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PRE-SERVICE PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS, AND INTENTIONS TOWARD INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *The present study investigated pre-service physical education (P.E.) teachers' attitudes, intentions, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, as well as the relationships among these variables. It further examined the effects of gender and year of study and explored the association between perceived academic preparation and perceived teaching competence within the TPB framework. A total of 176 P.E. students (68 males, 108 females) completed validated questionnaires. Descriptive findings indicated high intention ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 0.82$) and positive attitudes ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 0.67$), whereas PBC was moderate ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.15$). Year of study did not significantly affect TPB variables ($p > .05$), while female students reported significantly higher intention scores than males, $t(174) = -2.44$, $p < .01$. Correlation analyses revealed significant positive associations between attitudes and intention ($r = .457$, $p < .01$), intention and PBC ($r = .451$, $p < .01$), and attitudes and PBC ($r = .273$, $p < .01$). Moreover, perceived university preparation was strongly associated with perceived teaching competence ($r = .637$, $p < .01$), which was moderately related to attitudes ($r = .278$, $p < .01$) and intention ($r = .264$, $p < .01$). The findings highlight the central role of university preparation in strengthening inclusive dispositions and perceived competence among future P.E. teachers.*

Keywords: Students with disabilities, teacher preparation, pedagogical readiness, educational mainstreaming, professional predispositions, special educational needs

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the integration and mainstreaming of students with diverse functional limitations within standard educational environments has drawn substantial attention from pedagogues and school systems. This cooperative educational environment yields constructive developmental and social outcomes both for the integrated youth and for their typically developing peers (Boyle et al., 2023; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022; Saloviita, 2018; Zagona, Kurth & MacFarland, 2017). The philosophy of inclusive schooling, which centers on embedding children with distinct educational demands into traditional classrooms, represents a contemporary instructional paradigm and empirical domain dedicated to building learning environments that secure equitable development pathways for every student.

Operating within this conceptual territory, a considerable body of literature has utilized Icek Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to evaluate the prospective behavioral commitments of working educators and university students regarding the classroom integration of youth with special needs. According to this psychological model, the focal drivers shaping actual execution are personal attitudes, subjective social pressures, perceived behavioral control (PBC), and behavioral intentions. More precisely, the TPB posits that actions are directly guided by an individual's explicit intent to act, which is structurally dependent upon: (a) one's evaluative orientation toward the action, (b) subjective norms capturing the perceived social endorsement of the behavior, and (c) the level of perceived control over the action, which reflects the person's internal conviction regarding their capacity to execute it.

Modern empirical studies applying the TPB framework have demonstrated that a major element shaping how teachers view inclusive school settings is their active engagement with dedicated special education and inclusion modules during higher education (Zagona et al., 2017). Furthermore, evidence indicates that standard classroom instructors across various academic fields frequently harbor less encouraging orientations toward embedding students with special needs, and these viewpoints show only minor correlations with their subjective self-efficacy metrics (Saloviita, 2018). This pattern indicates that feeling generally competent as an instructor does not automatically translate into a willingness to adopt inclusive classroom strategies.

Scholars have turned distinct focus toward the professional outlook of physical education (P.E.) instructors, who, despite experiencing institutional preparation paths parallel to special educators, regularly express lower levels of confidence when tasked with directing classes that integrate students with disabilities (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2014). Corresponding difficulties were highlighted by Rojo-Ramos et al. (2022), noting that P.E. specialists frequently experience complications when handling student diversity, even when they outwardly advocate for inclusion principles. Discrepancies in professional mindsets have also been documented when comparing pre-service candidates to active, in-service P.E. teachers based on their specific institutional level, with primary school instructors demonstrating more

receptive outlooks than secondary education specialists (Boyle et al., 2023; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022). In addition, variances often emerge based on the nature of the child's impairment, as educators report diminished self-perceived capability when instructing students experiencing intense behavioral or emotional challenges (Avramidis et al., 2000). Prior exploratory work has also illustrated that unsupportive mindsets toward educational integration are frequently tied to gaps in professional knowledge and field experience (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Hersman & Hodge, 2010; Papadopoulou et al., 2004; Sato & Hodge, 2007; Simons & Kalogeropoulos, 2005). Conversely, structured university coursework during the undergraduate phase serves as a cornerstone for building positive professional attitudes and driving instructional competence (Tanure Alves et al., 2022).

Considered collectively, the evidence suggests that teacher preparation during university studies is a critical factor for the successful implementation of inclusion programs. Participation in specialized inclusive education courses significantly affects the attitudes, intentions, and PBC of future P.E. teachers. Although previous research has extensively examined teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, several important gaps remain. First, limited research has simultaneously examined the interrelationships among the core TPB variables (attitudes, intentions, and PBC) within the context of P.E. Second, while university preparation has been identified as an influential factor, its association with perceived teaching competence and its indirect connection to TPB variables remain underexplored. Third, empirical evidence focusing specifically on pre-service P.E. teachers within the Greek educational context is scarce. Given that teacher preparation systems vary substantially across countries, understanding how academic preparation shapes psychological readiness for inclusion is particularly important in this national context. To address these gaps, a systematic examination of the interrelations among TPB variables and the role of perceived academic preparation in shaping inclusive readiness is warranted.

Purpose

The aim of this study was to examine the personal attitudes, behavioral intentions, and PBC of future P.E. instructors regarding the mainstreaming of children with special needs in standard classrooms, alongside investigating the structural relationships among these specific elements. Additionally, the explicit sub-objectives were: a) to evaluate whether participant gender and current year of study exert a significant impact on the three focal TPB dimensions, and b) to assess the connection between pre-service P.E. teachers' appraisals of their university coursework preparation and their subjective teaching confidence, in relation to the three overarching parameters of the TPB model.

Research Hypotheses

Drawing on the foundational tenets of the TPB and relevant empirical literature, the following research hypotheses were established:

- H1:** Attitudes toward inclusion will be positively associated with intention.
- H2:** Perceived behavioral control will be positively associated with intention.
- H3:** Attitudes and PBC will be positively interrelated.

H4: Perceived university preparation will be positively associated with perceived teaching competence.

H5: Perceived teaching competence will be positively associated with attitudes and intention.

H6: Female pre-service P.E. teachers will report higher intention scores than male students.

H7: Year of study will significantly influence TPB variables.

Methods

Participants

The empirical data collection took place in Greece, capturing a sample of 176 undergraduate and postgraduate students (68 males and 108 females) from university Departments of Physical Education and Sport Science. The participating individuals represented future P.E. specialists qualifying for placement within the national Greek school framework. In terms of sample distribution, 16 individuals were in their 1st academic year, 35 in their 2nd, 25 in their 3rd, 73 in their 4th, 16 were completing remaining requirements, 7 had graduated, and 4 were pursuing advanced postgraduate degrees.

Measures

The data gathering process utilized an evaluation instrument structured into three distinct segments:

a) A standard demographic section, which collected baseline participant characteristics including biological sex, current age, specific year of registration, and current degree level (undergraduate versus postgraduate).

b) An adaptation of the classic TPB assessment model (Ajzen & Madden, 1986), comprising: five items centered on attitudes (initiated by the introductory statement: "In the future, when I work as a P.E. teacher, including a student with a disability in my class will be something I consider to be...", which was paired with bipolar semantic indicators such as "bad-good", "wrong-right", etc.), four items focusing on prospective intention, and three items tracking individual PBC. Throughout these metrics, responses were captured via 7-point Likert scales. For the attitude construct, the values spanned from 1 = most negative to 7 = most positive; for the intention and PBC items, the options extended from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. This metric was refined and customized for Greek populations following standard methodological protocols (Ajzen, 2006). Internal consistency metrics demonstrated strong reliability coefficients for the attitude scale ($\alpha=.88$) and the PBC construct ($\alpha=.81$), while showing excellent internal structure for the intention construct ($\alpha=.93$). These diagnostic scores verify that all three TPB constructs possessed highly acceptable internal consistency across the entire group (N=176).

c) A customized pedagogical capability and training questionnaire, which featured a single metric exploring subjective teaching confidence (graded via a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = not at all competent to 7 = completely competent), alongside an item measuring the perceived quality of higher education coursework for instructing youth with physical or

developmental challenges (evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = very poor and 5 = excellent).

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The research data were gathered via an online digital interface using Google Forms, relying on a snowball distribution approach. The direct questionnaire link was circulated across institutional student email groups and professional social networking channels targeting future P.E. educators. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and fully anonymous. Before entering the questionnaire portal, all respondents were briefed on the study's scientific goals and provided their electronic informed consent. The collection protocol did not gather any direct personal identifiers.

In alignment with the institutional guidelines of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), this non-interventional, survey-based study involving legally capable adult participants did not require formal prior clearance from the University Research Ethics and Integrity Committee (EHDE). The data gathering process adhered strictly to the ethical standards detailed in the Declaration of Helsinki as well as the mandate parameters of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Study Variables

The primary target variables evaluated in this study were personal attitudes, behavioral intention, and PBC regarding the classroom integration of students with specific impairments. Each individual dimension was quantified by calculating the mean score of its corresponding questionnaire entries (five variables for attitudes, four for intention, and three for PBC), using 7-point Likert measurement paths. The independent predictors included participant gender (male versus female) and current year of study (divided into seven distinct brackets), both analyzed as categorical indicators. Subjective teaching confidence was assessed through a single 7-point scale option, while the perceived quality of higher education preparation was monitored via a 5-point metric. Elevated scores represented highly supportive attitudes, robust behavioral intents, stronger PBC, elevated personal competence, and superior coursework preparation.

Data analysis

Statistical processing was carried out via the SPSS software package (Version 29). Descriptive parameters (means along with standard deviations) were generated for every target metric. Pearson bivariate correlation coefficients were computed to map the associations between core TPB elements, subjective teaching confidence, and perceived academic preparation. Independent-samples t-tests were utilized to evaluate differences between genders relative to the TPB scores. Furthermore, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were deployed to explore fluctuations across the various years of study. Baseline testing for data normality and equal variances was executed via Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's diagnostics, respectively, with all conditions meeting acceptable standards. The alpha threshold for determining statistical significance was maintained at $p < .05$.

Results

Table 1 outlines the specific means and corresponding standard deviations for the three focal dependent dimensions, organized by participant gender and year of study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for TPB variables by gender and year of study.

Year of study	Gender	M±SD for attitudes	M±SD for intention	M±SD for PBC	N
1 st year	Male	-	-	-	-
	Female	5.77±.46	6.28±.65	4.79±1.24	16
	Total	5.77±.46	6.28±.65	4.79±1.24	16
2 nd year	Male	5.84±.58	5.9±.85	5.24±1.16	11
	Female	5.50±.66	5.82±.66	4.72±1.08	24
	Total	5.60±.64	5.85±.71	4.88±1.12	35
3 rd year	Male	5.56±.79	5.72±.76	4.89±1.15	16
	Female	6.04±.48	6.22±.93	5.18±1.19	9
	Total	5.74±.73	5.9±.84	5±1.15	25
4 th year	Male	5.72±.66	5.71±.94	5.03±1.17	28
	Female	5.81±.60	6.22±.75	5.19±1.13	45
	Total	5.78±.63	6.02±.85	5.13±1.14	73
Degree-pending students	Male	5.51±1.15	6.06±.93	4.59±1.05	9
	Female	5.43±.77	5.89±1.07	4.33±1.58	7
	Total	5.47±.97	5.98±.96	4.48±1.27	16
Graduate students	Male	5.80±.85	6.00±1.41	5.83±.23	2
	Female	6.32±.27	6.45±.41	5.067±.79	5
	Total	6.17±.48	6.32±.70	5.28±.75	7
Postgraduate students	Male	6.50±.14	7.00±.00	6±.470	2
	Female	6.50±.42	7±.0	6.5±.70	2
	Total	6.50±.26	7±.0	6.25±.57	4
TOTAL	Male	5.70±.75	5.84±.88	5.03±1.13	68

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	Female	5.77±.61	6.14±.75	4.99±1.17	108
	TOTAL	5.74±.67	6.02±.82	5±1.15	176

The calculated descriptive indices showed that, for the collective sample, relatively high mean scores were present for personal attitudes ($M=5.74$, $SD=0.67$), PBC ($M=5.00$, $SD=1.15$), and prospective intention ($M=6.02$, $SD=0.82$) regarding the embedding of youth with challenges into P.E. environments. In a more detailed view, mean metrics across the different academic years stretched from 5.47 (second-year cohorts) to 6.50 (advanced postgraduate students) for attitudes, from 5.85 (second-year cohorts) to 7.00 (advanced postgraduate students) for behavioral intention, and from 4.48 (degree-pending individuals) to 6.25 (postgraduate students) for PBC.

Moving further into inferential evaluation, the calculation of three standalone one-way ANOVAs (treating academic year as the grouping factor, and personal attitudes, intentions, and PBC as separate criteria) demonstrated that the current year of higher education was not a significant determinant affecting any of the primary TPB indices [specifically: $F(6,169)=2.124$, $p>.05$ for personal attitudes; $F(6,169)=1.773$, $p>.05$ for intentions; and $F(6,169)=1.741$, $p>.05$ for PBC] (refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Results of One-Way ANOVAs examining the effect of Year of Study on TPB variables.

Dependent Variable	df (Between, Within)	F	p-value	η^2
Attitudes	(6, 169)	2.124	> .05	.070
Intentions	(6, 169)	1.773	> .05	.059
Perceived Behavioral Control	(6, 169)	1.741	> .05	.058

In addition, as revealed through three independent-samples t-test computations, the student's gender did not act as a statistically significant factor for personal attitudes ($t=-0.661$, $p>.05$) or PBC scores ($t=0.216$, $p>.05$). Crucially, however, this trend changed regarding the behavioral intention construct, as female respondents demonstrated significantly higher prospective intention metrics ($M=6.14$, $SD=0.75$) than their male peers ($M=5.83$, $SD=0.88$), [$t(174)=-2.440$, $p<.01$].

Lastly, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis, computed to chart the paths linking the three core TPB markers, the participants' subjective teaching confidence with integrated populations, and their appraisal of higher education preparation quality, surfaced multiple positive and meaningful linkages. Specifically, the following statistical paths were confirmed: (a) personal attitudes displayed a strong and positive relationship with prospective intentions ($r=.457$, $p<.01$) while exhibiting a moderate positive link with PBC ($r=.273$, $p<.01$); (b) behavioral intentions were strongly and positively connected to PBC scores ($r=.451$, $p<.01$); (c) perceived university preparation quality for special needs contexts exhibited a strong,

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positive link with subjective teaching confidence ($r=.637$, $p<.01$); and (d) subjective teaching confidence demonstrated moderate positive associations with both personal attitudes ($r=.278$, $p<.01$) and prospective intentions ($r=.264$, $p<.01$) among the student sample. These specific statistical linkages are structurally compiled in Table 3.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations among TPB Variables, Perceived Academic Preparation, and Perceived Teaching Competence.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Attitudes	1				
2. Perceived Behavioral Control	.273**	1			
3. Intention	.457**	.451**	1		
4. Perceived academic preparation	.277**	.220**	.253**	1	
5. Perceived teaching competence	.278**	.162*	.264**	.637**	1

Note: * $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$.

Discussion

This exploration set out to analyze future P.E. educators' personal attitudes, behavioral intentions, and PBC towards integrating children with specific challenges into mainstream school environments, alongside tracking the structural links between these components. Additional objectives focused on evaluating potential variations driven by student gender and current academic year, while exploring how perceived coursework preparation and self-rated teaching confidence connect to core TPB dimensions. The final data validated our foundational expectations, suggesting a highly positive baseline for implementing successful inclusive practices within physical education classes. The survey participants demonstrated widely positive viewpoints and robust behavioral commitments towards classroom integration, scoring highly across all evaluated TPB constructs. These patterns align with the findings of Sharma and Sokal (2015), which detailed that a heightened professional readiness to include youth with disabilities is strongly associated with intensified personal efforts to implement inclusive strategies during lessons.

This encouraging professional climate presents an optimistic outlook for the future layout of the school system. The pre-service P.E. candidates in this sample seem to evaluate functional impairment not as an absolute constraint, but rather as an expression of individual human diversity that should not isolate a student from the shared classroom environment. Heightened societal exposure to Elite Para-Sports (such as the global Paralympic Games) could likewise support more receptive personal views, increasing the probability that these forthcoming educators will lead their student groups toward broader acceptance and social integration of peers with functional challenges. Subsequent studies could beneficially track the direct influence of hands-on participation in adaptive sports modules on the evolving orientations of P.E. university students.

The generated data also pointed to the absence of meaningful gender-driven variations in relation to personal attitudes or PBC metrics. Conversely, female students exhibited a significantly stronger prospective intention to integrate children with disabilities into general classes compared to male students. This suggests that female P.E. specialists may exhibit a higher behavioral inclination to actualize inclusive strategies within real-world educational environments. This specific trend reflects prior evidence detailed by Saloviita (2018), whereas Rojo-Ramos et al. (2022) demonstrated that male instructors scored slightly higher on specific procedural components of inclusion initiatives. Reflecting on these conflicting paths across the literature, it is apparent that biological sex yields inconsistent findings, with certain projects favoring male candidates and others favoring female candidates regarding inclusive viewpoints and actions. In this specific investigation, female respondents scored significantly higher on behavioral intent, while male respondents scored slightly higher (though without reaching statistical significance) on the PBC index.

Notably, the PBC dimension registered the lowest mean index among the three core TPB components, which is highly likely due to the fact that these student participants have not yet encountered inclusive teaching within actual, real-world school settings. Their survey entries may thus capture academic optimism rather than hands-on professional reality. Viewed through the lenses of the TPB, this outcome is theoretically consistent, given that PBC captures anticipated execution constraints. Consequently, while future instructors express solid behavioral intent, their lower metrics for perceived control may echo underlying apprehensions regarding school resource access, university training sufficiency, or complex classroom management scenarios. This emphasizes the vital necessity of executing longitudinal research tracking TPB components both before and after full entry into active teaching, as genuine field experience can profoundly restructure these perceptions.

Broadly speaking, however, the gathered data validates that future P.E. instructors are highly familiar with and supportive of inclusion models. Regardless of whether they were completing undergraduate modules or pursuing postgraduate tracks, the study participants displayed an equal openness to welcoming students with special needs into their sports sessions. These observations are encouraging and motivating, given that these university cohorts represent the upcoming generation of active teachers. Their current positive positioning promises a bright future for inclusive school models, assuming that state educational frameworks structurally reinforce this mindset by providing dedicated school resources and continuing training.

The most focal structural path identified in this research is the tight relationship linking perceived higher education coursework quality to subjective teaching confidence, which subsequently drives positive adjustments in both personal attitudes and behavioral intentions toward classroom integration. This reinforces the principle that professional teacher education serves as a fundamental lever in constructing inclusive mindsets.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the value of these observations, the current study possesses specific limitations that require acknowledgement. First, although the overall sample size proved adequate for the

statistical operations performed, it was collected from a single regional university context, which potentially constraints the global generalizability of the findings to pre-service P.E. candidates across divergent socio-cultural or national educational frameworks. Second, the reliance on self-reported survey tools can be vulnerable to social desirability biases, as respondents might provide entries they believe are more professionally expected regarding inclusive values. Forthcoming research should aim to engage wider, multi-center samples to strengthen the generalizability of these outcomes. Furthermore, embedding qualitative tracking tools, such as semi-structured individual interviews or focus group sessions, would offer a deeper, more granular understanding of the underlying factors constructing student mindsets.

Conclusion

In summary, this research verifies that future P.E. educators display supportive personal attitudes, robust behavioral intentions, and a moderate level of PBC regarding classroom integration. While prospective intent scores were elevated, the lower indicators for perceived behavioral control may reflect latent worries regarding practical implementation. The perceived quality of university-level coursework emerges as a vital parameter, given that it directly reinforces personal teaching confidence, attitudes, and prospective intention lines.

Ultimately, optimizing teacher education tracks throughout the undergraduate phase by infusing specialized theoretical knowledge, real-world practical exposures, and targeted inclusive instructional strategies remains the ultimate key to the viable execution of school integration models. Securing top-tier academic training stands as one of the most decisive institutional factors for ensuring the successful integration of youth with special needs in modern classrooms and securing equitable educational pathways for all.

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