



Teachers' perception on teaching physical education at tertiary level

Hoang Thi Dinh

Lecturer, Trade Union University, Hanoi, Vietnam
Corresponding Author: Hoang Thi Dinh, dinhht@dhcd.edu

Date of Submission: 15-05-2025

Date of Acceptance: 31-05-2025

ABSTRACT: This qualitative study explored university lecturers' perceptions of teaching physical education (PE) at the tertiary level, an area sometimes underappreciated despite its significance for holistic development. Eleven in-depth interviews revealed that despite structural undervaluation and limited resources, teachers see their responsibilities as transforming, emphasizing student well-being, inclusiveness, and promoting long-term healthy lives. Among difficulties with academic recognition, participants showed great occupational identification and dedication to student growth. The findings highlight the complex realities of tertiary PE, advocating for increased institutional support, professional training, and further research on long-term student outcomes to better position PE as a vital component of higher education.

KEYWORDS: physical education, tertiary level, teacher perception, inclusive pedagogy, qualitative research, thematic analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Considered as the pillar of holistic development, physical education (PE) promotes not only physical ability but also important psychological and social abilities. Although its value is well-known in elementary and secondary education, university-level PE instruction has a quite different terrain. Here, teachers negotiate a complex environment molded by shifting student demographics, the demands of academia, and society's changing perceptions of health and fitness. To truly enhance pedagogical strategies and ensure program effectiveness in this unique setting, we need a more profound understanding of how physical educators in higher education perceive their multifaceted roles and responsibilities.

Even with great progress in educational research, physical education sometimes struggles

with questions of legitimacy and systematic support inside the larger scholarly framework. As Locke (1977) pointed out, historically the field has battled for complete integration and acceptance. At the university level, physical education education sometimes faces a less importance than usually "core" academic disciplines. can result in an undervaluation of the subject itself as well as the committed experts teaching it.

Moreover, university-level PE teachers sometimes find themselves juggling a basic conflict: the conventional emphasis on performance-based outcomes (e.g., skill mastery, fitness levels) against more progressive, student-centered educational goals which emphasize critical thinking, personal well-being, and lifetime physical activity participation (Silverman & Skonie, 1997). This dynamic generates a unique set of instructional problems less common in previous phases of schooling. In this complex environment, knowing teacher perspectives becomes a key starting point for appreciating the present status of physical education in higher education. From the curriculum design to the particular instructional approaches selected and even the enthusiasm with which courses are presented, these impressions actively impact a wide range of instructional decisions; they are not only internal attitudes. Moreover, professional reflection - whether "in action" during teaching or "on action" after the fact - serves as a transforming instrument allowing teachers to adapt and respond properly to the various reality of their classrooms (Tsangaridou, 2005).

Current studies, however, show a clear discrepancy: studies have particularly looked at how tertiary level PE teachers view their special tasks, the difficulties they run across, and their sense of pedagogical efficacy inside this particular academic setting. This lack of targeted research results in our poor understanding of the particular requirements and experiences of these teachers.



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Conceptual Foundations of Physical Education at the Tertiary Level

Physical Education (PE) at the tertiary level goes beyond the conventional K–12 emphasis on acquisition of basic motor skills and rote physical exercise. While still valuing the promotion of physical literacy and active lifestyles, university-level PE coursework delves into a more sophisticated understanding of human movement, health, and its societal implications. University-level PE courses explore a more comprehensive knowledge of human movement, health, and its social ramifications. It goes beyond just "doing" to "understand," and "critically analyze." This includes investigating the theoretical foundations of exercise science, sport psychology, motor learning, and biomechanics. Students are taught not just how to execute a task but also why particular pedagogical strategies are successful, how physiological adaptations arise, and what psychological aspects affect performance and involvement (Lumpkin, 1998; Rink & Hall, 2008). This emphasis on scientific and pedagogical knowledge distinguishes tertiary PE from its earlier counterparts.

Moreover, tertiary PE sometimes includes a substantial teaching component, especially for students aiming at vocations in health or education. This implies looking at several teaching approaches, curriculum development, evaluation techniques, and inclusive behaviors in physical education environments. The goal is to produce reflective practitioners able to modify their instruction to fit changing health environments and various populations (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2013). Beyond the practical and pedagogical, tertiary PE also emphasizes the socio-cultural dimensions of physical activity. This covers important debates on the function of sports in national identity, how media shapes body image, problems of equality and access in physical exercise, and the historical development of physical culture. Studies investigate, for example, how team sports improve interpersonal skills vital for success (Baños et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023) and how physical education might support social and emotional growth (Malinauskas & Malinauskiene, 2021). Basically, it seeks to equip students to be informed citizens and leaders in many spheres relating to human movement and well-being by encouraging critical thinking about health, well-being, and the wider societal consequences of physical activity.

Far from a passive internal state, teacher perception is a major motivator for instructional practice and a vital prism through which to view the challenging

reality of tertiary education. These impressions, which cover ideas like curricular relevance, student capabilities, institutional support, and personal efficacy, directly translate into observable classroom actions (Silverman & Skonie, 1997; Locke, 1977). For example, a PE teacher who believes the material is out-of-date could be less enthusiastic in how she delivers it, therefore influencing student involvement. On the other hand, a teacher who sees the transforming potential of physical exercise should actively look for creative approaches to link abstract ideas with useful application. Studies repeatedly show how important teachers are to determining student self-esteem, changing their perceptions of physical education, and including them in physical activities (Granero-Gallegos et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2023).

Within the framework of tertiary PE, the relevance of instructor opinion is enhanced by numerous elements. Historically, PE has sometimes been seen as less intellectually demanding than other fields and has struggled for academic equity inside higher education institutions. This historical marginalization (Cardinal, 2019) can affect how PE teachers view their own professional status, therefore influencing either feelings of inadequacy or a strengthened desire to justify the academic importance of their discipline. These impressions can then inspire teachers to improve the intellectual rigor of their classes, include more research-based materials, and support their programs within the academic hierarchy. Studies have revealed that because of opinions among managers and colleagues that their subject lacks academic rigor or bears lesser significance, PE teachers can face marginalization and isolation (Lux & McCullick, 2011; MacDonald, 1995). These perceptions can negatively impact motivation and effectiveness.

Moreover, tertiary PE educators face the unique challenge of balancing the demand for both physical performance (e.g., skill demonstration, fitness testing) and pedagogical rigor (e.g., theoretical knowledge, critical analysis). Their perceptions of this balance directly inform their teaching priorities. Do they prioritize technical skill development, or do they emphasize the cognitive and affective domains of learning? In what ways do they evaluate student knowledge such that it really reflects both intellectual grasp and physical ability? Gaining understanding of the internal and external factors influencing teaching practice in colleges and universities depends on knowing these complex viewpoints. These impressions and, thus, student experiences are highly influenced by elements such as class sizes, curriculum



design, instructor credentials, and facilities. Moreover, the way a teacher conducts and the surroundings they design can significantly influence how students view physical exercise and sports generally (Murphy et al., 2023). By means of analysis of these opinions, researchers and managers can ultimately spot possible areas of support, professional development, and curriculum improvement, thereby trying to improve the quality and impact of tertiary physical education.

2. The Evolution and Challenges of Research on Physical Education Teaching

Research on teaching physical education has followed a path marked by both constant criticism and expansion. Although knowledge of successful physical education was becoming more and more important in the late 20th century, the early body of work was sometimes under criticism for its theoretical insensitivity and methodological restrictions. One very moving critique came from Locke (1977), who notably called studies on physical education's instructional practices "dismal science." Several chronic problems that beset the field - a pervasive lack of replicability, making it difficult to establish consistent findings; an absence of cumulative knowledge, preventing the building of a coherent theoretical framework; weak practical application, rendering much of the research irrelevant to real-world teaching challenges; and a great disconnection from teacher needs and classroom reality - led to this forceful indictment. The fact that graduate students, whose limited resources, short-term involvement, and sometimes single concentration limited the depth and range of their questions, undertook a significant amount of early research often compounded these basic flaws. This early landscape depicted a study field grappling to identify its goal and establish rigorous methods, a difficulty not unique for newly established academic fields.

Early studies on physical education's instruction show a quantitative predominance that highlights even more its basic difficulties. In their exhaustive analysis of 179 papers on physical education education, Silverman and Skonie (1997) painstakingly noted that an overwhelming majority, more than 85%, were categorized as "effectiveness studies." Mostly using quantitative techniques, these studies carefully measured observable events including student learning outcomes (e.g., skill acquisition, fitness scores), particular teacher behaviors (e.g., time spent on instruction, feedback types), and the structural elements of courses (e.g., lesson plans, organization of activities). Although

these investigations were typically limited in scope, they surely gave important empirical data on the mechanical elements of classroom operations. Most importantly, they hardly addressed the subjective experiences of teachers - that is, their opinions, motives, difficulties, or decision-making process. Moreover, these quantitative methods sometimes neglected the fundamental ideas and values that direct teaching practice, therefore failing to interact closely with educational philosophies. Although this limited focus produced observable results, it unintentionally reinforced a reductionist perspective of teaching efficacy, therefore transforming it from a complicated interaction of cognition, emotion, and circumstance into a collection of behaviors.

This historically limited research focus has had major effects on how PE's conception of "effective teaching" is based. Much of the study on teaching in physical education literature has unintentionally disregarded important, higher-order considerations that are vital to really understanding and improving teaching practice by mostly approaching it through a mechanical or behavioral perspective. Mostly disregarded were elements such teacher motivation, their capacity for introspection on their practice, the development of their professional identity, and their feeling of professional agency - that is, their capability to affect the results and surroundings of their classroom. These are exactly the elements that are not only vital for teacher development in all kinds of educational environments but also especially important for teachers in university settings, where intellectual leadership, curriculum development, and mentoring of upcoming professionals take front stage. The absence of these psychological and socio-cultural aspects has restricted the field's capacity to create thorough theories of teaching and learning in PE, so undermining knowledge of the whole character of successful pedagogy and the difficult reality experienced by physical education teachers in higher education. Consequently, the difficulty for modern research on teaching in physical education is to transcend simple effectiveness measures to embrace a more holistic, theoretically informed, and practically relevant research agenda that captures the richness and complexity of the teaching and learning experience.

3. Tertiary Context and Gaps in Existing Research

Although the scholarly terrain of Physical Education (PE) research at the elementary and secondary school levels is somewhat rich, the literature especially addressing PE teaching in postsecondary education is sorely lacking. Whether



looking at teacher behavior (Silverman & Skonie, 1997), investigating pedagogical preferences (Auntu & Karahan, 2012), or digging into reflective practices (Tsangaridou, 2005), the great majority of studies center on K–12 environments. Given the significant differences in the pedagogical terrain of colleges and universities relative to their pre-tertiary predecessors, this control is especially troublesome.

Characterized by diverse instructional needs, high student expectations, and a fundamentally different institutional culture, the university setting offers PE teachers a unique and challenging environment. Unlike school-based physical education programs, tertiary PE courses frequently include a sophisticated tapestry of learning environments. This includes expecting a strong academic knowledge from teachers by thorough theoretical courses encompassing fields including kinesiology, sport psychology, exercise physiology, and motor learning. Requiring a high degree of performance competence and pedagogical skill, there are typically extensive practical courses focusing on advanced skill training, fitness leadership, coaching approaches, and tailored physical activity alongside these theoretical elements. Moreover, many tertiary PE courses include research training, in which teachers aid students in doing their own investigations, so necessitating their own active research as well.

Thus, tertiary level PE teachers are not only teachers; they are multifarious professionals with roles as scholars, actively involved in research and dissemination; advisers, guiding students through academic and career paths; and curriculum designers, so determining the very content and structure of their programs. Therefore, a special set of academic demands greatly affects how they view instruction. Natural for university faculty life, the "publish-or-perish" pressure can rob time and energy from pedagogical innovation. The depth of interaction with students might be affected by limited teaching time, sometimes limited by demanding course loads and research obligations. Furthermore influencing their perspective on the importance and direction of physical education in higher education are conflicting departmental agendas and the continuous fight for recognition inside more general academic hierarchies. The classic argument by Locke (1977) that much of PE research has been detached from the reality of professional practice rings even more true in university environments. Evidence clearly clarifying how tertiary PE teachers view their complex roles, the degree and type of institutional support they receive, or the particular difficulties they have in balancing the physical and practical aspects

of their field with the academic rigor expected in higher education is sorely lacking. This significant study disparity emphasizes how urgently thorough investigation of the tertiary PE terrain is needed.

Examining teacher opinion is far more than just a record of views; it is a fundamental pillar for methodically raising teaching quality, maximizing student learning outcomes, and increasing institutional support for physical education. Teachers' basic beliefs and impressions greatly affect their methodological decisions in the classroom (Auntu & Karahan, 2012), their proactive participation in reflective practice and professional development (Tsangaridou, 2005), and their ultimate interpretation of what constitutes meaningful and valuable education (Silverman & Skonie, 1997). As consistently shown in the existing literature. These impressions shape the learning environment and serve as their internal compass directing their decisions on training. Furthermore, teachers' impressions of the situation of their field of work directly affect their emotional and professional well-being. Teachers who believe their topic, such tertiary PE, is underappreciated, misinterpreted, or excluded within the larger academic framework run a risk of suffering a variety of negative consequences. Professional burnout resulting from a sense of fighting an uphill battle; less motivation leading to less excitement and effort; or even hostility to innovation as they may view new projects as more obligations than chances for development. On the other hand, when educators feel professionally respected, really supported, and empowered, a great synergy results. Such favorable impressions create a rich environment for development, which motivates teachers to actively pursue research-informed practices to improve their instruction, use more creative and innovative pedagogical approaches, and fervently advocate the field itself, so supporting its significance both inside the university and outside.

Therefore, a focused study on the opinions of university PE teachers is not only helpful but also necessary for exposing both the inherent human motivators driving brilliance and the systematic obstacles impeding good teaching. The knowledge gained from such studies immediately helps to guide the creation of focused and successful professional development initiatives catered to the particular requirements of tertiary PE teachers. It can help to ensure that programs are relevant, interesting, and in line with modern needs, so guiding significant curriculum transformation. Most importantly, this information can influence institutional policy, therefore affecting the distribution of resources,



suitable acknowledgement of faculty efforts, and a more favorable academic climate for physical education. Deeper knowledge of teacher opinions is ultimately essential for more general advocacy campaigns to securely establish and improve the key place of physical education in higher education.

All things considered, even if the body of current research provides a strong basis for knowledge of physical education, especially at the school level, offering insights into teaching styles, reflective practices, and systematic challenges of research traditions, the tertiary context remains rather understudied. Mostly unexplored ground is the particular difficulties and intricacies of how PE teachers view their multifarious instructional duties, the particular hurdles they face, and their institutional environment. Future studies must clearly focus on

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore university-level physical education (PE) teachers' perceptions of their teaching practices, challenges, and professional roles. A total of 11

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Analysis of the interview data revealed five interrelated thematic domains concerning how university-level physical education (PE) lecturers perceive their teaching roles, pedagogical challenges, and institutional positioning. These themes draw attention to inherent conflicts between the institutional constraints in higher education environments and the transforming power of physical education. Every theme below explores the particular challenges faced, how teachers understand these facts, and what obstacles they run across in daily operations.

Undervalued but Growingly Important

One of participants' ongoing worries was the seeming exclusion of physical education inside the academic structure. Often excluded from institutional planning, strategic investments, or multidisciplinary cooperation, lecturers sometimes characterized physical education as an underappreciated profession. Notwithstanding this, they underlined that PE is becoming more and more important in achieving more general educational objectives especially in view of growing worries about student mental health, stress, and inactive lifestyles. Still, their demands for respect sometimes go unmet.

As one lecturer noted, "We're part of the solution to burnout and anxiety, but decision-makers don't see that. PE is still 'just gym class' to many" (Response 3). Another added, "When our faculty

teacher perception as a central lens given the intrinsically multifarious character of teaching physical education in higher education - which deftly combines physical performance, sophisticated pedagogical theory, and rigorous academic responsibilities. This perspective helps one to build a more complete awareness of professional development needs, paths for curricular innovation, and techniques for successful educational leadership, therefore improving the outcome. This study intends to provide both interesting empirical results and major theoretical contributions to the developing and ever more important conversation on physical education in higher education by especially addressing this important research gap and investigating the opinions of tertiary-level PE educators.

physical education lecturers at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted between February and April 2025

isn't even consulted during wellness campaigns, it's clear where we stand in the hierarchy" (Response 6). Therefore, the institutional neglect to recognize the importance of physical education rather than its relevance defines the issue. This leads to a gulf between the structural neglect PE gets in academics and its possible contribution to overall student development.

Physical Education as Formal Education

Although course outlines and university standards usually place physical competency domain as such, participants saw their role as far more broad. Many teachers underlined that physical education provides a forum for kids to acquire vital life skills such emotional control, teamwork, self-discipline, and confidence - which are applicable in all spheres of life including into adulthood. Often conflicting with antiquated ideas that limit PE to sports methods or physical drills is this larger pedagogical vision.

"My job isn't to make athletes," explained one lecturer. "It's to help students know their bodies, respect their limits, and work with others" (Response 1). Another echoed this sentiment: "When a shy student leads a warm-up or reflects on their performance for the first time, that's growth that matters more than speed or strength" (Response 9). Here there is two-fold a problem: First of all, institutional systems hardly evaluate or reward these psychosocial results; second, students may show up for physical education courses with limited expectations that need to be carefully refocused.



Inclusive motivation

Particularly in general elective classes, participants regularly noted that student desire and past physical activity experience differed greatly. While some students were reluctant, physically inactive, or nervous about involvement, others were eager and physically confident. For teachers, who had to create sessions that fairly engaged every student while addressing different skill levels, physical capacities, and cultural norms, this disparity provided a major difficulty.

“Some students love it - they’re energetic, competitive, and involved. But others treat it like a filler course or avoid participation because they feel self-conscious,” noted a lecturer. Another described adapting activities for an international student: “She had never participated in a co-ed class before. We adjusted the group settings and allowed her to ease in slowly, which helped a lot” (Response 8). These instances show the teachers' attempts to create a feeling of inclusiveness and comfort in a topic that may easily appear threatening or exclusive.

The larger problem is the lack of institutional support for inclusive practices; many professors have to rely on personal judgment instead of institutional tools or training to properly handle variety.

Managing Teaching's Planning Against Adaptability

Though most teachers pointed out the importance of flexibility in implementation, most valued organized lesson planning for organization, safety, and growth. Often factors like shared facilities, erratic weather, and changing student energy required quick changes. This called for not only pedagogical agility but also emotional intelligence and the capacity to read classroom dynamics.

“You walk in with a plan, but you also walk in with intuition,” one explained. “Some days, your students need a workout. Other days, they need a walk and talk.” Similarly, another shared a logistical challenge: “I planned a circuit in the main hall, only to find out it was double-booked. We ended up doing the session in a corridor using chairs and cones. You learn to improvise.”

V. CONCLUSION

This study offers a rich, grounded insight of how tertiary level physical education teachers view their jobs, problems, instructional strategies, and professional identities. By means of thorough interviews with eleven university teachers, a clear image emerged: although PE still suffers structural

The major problem here is not inadequate preparation but rather a lack of institutional dependability in space distribution and scheduling, which drives teachers to function in reactive rather than proactive forms. Nevertheless, professors stayed dedicated to provide significant learning opportunities even in less than ideal surroundings.

Teaching as Advocacy and Extended Effects

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the great sense of purpose teachers gained from their job ran across all the interviews. Many said they taught physical education as a kind of advocacy for the re-humanization of education, self-care, and good living. Their drive comes from personal belief and significant student contacts rather than from institutional validation.

“Teaching PE is about shaping attitudes. It’s about showing students that their health matters - and that they’re allowed to take up space, move, and feel good in their bodies,” shared P1. Others emphasized the delayed nature of impact: “Sometimes you won’t see the difference now, but years later a student writes to say they’re still exercising or they became a coach. That’s our legacy” (Response 3).

This theme reveals that lecturers frame their work as part of a larger societal mission. In a system that often prioritizes technical knowledge and academic metrics, they persist in offering embodied, emotionally rich, and transformative learning experiences.

This subject shows how teachers view their profession as part of a greater social mission. They continue to provide embodied, emotionally rich, and transforming learning opportunities in a system that sometimes gives technical knowledge and academic measurements top priority.

Overall, the findings show a group of teachers who remain fervently dedicated to student growth and educational justice even while they negotiate major institutional constraints. Anchored in advocacy, contemplation, and relational care, their work represents a philosophy of education transcending physical training. But inadequate infrastructure, and limited institutional support hinder the viability of such education.

marginalization in higher education, its teachers are fervently engaged in its more general pedagogical goal. These speakers foster critical thinking, support lifetime wellbeing, and encourage inclusiveness and empathy in addition to imparting physical abilities. Driven by innate motivation, peer support, and a strong confidence in the transforming power of



physical education, these teachers continue among institutional neglect and infrastructure restrictions. They see themselves as change agents and activists as much as teachers. Their labor provides confidence, resilience, community, and self-awareness - qualities more than credentials. Universities have to go beyond tokenistic inclusion if they are to really realize the possibilities of physical education at the tertiary level. This calls for real infrastructure expenditures, institutional acknowledgment, multidisciplinary teamwork, and professional development targeted on reflective, inclusive, and adaptive teaching. Only then will PE be rightfully in place, not on the edges but rather at the core of comprehensive, human-centered higher education.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Aktop, A., & Karahan, N. (2012). Physical education teachers' views of teaching methods: Gender differences. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 1910–1913.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.05.401>
- [2]. Calderhead, J. (1996). Teachers: Beliefs and knowledge. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 709–725). Macmillan.
- [3]. Faucette, N., Nugent, P., Sallis, J. F., & McKenzie, T. L. (2002). "I'd rather chew on aluminum foil": Overcoming classroom teachers' resistance to teaching physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 21(3), 287–308.
- [4]. Graber, K. C. (2001). Research on teaching in physical education. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 491–519). AERA.
- [5]. Keating, X. D., Silverman, S., & Kulinna, P. H. (2019). Physical education teacher educators' views about health-related physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 38(1), 1–10.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0272>
- [6]. Locke, L. F. (1977). Research on teaching physical education: New hope for a dismal science. *Quest*, 28(1), 2–16.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.1977.10519895>
- [7]. Macdonald, D., & Tinning, R. (2003). Reflective practice goes public: Reflection, governmentality and postmodernity. In A. L. Beck, D. McKillop, & P. Goldstein (Eds.), *Teaching the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teacher education* (pp. 119–138). SUNY Press.
- [8]. Placek, J. H., & Smyth, D. M. (1995). Examining the relationship between ability, effort, and self-perception in physical education. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 66(1), 18–24.
- [9]. Siedentop, D., & Locke, L. F. (1997). Making a difference for physical education: What professors and practitioners must build together. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 68(4), 25–33.
- [10]. Silverman, S., & Skonie, R. (1997). Research on teaching in physical education: An analysis of published research. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 16, 300–311.
- [11]. Tsangaridou, N. (2005). Classroom teachers' reflections on teaching physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 24(1), 24–50.
- [12]. Tsangaridou, N., & O'Sullivan, M. (1997). The role of reflection in shaping physical education teachers' educational values and practices. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 17(1), 2–25.
- [13]. Xiang, P., Lowy, S., & McBride, R. E. (2002). The impact of a field-based elementary physical education methods course on preservice classroom teachers' beliefs. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 21(2), 145–161.
- [14]. Zeichner, K. M., & Tabachnick, B. R. (1991). Reflections on reflective teaching. In B. R. Tabachnick & K. M. Zeichner (Eds.), *Issues and practices in inquiry-oriented teacher education* (pp. 1–21). Falmer Press.