

# The School-Community Transition in Puerto Rico: Perceptions of Adapted Physical Education Teachers

La transición escuela-comunidad en Puerto Rico: percepciones de los profesores de educación física adaptada

A transição escola-comunidade em Porto Rico: percepções dos professores de educação física adaptada

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the perception of adapted physical education teachers perceptions on the effectiveness of the school-to-community transition process for students with disabilities in Puerto Rico. 71 teachers completed an open-ended questionnaire validated by a group of experts. Results showed that the majority of adapted physical education teachers in Puerto Rico do not plan for transition and they consider these services and processes to be inadequate. Data analysis uncovered three recurring themes: (a) lack of transitions services knowledge and training, (b) inadequate transition planning, and (c) ineffectiveness of transition services. It seems clear that there is a need to provide professional development opportunities and clearer guidelines on transition planning and implementation to all adapted physical education teachers in Puerto Rico.

**KEYWORDS:** Adapted physical education, community integration, disability, social inclusion, transition.

## RESUMEN

El propósito de este estudio fue determinar las percepciones de los profesores de educación física adaptada sobre la efectividad

del proceso de transición de la escuela a la comunidad para los estudiantes con discapacidades en Puerto Rico. 71 profesores completaron un cuestionario con preguntas abiertas validado por un panel de expertos. Los resultados indicaron que la mayoría de los profesores de educación física adaptada de Puerto Rico no planifican la transición y piensan que estos servicios y procesos son inadecuados. El análisis de datos descubrió tres temas recurrentes: (a) falta de conocimiento y capacitación sobre los servicios de transición, (b) planificación inadecuada de la transición y, (c) ineficacia de los servicios de transición. Se concluye que existe la necesidad de dar oportunidades de desarrollo profesional y guías más claras sobre la planificación e implementación del proceso transición a todos los profesores de educación física adaptada de Puerto Rico.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** educación física adaptada, integración comunitaria, discapacidad, inclusión social, transición.

## RESUMO

O objetivo deste estudo foi determinar as percepções dos professores de educação física adaptada sobre a eficácia do processo de transição da escola para a comunidade para alunos com deficiência em Porto Rico. 71 professores responderam um questionário aberto validado por um grupo de especialistas. Os resultados indicaram que a maioria dos professores de educação física adaptada em Porto Rico não planeja a transição e considera esses serviços e processos inadequados. A análise de dados revelou três temas comuns: (a) falta de conhecimento e treinamento dos serviços de transição, (b) planejamento inadequado da transição, e (c) ineficácia dos serviços de transição. Conclui-se que há necessidade de oportunidades de desenvolvimento profissional e diretrizes mais claras sobre o planejamento e a implementação do processo de transição para todos os professores de educação física adaptada em Porto Rico.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** educação física adaptada, integração comunitária, deficiência, inclusão social, transição.

## INTRODUCTION

Public Law 108-466 (2004), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of the United States of America (IDEA) demands that all individuals diagnosed with disabilities (ages 3 to 21) must be provided with a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Likewise, in Puerto Rico, Public Law 51 “Comprehensive Services for Individuals with Disabilities” also provides Puerto Rican students with disabilities the same rights as IDEA.

These laws provide students with disabilities the right to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a written document developed by a multidisciplinary team to ensure that students with disabilities receive the education and services they need to meet their unique needs (Winnick & Porretta, 2022).

In addition, these laws require that transition services be provided beginning at age 16. Transition services (including transition planning) are intended to provide youth with disabilities with the skills necessary to be prepared for their transition from school to the community and to become independent, active, and healthy individuals for society (Morningstar & Clavenna-Deane, 2018; Winnick & Porretta, 2022).

Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1990, P.L. 101-476 defines transition services as:

... a coordinated set of activities for a child, with a disability, that—  
(A) is designed to be within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child’s movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including sup-

ported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (B) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and (C) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and [provision of a] functional vocational evaluation (Public Law 108-466, 2004).

Unfortunately, in the United States, including the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, many young people with disabilities are not socially included in their communities, especially once they finish high school (Franklin et al., 2019; Samalot-Rivera, 2018, 2023; Young-Southward et al., 2017). In addition, this population has fewer opportunities related to sports, leisure and free time than people without disabilities (Erbaş et al., 2021; Kozub & Samalot-Rivera, 2020).

According to related literature, this occurs due to the lack of specialized community programs, lack of knowledge on the part of school and community personnel regarding the transition process, and lack of family involvement (Columna et al., 2015; Samalot-Rivera, 2023). Literature also reveals that opportunities in the community related to recreation and leisure for this population are limited and often inadequate (Erbaş et al., 2021; Kozub & Samalot, 2020; Samalot-Rivera & Lieberman, 2017).

The literature also mentions the lack of emphasis on adapted physical education content (including transition) in physical education teacher preparation programs (Ješínová, 2014; Samalot-Rivera & Lieberman, 2017; Winnick & Porretta, 2022). Unfortunately, most physical education teacher preparation programs only require a course in adapted physical education, but this is often focused on discussing the different types of disabilities and briefly addressing transition-related content.

It has also been shown that adapted physical education teachers felt that their education agencies did not provide them with sufficient guidance and support in inclusion and transition services in education (Samalot-Rivera, 2018).

So what kind of pedagogical and content knowledge do adapted physical education teachers receive from their teacher preparation programs regarding transition? What kind of support do teachers receive in relation to their educational agency's transition services?

The purpose of this study was twofold: to investigate the perceptions of adapted physical educators on the effectiveness of the school-to-community transition process for students with disabilities in Puerto Rico, and to identify areas related to the transition process where further guidance and training are needed.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data collection and participants

After approval of the research by the principal investigator's institution and the adapted physical education program of Puerto Rico, data were collected by means of an open-ended questionnaire, titled "Adapted Physical Educators Perceptions about the Transition Process from School to the Community in Puerto Rico".

Seventy-one participants (table 1) completed the questionnaire, created in Google Forms, and sent electronically to all adapted physical education teachers of the Puerto Rico Department of Education and some private institutions.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics

Data	Percentage
Female	39%
Male	61%
Public school	99%
Private school	1%
1-5 years teaching experience	30%
6-10 years	24%
11-15 years	19%
16-20 years	9%
20+ years	18%

**Source:** Own elaboration.

The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions (table 2) and a Likert scale (table 3). Two college professors of adapted physical education and three teachers of adapted physical education, experts in the field, validated the content of the questionnaire. Working as a panel, the five experts reviewed the questionnaire until all reached agreement. Revisions sought to ensure that the questions actually elicited information about the current status of transition services for students with disabilities in Puerto Rico.

**Table 2.** Transition Services Questionnaire

1	What do you understand by transition process in Adapted Physical Education?
2	Do you know the areas to which the transition process can be oriented?
3	Do you plan with your students objectives that promote the appropriate use of leisure time in their communities?
4	Do you participate in the development of transition goals and objectives in your students' IEPs?
5	In general, how appropriate is the transition process offered by the Puerto Rico Department of Education for you?
6	Do you use the transition questionnaire found in the Puerto Rico Department of Education's APE guidance document?
7	Do you use the Department of Education's Special Education procedures manual for the transition process for your students over the age of 16?

**Source:** Own elaboration.

**Table 3.** Likert scale

Indicate the extent to which you understand you need guidance on the transition process through the APE class in each of the following areas:	Very necessary	Necessary	Unnecessary
Development of objectives related to recreation and leisure			
Legislation			
Activities			
Teaching strategies			
Assessment about level of independence			
Teacher responsibilities			

**Source:** Own elaboration.

## Data analysis

To facilitate the analysis, a separate file was created for each question and the open-ended responses were organized into tables. The researchers then read and analyzed the transcripts until a consensus was reached to identify recurring themes. Conceptually similar key concepts were assembled into thematic statements, giving fundamental meaning to the experiences (Patton, 2014). Finally, researchers submitted the themes and supporting quotes extracted from the transcripts to an external reviewer, who ensured that the themes reflected the purpose of the study and corresponded to the research questions (table 4).

**Table 4.** Research questions

1	What are the perceptions of adapted physical educators about the school-to-community transition process in Puerto Rico?
2	Can adapted physical educators in Puerto Rico identify areas to work on school-to-community transition?
3	Do adapted physical educators plan the school-to-community transition process for youth with disabilities in Puerto Rico?
4	What are the areas in which adapted physical educators in Puerto Rico may need more knowledge about the transition process and what it entails?

**Source:** Own elaboration.



## RESULTS

Data showed that 72% of the participants plan for transition from school to community. However, when asked if they could identify areas for transition development, only 57% responded affirmatively, but only a smaller percentage were able to mention all of them. Although the majority of adapted physical education teachers said they plan for transition, only slightly more than half can identify areas to work on for an effective transition process.

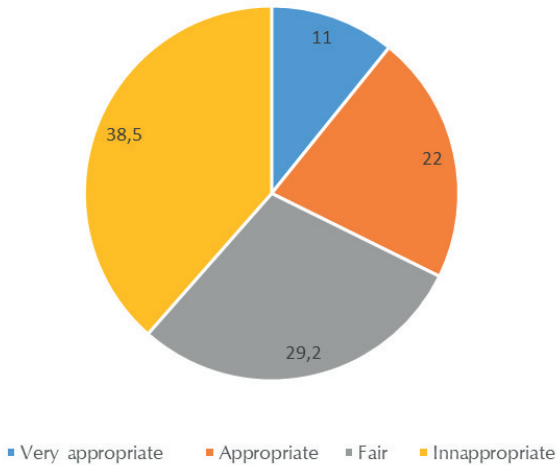
Results showed that only 60% of the teachers participated in IEP meetings to determine their students' transition goals. However, very few claimed to have being asked about transition goals during IEP meetings.

Only 43% of the teachers said they had used the "Physical Education Transition Activities Checklist," which the Puerto Rico Department of Education gives to the teachers. And according to the open-ended responses, most teachers said they did not know about the existence of this document and would need guidance on how to do it.

Unfortunately, only 32% expressed positively about the adequacy of transition services in Puerto Rico (figure 1), and many expressed their frustration with the way transition services are handled and expected more guidance and support.

All participants agreed that more training and guidance is needed in transition services in areas such as: development of goals related to recreation and leisure, legislation, community activities, teaching strategies for transition, assessment of independence levels, and teacher responsibilities. These results suggest the need for more emphasis on transition training for teachers and professionals working with youth with disabilities.

**Figure 1.** To what extent are transition services in Puerto Rico adequate?



**Source:** Own elaboration.

Many teachers shared feelings of frustration with the lack of support from their educational agency (Puerto Rico Department of Education) to provide their students with adequate school-to-community transition services. Participants shared three main concerns: (1) lack of transition knowledge and training, (2) inadequate transition planning, and (3) ineffectiveness of transition services.

### **Lack of transition services knowledge and training**

Teachers expressed a need to know how to provide effective transition services to their students and asked for greater clarity on how the transition process is supposed to work. One of them noted that “It is unclear to me how this must be done.” Unfortunately, teachers in Puerto Rico are not getting the necessary content preparation through their teacher training programs. There are expressions like “We never learned about the tran-

sition in our program.” “The teacher in my adapted class only mentioned it, but he gave very little information”.

Additionally, teachers often expressed their frustration at the lack of guidance and support from the Department of Education. “We did not get any help or guidance from the Department of Education; they just gave us a booklet but no training” or “I do not know what to do and no one ever explained to me how the process should be done.” On the other hand, some teachers said that community participation in the transition “is the parent’s responsibility”. It seems evident that these teachers are not clear that a transition process is a collaborative approach, the effectiveness of which depends on parents, as well as other professionals.

### **Inadequate transition planning**

Transition planning is essential because it helps establish short- and long-term goals so youth with disabilities can develop the skills they need to be the most independent and active individuals possible.

Unfortunately, most teachers are not involved in the development of their student’s IEPs. “I had not been invited to one of those meetings” or “The special education teacher is the one who fills out that document”, but not being invited to IEP meetings is not very encouraging because the adapted physical education teachers are the specialists who should report on the motor ability and physical fitness of the students and their current level of performance, as well as provide recommendations on goals and objectives related to leisure and recreation for students’ effective participation in the community.

When asked, most teachers confessed that they do not develop transition plans for the adapted physical education class; conversely, teachers who do plan are not sure they are doing what is expected of them. “I have heard about it, but I have never developed one of those”, “I have developed transition goals

based on the Department of Education guidelines, but I have not have any training, and I am not sure if I am doing what I am supposed to”.

### **Ineffectiveness of transition services**

Unfortunately, many Puerto Rican teachers expressed frustration with the ineffectiveness of the transition services for students with disabilities due to the lack of support and coordination from the government agencies and community services. “There are some adapted sports programs in the community, but they are very limited and most students stay home doing nothing once they graduate from high school”. “There is transition in schools and we work transition, but it is not effective, there is no collaboration with the Department of Recreation and Sports”.

The teachers’ biggest concern is that “After age 21, opportunities for these students are limited, there is nothing out there”. Unfortunately, this has been an issue that has plagued this population for many years. In this regard, Kozub and Samalot-Rivera (2020) mentioned that although progress has been made providing sports opportunities at the interschool level to young people with disabilities, more than half of the states in the United States lack opportunities for this population, which in itself is a big problem. Participating in leisure and recreation activities is a good start for these students to work on their transition skills with in-school and after-school programming, and interschool sports competitions.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Adapted physical education teachers are not completely satisfied with school-community transition services are done in Puerto Rico. One of the most significant needs is greater collaboration by government agencies –like the Department of Education and

the Department of Recreation and Sports– to promote the social inclusion of these students.

Most teachers also admitted a lack of knowledge about transition services, including transition planning, and the need for more guidance and training on to the process in adapted physical education.

The lack of opportunities for youth with disabilities after high school constitutes a major challenge. If done efficiently, the transition process in adapted physical education could offer the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers to lead active and healthy lives and positive social interaction through physical activity.

Collaboration is the key to success. The involvement of the adapted physical education teacher in the transition process and the authentic cooperation between school and community will allow for effective transition.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Updated and comprehensive guidelines and professional training opportunities should be provided to all adapted physical education teachers.

Training programs should provide their teacher candidates with the appropriate pedagogical content knowledge to effectively plan and implement the transition process for youth with disabilities.

Teachers and administrators should understand the importance of general and adapted physical education to their student's transition process, and that adapted physical education is a direct educational service required by law (Hodge et al., 2017; Ješínová et al., 2014; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2011; Winnick & Porretta, 2022).

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