What Is a Highly Qualified Adapted Physical Education Teacher?

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It requires more than a college degree and a teaching license.

On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law. This act required statewide accountability for student performance in reading and math, greater flexibility for parents to make choices for their children if they attended a "low performing" school, and improved teacher quality. The requirement for better teacher quality has resulted in state guidelines to define what constitutes a "highly qualified" teacher. However, the U.S. Department of Education (2005) requires that, at a minimum, "highly qualified" teachers have a four-year college degree, a full state teaching license, and demonstrated knowledge of the subject they are teaching, either by having a college major in the subject or by passing an examination. State and national guidelines currently exist for teachers of "core" academic areas, but not for physical education or adapted physical education (APE) teachers. To address this, NASPE published a position paper that describes the qualities and characteristics of a "highly qualified" physical education teacher (Napper-Owen, Marston, Van Volkinburg, Afeman, & Brewer, 2008; Van Volkinburg, Marston, & Napper-Owen, 2008).

The development of a comparable position paper for APE teachers began in 2006 at the AAHPERD National Convention and Exposition. The Adapted Physical Activity Council (APAC) of the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR) formed a committee to develop a position paper defining the term "highly qualified" as it applies to the discipline of adapted physical education. The committee included current APE teachers and university faculty from APE teacher preparation programs. A draft of guidelines was written and shared with the committee for ideas and feedback. This draft was then edited and sent out to public school teachers for review and was then reviewed in an open forum at the following AAHPERD convention in 2007. Relevant suggestions were accepted, the document was edited, and the committee reviewed it again. A final draft was completed in May 2007 and received final approval from the AAHPERD executive board in winter of 2008. The full version of this document is available on the AAPAR web site (AAPAR & National Consortium for Physical Education and Recreation for Individuals with Disabilities [NCPERID], 2007) and is supported by both APAC and NCPERID. Table 1 describes the four minimum criteria for the training of a highly qualified adapted physical educator.

The purpose of publishing this document was to inform public school administrators in special education and physical education about the requisite knowledge and skills that a highly qualified adapted physical educator must possess in order
to safely and effectively teach students with disabilities in public schools. Moreover, APAC and NCPERID expect this document to help university programs to develop an academic program in adapted physical education.

The purpose of this article is to further explain the characteristics of a highly qualified adapted physical educator. By reviewing the information presented in the article, both adapted and general physical education teachers can consider their knowledge and skills and determine whether they feel particular areas of inservice training might be helpful. Such information can also guide workshops, conference planning, or continuing education classes to improve the quality of any program, should there be areas of need.

Who Is Highly Qualified?

Obviously knowledge of pedagogy and the ability to teach effectively to enhance student achievement are essential attributes of any teacher. Effective teaching behaviors are defined in the research literature for general classroom teachers (Berliner, 1987; Brophy & Good, 1986; Gage, 1978; Rosenshine, 1987) and physical education teachers (Rink, 2006; Schempp, 2003; Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000; Silverman, 1991). To be “highly qualified,” an adapted physical educator must demonstrate effective teaching behaviors in addition to other job-related professional skills (i.e., collaborative teaching, consultative cross-disciplinary teaching, behavior management skill, etc.).

Highly qualified teachers are those whose students have high levels of achievement and low levels of errors. Indices of achievement include, but are not limited to, high levels of physical and motor fitness; skills in aquatics, games, rhythms, dance, and sports; and the use of leisure time to engage in vigorous health-related physical activity. Disabling conditions notwithstanding, students of highly qualified adapted physical educators will attain high achievement levels consistent with their capabilities. Because all physical educators are expected to be “highly qualified,” the term “adapted physical educator” will be used throughout the remainder of this article and is understood to include the “highly qualified” modifier.

Adapted physical educators represent a select group of people from teacher preparation programs, who have APE as an area of specialization. These individuals have a degree in kinesiology with a specialization in pedagogy and a particular focus of attention on adapted physical activity. These teachers also have content knowledge about assessment, individualized educational planning, effective teaching, and evaluation of teaching effectiveness via student achievement. Adapted physical educators demonstrate subject matter competence in various ways including, but not limited to, graduation from state-recognized subject matter programs in APE.

Other less tangible attributes of an adapted physical educator are difficult to measure but easy to understand. For example, the teaching personality of an adapted physical educator should match the culture of the school and the population of students that he or she teaches. Essentially, the adapted physical educator must have the skills and personality to handle the students in his or her school. For example, teaching APE in the inner city of New York is significantly different from teaching in rural Iowa. One locale is not necessarily superior to the other, but they are very different. Likewise, an adapted physical educator must have the maturity associated with working as a member of an educational team and have consultative skills to work with colleagues from other academic areas (i.e., special education, education, psychology, and allied health professions) and parents along the continuum of alternative class placements that appear in public schools. Most importantly, the adapted physical educator must demonstrate a commitment to student achievement as it relates to health-related physical education.

Comprehensive Content Knowledge and Skills

The “highly qualified” APE teacher document states that “highly qualified adapted physical education teachers must have the knowledge and skills [defined by NASPE] for a ‘highly qualified’ physical education teacher” (AAPAR & NCPERID, 2007, p. 2). This professional must be a physical educator first, possessing the content knowledge of general physical education with the ability to apply this information to teaching physical education to children with disabilities. As outlined in Table 1, the document further states that this professional has additional comprehensive content knowledge relative to disabilities, assessment, special education law, individual education plans, and behavior management, among other critical content areas related to adapted physical education (AAPAR & NCPERID).

The following sections in this article address some of the specific content knowledge areas and the guiding principles necessary to be an adapted physical educator. Comprehensive content knowledge and safety must be artfully combined with the everyday skills of teaching.

**Physical Education Content Knowledge.** The adapted physical educator is knowledgeable about subject matter content and follows the best practices described in the “highly qualified” physical education teacher document (NASPE, 2007),

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Four Criteria for Training of Highly Qualified Teachers of Children with Disabilities</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Bachelor’s degree in physical education teacher education AND state license to teach physical education.</td>
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<td>• Twelve semester hours specifically addressing the educational needs of students with disabilities, with a minimum of 9 semester hours specific to the area of adapted physical education.</td>
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<td>• Minimum of 150 hours of practicum experience.</td>
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<td>• Professional preparation programs must be based on standards (state or national) for adapted physical education.</td>
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Table 2. Content Knowledge of Highly Qualified APE Teachers

Recommended content from a minimum of 12 semester hours addressing the needs of children with disabilities:

- Disability studies
- Motor assessment of individuals with disabilities
- Report writing
- Special education law
- Development of individualized education programs (IEPs)
- Individual teaching and learning styles
- Adaptations and modifications for physical education
- Behavior management
- Collaboration and consultation
- Advocacy
- Inclusion practices
- Community and family resources
- Professional leadership
- Assistive technology for physical education

... the “highly qualified” APE teacher document (AAPAR & NCPERID, 2007), the Adapted Physical Education National Standards (Kelly, 2006), and other specific state and local district school policies or guidelines. These documents and guidelines require the professional to stay current and recognize scientific advancements in the education knowledge base. More specifically, the adapted physical educator adheres to the definition of physical education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), which includes physical and motor fitness, fundamental motor skills and patterns, and skills in aquatics, dance, and games and sports (both intramural and lifetime sports). This professional recognizes that adapted physical education is not therapy but education. Incorporated into the teaching of students with disabilities are the educational learning objectives from the physical, social, and cognitive domains of behavior as well as the state-required content standards.

**Safety.** Safety is primary with the adapted physical educator, and he or she is aware of any potentially contraindicated activities. For example, the adapted physical educator would not allow students with Down syndrome who have atlantoaxial instability (lax joints of the neck) to participate in any inverted activities that might put pressure on the head. The adapted educator makes it a practice to check all facilities and equipment for potential hazards and to identify students taking medication or with medical conditions such as seizures and allergies. This information can be obtained by asking the school nurse or the student’s special education teacher, checking school files, or sending a note home to the student’s parents to ask for general information about their child. This professional also makes it a practice to safeguard children not only from physical harm, but from psychological harm (Lavay, 2005).

**Disability Studies.** This professional has strong background knowledge of the different disabilities encountered when teaching, including the 14 disability categories recognized by IDEIA (table 3). Such knowledge should include an understanding of effective programming for various disabilities, safety considerations, and contraindicated activities. In addition, the adapted physical educator must understand the variability of individuals as well as the variability within any specific disability. Due to the multitude of disabilities that exist, this individual must also know where and how to find accurate information regarding relevant research and effective programming.

**Assessment Methods for Student Service Qualification and Report Writing.** Adapted physical educators use valid assessment practices for student service qualification and instructional design. They possess knowledge about a wide variety of assessment tools based on the needs of the students served, including the different disability populations and age ranges from preschool to high school. These professionals realize that no single assessment instrument exists that will serve all students. In addition, they are able to translate assessment practices into effective report writing. Most importantly, adapted physical educators will meet the needs of the students served by determining the present level of performance in order to provide effective program qualification and instruction.

**Special Education Laws and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).** Adapted physical educators need to have a comprehensive knowledge of the history of the laws that govern special education, physical education, and sport for individuals with disabilities. Similarly, they must have a thorough understanding of how those laws apply to current teaching and coaching behaviors. Current legislation governs timelines for referrals, qualifying disabilities, strategies for assessments, content to be included in reports, guidelines for IEP meetings, triennial reviews, and access and equity. Such information is critical for effectively assessing and planning programs, as well as to protect districts from unwanted lawsuits.

**Individual Teaching and Learning Styles.** To create a positive and successful student experience, instructional design and planning must be based on the adapted physical educator’s understanding of many factors that affect student learning. This professional effectively uses curriculum and instructional models and approaches, such as an ecological task analytic teaching model (Davis & Burton, 1991), a multisensory approach, and community-based instruction. Instruction emphasizes each learner’s strengths. For example, this professional uses a multisensory approach by selecting such sensory modalities as the tactile, kinesthetic, visual, and auditory to match each student’s unique needs. This professional also uses a continuum of teaching styles ranging from teacher directed, such as the command style, to a more student-centered approach, such as cooperative or open-ended teaching (Moston & Ashworth, 2002). Teaching style
notwithstanding, the adapted physical educator will use task analysis to carefully observe students’ movement and make adaptations and modifications to the rules, equipment, and facilities as needed to support the learner. This individual is creative because he or she must expand or “adapt” teaching ideas. This creativity comes from such factors as fluency, flexibility and original thinking (Sherrill, 2004). Fluency is the ability to generate a large number of responses such as providing the student with different kinds of choices, flexibility is the ability to shift categories and think of different approaches, and original thinking is the ability to think in novel and unique ways possessing the power to imagine.

Adaptations and Modifications. Adaptations and modifications make content accessible for all students. The adapted physical educator needs to be familiar with the many ways to create variations in games, activities, and sports, such as changing rules, equipment, movement patterns, players, or the organization of the activity. Student success depends on the professional’s understanding of the underlying functional abilities of the individual based on assessments and knowledge of the components of an activity that are needed in order to match the task to the desired learning outcome (Kasser & Lytle, 2005).

Behavior Management. The foundation of effective instruction is management of student behavior. The adapted physical educator knows a variety of behavior management practices to support positive individual and group behaviors and, most importantly, knows how to help students take responsibility for their own behavior. This professional uses various teaching strategies, including proactive methods such as clear, concise rules and routines, to help prevent problems before they occur; methods to maintain and increase desirable behaviors such as varied reinforcements; and, when necessary, methods and consequences to redirect or decrease inappropriate behaviors, such as time out. The adapted physical educator knows how to implement a system-wide behavioral intervention plan and physical restraint techniques, when necessary, for students with more severe behavior problems (Lavay, French, & Henderson, 2006, 2007).

Collaboration and Consultation. Effective collaboration and consultation by the adapted physical educator require knowledge and behaviors that demonstrate respect, good communication skills, and the ability to work successfully with other professionals. This professional is articulate and collegial when communicating with others, while maintaining a positive and professional persona. This individual will teach as a part of a team approach and share with and learn from other professionals, such as the special education classroom teacher, other adapted physical educators, administrators, and the child’s family. Adapted physical educators also understand, respect, and work with other related service providers (i.e., speech therapists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists; Lytle, Lavay, Robinson, & Huettig, 2003).

Advocacy and Inclusion Practices. Adapted physical educators are advocates for students with disabilities. They are knowledgeable about and stay current regarding legislative updates and reauthorizations (e.g., IDEIA) while working to promote a culture of inclusion and respect for individuals with disabilities in the district and schools where they teach (Tripp, Rizzo, & Webbert, 2007). For example, they may promote inclusion through “ability awareness” days in their schools or community or implement peer tutors to foster inclusion and social interaction among all students. They work to promote both general and adapted physical education programs in the schools, and they serve as a resource for other professionals, especially the general physical educator.

Community and Family Resources. Adapted physical educators serve as an advocate, support system, and resource for the families of the children they serve. For example, they listen to parents’ concerns during IEP meetings, and keep the line of communication open to families throughout the year by using such methods as an introductory class letter, questionnaires to determine student needs and interests, behavior notes, homework, progress reports, and newsletters. They are willing to educate families about the importance of physical activity and share physical activity and youth sport opportunities that are available in the school district’s community.

Professional Leadership. The adapted physical educator is willing to assume professional leadership with membership in professional organizations on the national (i.e., AAHPERD) and state level. In addition to attending inservices and professional conferences, this professional volunteers to serve in professional organizations as an officer or to organize and speak at inservices and conferences. The adapted physical educator stays current in the field by reading professional journals such as Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly, JOPERD, Strategies, and Palaestra. This individual makes it a practice to learn and network with other professionals, especially

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<th>Table 3. Disability Categories Recognized by IDEA</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Autism</td>
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<td>2. Deaf-blindness</td>
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<td>3. Deafness</td>
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<td>4. Developmental delay</td>
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<td>5. Emotional disturbance</td>
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<td>6. Hearing impairment</td>
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<td>7. Mental retardiation</td>
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<td>8. Multiple disabilities</td>
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<td>9. Orthopedic disabilities</td>
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<td>10. Other health impairment</td>
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<td>11. Learning disability</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Speech and language impairment</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Traumatic brain injury</td>
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<td>14. Visual impairment</td>
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*Source: National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2008)*
My district/county has an adapted physical education (APE) teacher.

I know who the assigned APE teacher is at my school should I need assistance.

The APE teacher in my school has a BA/BS in teaching physical education.

The APE teacher in my school has 12+ semester hours of coursework related specifically to teaching physical education to individuals with disabilities.

The APE teacher in my school was trained in a college program that is based on standards (state or national) for adapted physical education.

The APE teacher serving my school had preservice training in the age group they are currently working with.

I have ample equipment for each student to participate in my program.

I have ample facilities and space for instruction of quality physical education for all my students, including students with disabilities.

I am familiar with all students with disabilities in my program and have seen their files (IEPs) and know of any medical considerations in teaching them.

veteran teachers, through communication at inservices and professional conferences or through the Internet, by viewing web sites, using email, and participating in chat rooms (e.g., PE Talk, APE Talk). Most importantly, this individual earns other professionals' respect by consistently exhibiting professional conduct. This professional is resourcefull and able to see a difficult situation as an opportunity for growth rather than a problem. By focusing on goals, the adapted physical educator works to "make things happen," while remaining receptive to feedback.

Assistive Technology. Adapted physical educators need to have a comprehensive knowledge of the multitude of technology available to increase learning both inside and outside the classroom. Assistive technology can be as low tech as a pen to communicate in writing or as high tech as a voice-activated computer system. Many assistive devices available for individuals with disabilities are used for communication, positioning, mobility, stability, and sport/recreation. Examples include screen readers, bolsters or wedges, walkers and wheelchairs, prosthetics, mobile standers, and specialized sporting equipment, just to name a few. Sporting equipment might include sport wheelchairs, sit-skis, sledge hockey, or adapted bikes (Kelly, 2006).

Summary
The overall APE content knowledge presented in this article forms the basis for assessment, the writing of individualized education programs, and the delivery of services to children with disabilities. It is important to recognize that the development of the attributes of an adapted physical educator is an ongoing and continuous process. The adapted physical educator is expected to stay abreast with the body of knowledge and continue to grow as a professional. Doing so requires reflection and development of a philosophy that will help guide the adapted physical educator's future professional endeavors. Figure 1 provides a list of statements that address some of the points discussed in this article. The figure can serve as a simple checklist of questions that teachers and schools can use to begin evaluating their programs. The answers to these questions may provide a starting point for determining potential areas of need for academic preparation, advocacy, and recruitment of adapted physical educators. For each area met, accomplishments can be celebrated, and for each area not met, goals can be set as needed. Adapted physical educators, general physical educators, and administrators should advocate for excellence in physical education for all children.

References


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