setting or a one-on-one setting with students with disabilities. The prevalence and importance placed upon these practicum experiences was expressed, firstly, through syllabi course description, as seen in Nicole's, that explained the course is intended for students to get experience 'teaching and coaching physical activities for person with disabilities'. The instructors outlined the format of their practicum programs, explaining either these programs had students with disabilities come to their university or undergraduate students were integrated into school or community fitness settings. John detailed a practicum program where students with disabilities came to the university and the program was tailored to them based on their ages:

We have about 35 school-aged students from the community who come in on Thursday evenings for two hours ... Students that come in are split up into 3 different groups ... Our oldest group of students start in our weight room [and] fitness center to simulate what it might be like to be out in a community fitness center like a YMCA or some other fitness place ... Our younger two groups follow a similar setting where they also go to the pool for one 40–45 minute session, and then instead of going to the fitness center they go and do two different sessions in the gym where they're working on locomotor object control skills and personal physical fitness.

Raymond was the only participant who stated his students did not work directly with individuals with disabilities. Though, he did indicate they interacted in some fashion through a practicum program: 'In my class, I have my students observe the service-learning program, but they are not actually participating.'

All the participants cited a range of benefits for undergraduate students engaging in a service-learning program. Leah implied the practicum experience is able to deliver a close replication of the world of a physical educator, which provides a unique opportunity to prepare them for their careers, yet she also recognized these experiences will not fully prepare someone; 'I mean I hate to say it's sink or swim, but the day you get your job, nobody else is there.' James also stressed the necessity of having undergraduate students engaged in practical experiences:

I think it's that hands-on approach, it's learning that this [working with students with disabilities] may fail, this works great, learning how to communicate, building that relationship, building that level of trust so you can get through to students with disabilities at even a higher level. To me that is so valuable.

Each of the instructors recognized the importance of these opportunities in allowing students a chance to practice their skills in a control and supportive setting. Yet, they did not expect students to have perfected their teaching skills because of these singular experiences.

Furthermore, many of the instructors voiced the usefulness of the practicum program to reinforce and apply information from the lecture portion of the class. Nicole highlighted how through working with people with disabilities, undergraduates would attain a much greater understanding of how to effectively teach students with disabilities within a PE setting:

I think that is the value is that it's [the] hands-on [experience]. They have to create, they have to execute, then they have to evaluate, and hopefully that allows them to get some experience of 'what will I do when this kid walks into my class in five years?'

In addition, Ellen explained she can discuss the practicum experiences and scenarios within her lectures to make more meaningful connections to the context. For example, she stated: 'I can make very real examples from the practicum to the classroom. It solidifies the materials. It provides very memorable examples.' These practical experiences were also perceived as being the 'favorite portion' of the class, as highlighted by Alex:

This [the practicum] allows my students to use what they have learned in a very applied way and they learn more doing the practicum, doing the service learning component than they do from the lectures and the feedback that I get about the practicum is always their favorite component and actually in my reviews every year no one ever talks about the lectures, everything is about the practicum so it is certainly the most important aspect of the course in their minds.

As enjoyment can have a large influence in the learning process, these positive experiences in the practicum programs may lead future physical educators to build deeper connections to the content, and thus apply the knowledge in future encounters with students with disabilities.

Many of the instructors also communicated their own experiences with working with people with disabilities helped prepare them to teach this course. James expressed that one of the key areas to his preparation was being around individuals with disabilities and his main preparation for teaching the introduction to APE course was 'doing it every day as an educator'. John also reflected that because he had past experiences with people with disabilities, he was able to provide more meaningful connections to undergraduate students:

I'm able to give a personal story about, you know I worked with this 3rd grade student who had Muscular Dystrophy and this is how he moved, this is what he was like in class, and it just allows for the students to ask more specific questions rather than just speaking in generalities. From my perspective, it feels they are getting a stronger or deeper connection to the material than just these are the characteristics of a student with this disability.

Thus, the instructors' perceived the hands-on practicum component of introductory APE courses provided them, and their undergraduate students, the opportunity to develop as a teacher by reinforcing and applying content from the course.

### ***'[Our] purpose is to expose them'***

While the first theme discussed opportunities to practice skills with students with disabilities, a related goal of the introductory to APE course described by instructors was to expose undergraduate students to people with disabilities to influence their attitudes and empathy towards people with disabilities. For example, Leah stated, 'I want to make sure my majors don't end up leaving without some empathy for all kids. And without realizing the impact, both negative and positive, they can have on students.' The emphasis on attitude change was also found within the syllabi, with one of Nicole's objectives reading the student 'will demonstrate the ability to describe societal and personal changes in attitudes towards individuals with disabilities'. Many of the instructors also explained the introduction to APE course was meant to be used as an induction towards working with people with disabilities:

I think the primary purpose is to expose them and introduce them to what it's like to work with a kid with a disability ... [and to] give them a certain level of comfort and understanding. [John]

Yet, as John continued to explain, instructors try to provide this exposure in a controlled way by consciously pair undergraduate students with students with less severe needs:

What we do is we give our intro to APE students some of our easiest students to work with so that they're not overwhelmed or turned away. You know we are not going to give any introduction to APE [undergraduate] students [to] one of our ... students ... who displays some very, just poor behaviors from time to time. You know we are not going to put a student who is never worked with somebody like that in that setting. We'll give them a student who will give them a good experience in class.



Although many of the participants expressed the need for undergraduate's exposure to people with disabilities, Leah made it clear that one APE course was not sufficient to prepare someone to teach students with disabilities; yet it can provide students with a more complete understanding and greater empathy towards people with disabilities:

I start my entire course with we're here to learn as much as we can about the unique needs of students with disabilities, how to help them be successful in our classes. But you're not qualified to teach APE. This is just the beginning. So, I want them to get a taste of it. I don't have time to do more than that. But to have empathy and understanding and know that it's okay to ask for help from people who do know ... Is that fair to your students in APE because you're not qualified. And I don't mean that to be mean, I just mean that to mean you're just getting the tip of the iceberg.

Along with exposing undergraduates to people with disabilities to promote positive attitudes and empathy, many instructors also communicated the use of disability simulations within their classes to provide undergraduates with greater empathy for individuals with disabilities. For instance, Nicole discussed the use of 'empathy experiences' to simulate the needs for individuals with visual impairments:

We have done empathy experiences with loss of vision of different types of vision impairments in the gym where ... they have a vision impairment of some kind with special goggles ... and it always throws them for a loop. I think those empathy experiences in the lab are really cool. I think the thing with the empathy experiences is that not only is it the experience itself, but to remind my students that ... this is 24/7 for these kiddos, so think about that. It's not just do it and it's cool.

Nicole went on to explain the use of disability simulations was not an appropriate tool to teach undergraduates to empathize with all types of disabilities:

It's hard to simulate an emotional disability. It's hard to really give the students, I think, an authentic experience doing that. In the same way it's also difficult to simulate intellectual or cognitive disability. I would say it is definitely easier to simulate a physical disability. Many times, students with physical disabilities have average cognitive functioning so they're able to understand directions.

In exploring the idea about encouraging growth in the empathy one has toward individuals with disabilities, instructors resorted to either increasing a students' knowledge or through first-hand experiences of disability to make it 'relatable'.

### ***'We cover ... broad strokes'***

Many instructors noted the structure of their class was divided into two key pieces: (1) APE instructional strategies and supporting legislation and (2) disability characteristics. Alex explained this structure of the class was developed using a widely adopted textbook for introductory APE courses, *APE and Sport* (Winnick & Porretta, 2017):

The biggest structure of the class is I have been using the Winnick [and Porretta] textbook. So, it [the class] follows largely the format of the Winnick textbook with going from basic introductory material into measurements and evaluations. We cover IEPs, including early childhood and then behavior management and instructional strategies. We cover those in kind of broad strokes, regardless of disability. We then spend the second half of the semester doing lectures and activities on specific disability groups and again it currently follows the format of the Winnick textbook for how certain disability groups are put together into chapters.

The prominent use of the Winnick and Porretta (2017) textbook was also confirmed within the syllabi and demographic survey ( $n = 5$ , 71%).

Within the section of the courses centered on APE instructional strategies, there were large focuses on the topics of laws, IEPs, and behavior management. Nicole explained she focuses on the law 'because I think that's really important to know the law and to understand when you should be advocating for kids getting PE'. Yet, these topics appear to be covered narrowly. For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) was the only law mentioned specifically within the interviews. IDEA provides a definition of PE and mandates that students

with disabilities must receive APE services if students are eligible. In addition, IDEA also mandates students with disabilities receiving special education services receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). As a part of these instruction, many of the instructors provided details on assignments they provided their students to replicate the IEP process:

The biggest assignment of the classes that I have them do is a mock IEP for PE. They select a disability from that list and then create a hypothetical student with that disability and write an IEP for that student, specifically for PE. [Alex]

An emphasis on legislation and being able to write IEP goals and objectives was also prominent within the syllabi course descriptions and objectives. For example, along with specific objectives on undergraduate students learning about IEPs, goal writing, and laws related to APE, John's syllabi also provided the overarching objective that students will be able to 'understand and describe the special education process'. Though, again, this information was narrowly contained to IDEA and IEPs.

Although all instructors noted they provide an overview of the law and IEPs, not all the participants appeared to believe these were essential for undergraduates to fully grasp. For example, James suggested he wants his students to simply be exposed to these concepts, rather than master this content:

We touch on laws, [such as] IDEA. I definitely go over that, but I feel like it's more important and more practical for them to be versed in techniques and modifications and being prepared for that kind of stuff and having a general feel for the laws, having a general feel for IEPs, and having a general feel for some of those things.

Like James, others accentuated that students with disabilities deserve a quality PE program regardless of legal requirements; so, those working with people with disabilities need to be knowledgeable about specific teaching strategies. For example, Leah expressed the need for physical educators to accommodate and teach students with disabilities.

I don't think teachers do things that are harmful to students in most cases because they mean to, they just don't know. So, I want to let my students know that it's okay to not know. It's not okay to continue to go forward not knowing. And so, it's extremely important to understand that every child can be successful, and every child deserves 100% of their effort to understand how to make learning in PE successful for every kid regardless of ability.

Aside from the focus on APE instructional strategies and supporting legislation, there was a predominant focus on disability characteristics, teaching strategies specific to a disability, and contraindicated exercises for disabilities. For example, one course description read: 'Emphasizes the adaptation of PE to needs of children with physical, intellectual, emotional, or sensory disabilities.' Raymond also noted the emphasis placed on disability within his class: 'I just mainly focus on the disability, and cause of disability and some characteristics of some people with a specific disability and how to modify some activities for ... a specific disability.'

Regarding the specific disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, hereto referred to as autism, emerged as the most prominent disability covered. For instance, one participant said they spent six days covering autism-related topics. Although almost all the course descriptions and objectives were broad when referring to disabilities, one objective specifically referenced the need to 'demonstrate the knowledge of how to plan and schedule to improve predictability for children with autism'. James also echoed this focus on autism:

We usually have our autism consultants ... come up to our class. I usually give them one full night where it's kind of like a Q and A. I let them tell the students how the district uses them and how they work throughout the district. I've done some autism simulations ... with strobe lights, and loud music and trying to get them to concentrate while there's all kinds of chaos going on to kind of give them that sense of what's it's like when you're a little bit overstimulated and then you're getting a bunch of directions to do a game, how it can easily lead to a meltdown.

Although many of the instructors appeared to place importance on covering autism, this emphasis was not assigned equally among all disabilities. When asked about multiple disabilities, Nicole stated, 'I don't necessarily spend a lot of time specifically talking about it.' Regarding the disability category of other health impairments, Nicole also explained, 'We don't do a really great job on that.' Related to the practicum experiences, the focus on autism was again unmistakable. All six of the instructors with a practicum component stated their undergraduates worked with students on the autism spectrum. Alex conveyed the important role that autism had within the introduction to APE course practicum experience:

[We] mostly [have children with] autism ... We will see a couple of students that will be identified with attentional deficit disorder or occasionally the last couple of years we've had one particular student with a visual impairment. One student with cerebral palsy. But by and large most of our students that are identified [with] autism.

The emphasis on autism may also be perpetuated by the fact many general physical educators have explicitly cited they find it difficult to teach students on the autism spectrum in a PE setting (e.g. Colombo-Dougovito, 2015). Like the legislative course material, instructors focused on 'need-to-know' information about certain disabilities. It is likely course instructors meant to allocate course content and time based on the presumption of the student's likelihood of need in the field.

## Discussion

Societally, the views of the needs of individuals with disabilities are, often, demarcated as 'special' and general knowledge of disability, even by parents and teachers (Lalvani, 2015), is informed by broader assumptions of stigma and marginalization. Indeed, though inclusion is, often, expressed as an important value by educators, how inclusive integrated settings are or can be remain an unsettled debate (Haegele, 2019; Hornby, 1999). For example, Morley et al. (2005) showed that teachers view inclusion as a 'journey' (i.e. that it is always possible to improve) but that the inclusion of students with disabilities can hold back able-bodied students. Too often the experiences of students in educational settings, though integrated, remain exclusionary and far from inclusive (Haegele, 2019; Kauffman et al., 2016; Pellicano et al., 2018). Despite educational training in supporting students with disabilities and federal regulations aimed at providing equal opportunity, the views of teachers and the practices of school districts are situated in the broader beliefs of society, which consistently deprioritize the needs of disabled individuals as has been described as a 'permissible prejudice' (Chodorow, 1999). Thus, the continued negative association of being 'labeled' as disabled continue to be, at least partially, mechanized through teachers' low expectations (Shifrer, 2013).

As collegiate instruction is often the first opportunity to socialize future teachers to the profession, the aim of this study was to examine introductory APE course instructors' perspectives towards the purpose of this course, what content were delivered within the course, and why they chose to focus on this content. Through examining the beliefs of the course instructors, the importance of hands-on learning experiences through a practicum program was clearly expressed. This aligns with previous research suggesting practicum programs are a key characteristic within introductory APE courses (Bishop & Driver, 2007; Kwon, 2018; Piletic & Davis, 2010). Yet, participants in the present study provided little rationale for their including these experiences beyond the belief that practicum experiences allow instructors to bridge the gap between practice and theory. The need for college instructors to bridge the theory to practice gap is crucial, as understanding and implementing theoretically driven practices is essential when teaching students with disabilities, and it is presently not occurring (McNamara et al., 2020). Additionally, the present findings highlight several concerning elements central to the breadth of the topic covered under APE and our societal views of disability.

Given the respective curriculum only had one APE course, instructors were often forced to cover broad swaths of information or cover select topics narrowly. Additionally, this limited instructors to cover only the basic medicalized definitions of each disability and rely heavily on practical

experiences to portray the complexities of working with students with disabilities, thus continuing the perpetuation of disability stigma associated with an impairment-centered understanding of disability. Instructors recognized these limitations, though they may not have voiced them directly. Given many of the instructional limitations faced, instructors focused on ‘must-need’ information and providing practical, experiential learning opportunities to practice in a supportive environment. Though this analysis provides a critical analysis of the educational practices of those teaching APE introductory courses, this critique is of the broader institution of higher education (for its lack of ingenuity in curriculum development) and society.

### ***(Re)considering the centering of practical experiences***

Most interviewees pointed out their practicum experiences were meant to lead to a positive change in attitude and empathy toward teaching students with disabilities and to introduce them to the field of APE. This is not surprising, as practicum programs have long been acknowledged as fundamental to APE college experiences (Piletic & Davis, 2010). Indeed, the finding that practicums afford students the extra ability to reinforce and apply information from the lecture part of the class aligns well with earlier literature. For example, Bishop and Driver (2007) explained these practicum experiences enabled college students the ‘opportunity to apply classroom curriculum in a practical setting, increasing the relevance of the course’ (p. 16). The large emphasis on this within the syllabi and interviews suggest these instructors have an assumption their undergraduates lack empathy and have negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. Prior research has shown that working with students with disabilities increases PETE students’ attitudes and perceived level of competence in their ability to teach students with disabilities (Taliaferro et al., 2015). Though, few acknowledge this work is built upon the assumption that empathy and competence is lacking, or that ‘exposure’ is an effective method to build skill competencies. Furthermore, the notion of promoting positive attitudes towards people with disabilities may be overly optimistic and relies heavily on college instructors providing a high-quality experience to PETE undergraduates within practicum programs that are often chaotic in nature and difficult to control – especially given the relatively short duration (often, one academic semester or about 15 weeks). Given the influential socialization that occur within PETE programs (Park & Curtner-Smith, 2018), faculty of those programs must be critical of their practices and prioritization of the program. Though, this analysis focused on the content of APE courses and the instructor’s reasoning behind those decisions are influenced by contexts beyond an individual course.

Many of the instructors relied heavily on covering the overall special education process or the medical characteristics of disabilities. Although the interviewees explained the use of disability simulations was often to elicit deeper empathy for individuals with disabilities, the idea some disabilities may be offensive to simulate begs the question of whether it is appropriate to provide undergraduates an experience where they are asked to empathize the perceived limitations of any given disability. Indeed, many scholars have questioned the use of disability simulations as an educational activity, as it has been purported, they often have no impact or unintended consequences, where abled-bodied individuals are put into positions where an impairment is heightened and enhances their vulnerability and perceived helplessness (Leo & Goodwin, 2016; Nario-Redmond et al., 2017). The prominent focus on medical characteristics and special education process, paired with the absence of teaching strategies teaching from a social justice framework, suggests that although APE college instructors acknowledge the need to develop more positive attitudes and empathy towards individuals with disabilities, a road to achieve this goal is unclear. A continuation of these ‘foundational experiences’ may further perpetuate ableism, which instructors are attempting to circumvent (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013). Future efforts should be made to embed social justice principles and pedagogy within PETE programs, with a concerted effort to incorporate them within introductory APE courses.

### ***(Re)prioritization of instructional content***

The instructors described many of their classes were divided into two main sections: APE strategies (e.g. laws, behavior management, IEPs) and specific disabilities. These findings align with Piletic and Davis's (2010) and Kwon's (2018) findings that disability was by far the most reported area covered in the introduction to APE course. Piletic and Davis explained this as problematic as physical educators will be faced with not only teaching students with disabilities in the general PE class, and thus needing an understanding of disabilities, but also be faced with legal procedures (e.g. IEP, assessments, least restrictive environment placement, transition plans). A pronounced effort to teach undergraduates about APE instructional strategies and supporting legislation is promising, as this content has often been overlooked in APE coursework (Piletic & Davis, 2010; Wilson et al., 2019). For example, the focus on legislation is vital as many physical educators are likely to be involved in part of the IEP process; however, it has been indicated they are often left out much of the time and are not satisfied with their involvement (Samalot & Lieberman, 2017; Wilson et al., 2019). Yet, a reconstitution of course content cannot come without an examination of the historically discriminatory practices in APE and PE pedagogy. It is vital for those guiding the educational practices of future teachers to cultural and societal awareness of *all* sides of disability experience (e.g. disability oppression and discrimination) not only those on impairment (Lalvani & Broderick, 2013).

One conclusion that could be derived from the present study's findings is a large array of information, competing interests, and perspectives are covered within the introductory APE course; in other words, instructors must prioritize giving insufficient information regarding a substantial number of topics or failing to highlight enough topics. The fact that many PETE programs only require one APE course (Kwon, 2018; Piletic & Davis, 2010) further exacerbates the exorbitant amount of content that could be covered within an introductory APE course, leading many instructors to focus on the impairments of disabilities to the exclusion of systemic barriers. With the overabundance of content that APE faculty perceive as necessary within one course, this may lead to a lack of depth given on important topics, as well as confusion as to where to begin – thus, a reliance on 'premier' textbooks such as Winnick and Porretta (2017). Although APE college faculty should continue to reflect on their content and pedagogy to ensure they are supplying quality and depth within the courses, without PETE programs offering more courses related to the expansive area of APE, little change is likely to occur. Though this may be controversial among APE and PE audiences, limiting content knowledge to impairments or laws alone without input from those with disabilities does not align with the social justice aspects of inclusion and perpetuates the societal stigma the profession claims to be working to improve.

### ***(De)centering the medicalized definitions of disability***

Although there appears to be strong emphasis on APE instructional strategies and legislation, the continued emphasis on disability-specific content (i.e. impairments) suggests introduction to APE classes still over rely on a medical model approach. Centering the concept of disability on impairments, the medical model perceives disability as needing to be fixed or treated; reducing one's disability, often, to something that is considered tragic and undesirable (Spencer et al., 2020). Haegele and Hodge (2016) explained the medical model is at odds with the notion that people with disabilities can successfully compete in athletic competition and attain the PE curriculum. Because introductory APE courses often provide PETE students with their known first experiences encountering disability, centering the medical model may cause strong misguided impressions on their views towards disabilities. Indeed, the overuse of the medical model, such as regularly over emphasizing the perceived limitations of a disability, can lead future professionals to have low expectations for individuals with disabilities (Shifrer, 2013). This practice may lead to a myriad of negative experiences and cause unneeded barriers to individuals achieving their own potential and goals.

The centering of this model may also instill within future physical educators the reliance on medically based terminology when referring and talking to people with disabilities. The language educators use when referring to and addressing students with disabilities creates a unique environment that can affect students with disabilities' self-esteem and provides a model for how to interact with people with disabilities (West et al., 2015). Boyd et al. (2015) explained using terminology associated with the medical model can negatively influence people with disabilities, as it reaffirms power imbalances between those with and without disabilities, as well as perpetuates negative societal views towards disability. If medical model language and views are pervasive throughout a college course devoted to providing undergraduates' their initial experiences and attitudes towards people with disabilities, it is likely these students will adopt the same language that often views disability from a deficit model that perpetuates views of less than (West et al., 2015). Although the use of medical model terminology to teach future physical educators may negatively influence their attitudes towards people with disabilities, it is not surprising, as the use of medical model terminology is commonplace within the APE literature (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Spencer et al., 2020) which acts in counter to the ideals of 'inclusion' that are touted as foundational to the field.

Yet, rigid suggestions of language are not possible. Indeed, within the field of APE, the 'correct' language concerning disability is highly debated (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Spencer et al., 2020) despite the acknowledgement that language choices can be limiting (Peers et al., 2014) and can perpetuate stereotype (Boyd et al., 2015; West et al., 2015). In fact, despite the growing recognition of updating how language is used (Peers et al., 2014; Spencer et al., 2020), some scholars have critiqued models which are often viewed as more progressive and inclusive, such as the social model which focuses on social structures and attitudes that impact people with disabilities (Spencer et al., 2020). For example, the social model fails to address impairment as an observable attribute that is an essential lived experience (Palmer & Harley, 2012), as well as largely ignores the different forms of intersectionality within other oppressed groups, such as race and gender (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Spencer et al., 2020).

### **Limitations**

Several limitations to this study should be recognized and discussed. First, this study used data collected from both introduction to APE and APA courses. Although it is presumed many similarities would be found within these courses, as *adapted physical activity* is an umbrella term referring to physical activity for individuals with disabilities and subsumes APE services (Hutzler & Sherrill, 2007), it is unknown to what extent these courses overlap or their intended purposes with curricula. To mitigate this limitation, syllabi from the courses included within this investigation were examined to ensure course description and/or objectives specifically mentioned teaching individuals with disabilities within a PE setting. Second, the use of a generic website to guide the recruiting of participants should also be acknowledged. Indeed, 26% of those contacted indicated they did not offer an APE course. Future research is necessary to build a comprehensive list of PETE programs within the U.S. As great regional and college ranking differences are to be expected, representational data are needed to guide state or national policy decisions regarding the standards of content knowledge necessary for certification. Third, the demographics of the participants were fairly heterogeneous, with a spectrum of education levels, job titles, and regions they reside and teach within the U.S. Although this sample included all APE higher education faculty across the U.S. and may have encapsulated a more authentic group of those teaching the introductory to APE courses across the U.S., a heterogeneous sample within qualitative research often needs a larger sample size to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being examined (Palinkas et al., 2015). Future research should seek to have a more homogeneous sample, especially in terms job title and whether participants have attained tenure or not as these variables are more likely to contribute to participants likelihood to feel they have more autonomy over decisions regarding curriculum changes (Kezar, 2013).

## Conclusion

Although PETE college programs are tasked with preparing future physical educators to teach every student in their care, including those with disabilities, physical educators often feel inadequately prepared to teach students with disabilities as programs often only include one APE-related course. Though likely not enough to train an individual to proficiency, APE courses serve to provide foundational information and are initial opportunities to socialize a future educator into the beliefs of the profession. However, through the present study, it is evident course instructors recognize the limitations to providing only one course of APE instruction; thus, attempting to cover a large amount of content and relying on practical experiences to provide reinforcement. Due to time limitations and limited priority within degree curriculum, this is likely to lead to a limited depth of information provided by instructors. In turn, future physical educators instructing students with disabilities may lean heavily on trial and error rather than evidence-based pedagogy. Through the present analysis, influences outside of the control of the instructor guide decisions about the information taught and instructors often resort to 'teaching how they were taught'. In addition, factors such as whether an instructor has attained tenure within their university has major implications in their perceptions towards their autonomy over curriculum changes in their courses (Kezar, 2013). Further research is necessary to gain a clearer understanding of how PETE programs train future physical educators to work with students with disabilities, how decision-makers place emphasis on curriculum content, and the factors that contribute to making curricular changes. Though this study provides illuminating evidence on the make-up of intro to APE courses, it highlights the broader institutional and societal barriers to providing comprehensive instruction to help future teachers overcome the systemic barriers faced by students with disabilities. Without this vital introspection, intro to APE courses and, more broadly, PETE programs will continue to be party of these systemic injustices.

## Note

1. Adapted physical education refers to a subset of physical education that focuses on delivering individualized instruction to students with disabilities (Winnick & Porretta, 2017).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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