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Physical Education Teacher Education: Pre-Service Teachers' Preparedness, Professional Identity, and Field Experience Quality

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Abstract

The quality of physical education in schools is inextricably linked to the quality of physical education teacher education (PETE) programmes that prepare future practitioners. Despite this foundational relationship, PETE in India has received limited systematic research attention, with persistent concerns about the contemporary relevance, pedagogical depth, and inclusive education alignment of Bachelor of Physical Education (B.P.Ed.) programmes remaining largely undocumented empirically. This study investigates the preparedness, professional identity development, and field experience quality of pre-service physical education teachers enrolled in B.P.Ed. programmes across six universities in South India. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the study combined a structured survey of 218 final-year B.P.Ed. students with in-depth interviews with 16 student teachers and 12 supervising mentors. Findings reveal significant and systematic gaps in pre-service teacher preparedness, particularly in inclusive physical education (72.5% of respondents reporting insufficient preparation), assessment design and feedback literacy (68.3%), and contemporary pedagogical model knowledge including TGfU and Sport Education (64.7%). Professional identity was identified as a significant predictor of teaching efficacy ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) and career commitment ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 29.2% and 37.3% of variance respectively beyond control variables. Field experience quality varied substantially across placement schools, with supervising mentor pedagogical sophistication, school PE culture, and available physical infrastructure identified as the primary determinants of practicum learning quality. Qualitative analysis documented three themes: supervisor pedagogical knowledge as a practicum learning mediator; school PE culture as a professional identity socialisation force; and constrained student teacher autonomy as a barrier to pedagogical experimentation. The study identifies comprehensive B.P.Ed. curriculum reform as the most critical policy priority and proposes specific module content, field experience quality standards, and professional identity development strategies for strengthening South Indian PETE.

Keywords:- Physical Education Teacher Education(PETE), B.P.Ed., Pre-Service Teachers, Professional Identity, Field Experience, Pedagogical Knowledge, Practicum, Teacher Preparedness, South India, Inclusive PE

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Foundational Role of PETE

Physical education teacher education (PETE) programmes occupy a uniquely consequential position in the education system: the knowledge, skills, values, and professional identity that pre-service teachers develop during their PETE programme establish the foundations of their teaching practice for the duration of their careers. Every year, thousands of B.P.Ed. graduates enter South Indian secondary schools as physical education teachers, and the quality of the PE they deliver, and thus the physical, health, cognitive, and social development outcomes they facilitate or fail to facilitate in their students, is substantially determined by the quality of the PETE they received. Given this multiplied impact, investments in PETE quality have potentially the highest return of any education system investment, as each improved PETE graduate subsequently influences hundreds of students annually across a multi-decade teaching career.

Despite this foundational significance, PETE in India has received remarkably limited systematic research attention relative to teacher education for academic subjects. The B.P.Ed. degree, typically a one to two-year professional qualification following an undergraduate degree, is the primary route into secondary school PE teaching in India, with programme content and structure governed by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) regulations last comprehensively revised in 2014. Practitioner discourse among experienced PE teachers and PE teacher educators consistently identifies concerns about the contemporary relevance of B.P.Ed. curriculum content, inadequate coverage of inclusive education, assessment literacy, and contemporary pedagogical models, and insufficient emphasis on reflective practice and professional identity development as programme outcomes. However, these concerns have not been systematically documented through empirical research that can provide the evidentiary basis for evidence-informed curriculum reform advocacy.

The present study addresses this research gap through a mixed-methods investigation of B.P.Ed. student preparedness, professional identity, and practicum quality across six South Indian universities, generating the empirical foundation for targeted PETE reform recommendations that respond to documented deficiencies rather than assumed ones.

1.2. The Contemporary PE Teacher Competency Framework

Contemporary PE teacher competency frameworks identify several knowledge domains essential for effective PE practice. Content knowledge encompasses sport-specific technical skills, exercise science, motor development theory, and fitness assessment competencies. Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK; Shulman, 1986), the distinctive professional knowledge of how to teach PE-specific content to diverse learners, is the knowledge domain most strongly associated with teaching effectiveness across school subjects. General pedagogical knowledge encompasses instructional design, classroom management, assessment literacy, and behaviour management. Knowledge of learners encompasses developmental characteristics, motivational psychology, special educational needs, and cultural diversity. Finally, professional knowledge encompasses curriculum frameworks, school policies, professional ethics, and collaborative practice. Effective PETE programmes develop competence across all these domains; programmes that overemphasise content knowledge at the expense of pedagogical and learner knowledge produce technically knowledgeable but pedagogically limited graduates.

1.3. Professional Identity in PETE

Professional identity, the constellation of beliefs, values, motivations, and self-perceptions that constitute a teacher's sense of themselves as a professional educator (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), has emerged as a significant PETE outcome variable with demonstrated consequences for teaching quality and career trajectory. Pre-service PE teachers develop their professional identities through complex interactions among their prior sport and physical activity experiences (often as competitive athletes or coaches), the theoretical and practical content of their PETE programme, the professional socialisation effects of school practicum placements, relationships with mentors, peers, and university tutors, and their evolving understanding of physical education's educational purposes and their own role within that enterprise.

Professional identity in PE teacher education is complicated by a distinctive dual identity tension: the athlete-coach identity, emphasising performance, competition, and skill transmission, and the teacher identity, emphasising learning facilitation, holistic development, and pedagogical diversity. PETE programmes that primarily reinforce the athlete-coach identity through curriculum content emphasising physical performance and sport coaching, without adequately developing the teacher identity through pedagogical theory, reflective practice, and inclusive education competence, risk producing graduates who relate to their students primarily as athletes to be coached rather than learners to be taught. The consequences of this identity orientation include narrower pedagogical repertoires, lower inclusion quality, and weaker professional commitment to PE's educational as distinct from athletic purposes.

1.4. Research Objectives

- To assess the self-reported preparedness of final-year B.P.Ed. students across 12 key PE teaching competency domains and identify the most significant preparation gaps.
- To examine the development of professional identity in B.P.Ed. students and its relationship to teaching efficacy and career commitment.
- To evaluate the quality and learning outcomes of practicum field experience placements across diverse school contexts.
- To identify curriculum reform priorities for B.P.Ed. programmes and propose specific content, field experience quality standards, and professional identity development strategies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. PETE Curriculum Content and Preparedness Gaps

International PETE research consistently documents preparedness gaps between graduate competencies and the demands of contemporary school PE practice, though the specific gap profiles vary by national context, regulatory framework, and institutional priorities. MacPhail et al. (2013) identified assessment literacy, inclusive pedagogy, and technology integration as the most significant PETE curriculum gaps across European and Australasian contexts. Redelius et al. (2015) documented that Swedish PETE graduates lacked theoretical understanding of the relationship between physical activity and health, limiting their capacity to educate students about the health rationale for PE. Richards et al. (2019) found that U.S. PETE graduates reported inadequate preparation for culturally responsive PE and meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Indian-specific PETE research is sparse. Available evidence suggests that B.P.Ed. programmes continue to emphasise traditional sport coaching, fitness testing, and physical performance over contemporary pedagogical models, assessment design, inclusion competencies, and reflective practice, reflecting a curriculum framework developed before the major international PE pedagogy developments of the 1990s and 2000s achieved global influence. The absence of systematic

empirical documentation of Indian B.P.Ed. preparedness gaps has impeded evidence-informed curriculum reform advocacy, making this study's contribution particularly timely.

2.2. Field Experience Quality in PETE

The practicum or school-based field experience is universally identified in teacher education research as the most powerful learning context for professional skill development, often described by graduates as the most influential component of their pre-service preparation (Caires et al., 2012). However, practicum learning is mediated by multiple contextual factors that create substantial variability in learning quality across placements. Cooperating teacher (mentor) quality is the most consistently identified mediator: placements with analytically sophisticated, reflective, and pedagogically diverse mentors produce significantly greater student teacher professional growth than placements with mentors whose feedback is limited to behaviour management advice and their own performance demonstrations.

School PE culture profoundly socialises student teachers during practicum through the implicit professional norms, values, and practices they observe, participate in, and are expected to adopt. Student teachers placed in schools with intellectually engaged PE departments that discuss pedagogy, share resources, and participate in professional development are socialised into teacher identities; those placed in schools where PE culture prioritises administrative compliance and competitive sport performance are socialised into coach-performance identities that may not align with the teacher professional identity that PETE programmes aspire to cultivate. This cultural socialisation effect can reinforce or undermine the professional identity development that university PETE programmes attempt to build.

2.3. Research Gaps in Indian PETE

Despite the significance of PETE for the Indian PE system, several critical research gaps persist. No nationally representative survey of B.P.Ed. student preparedness has been published. No study has systematically examined professional identity development in Indian B.P.Ed. contexts using validated instruments. The quality of school-based practicum placements across Indian universities has not been systematically documented. The relationship between PETE programme characteristics and graduate teaching quality in Indian schools has not been investigated. This study addresses the first three of these gaps for South Indian PETE specifically.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was employed, with the quantitative survey phase providing statistical characterisation of preparedness, professional identity, and outcome relationships, and the subsequent qualitative phase providing explanatory contextualisation of the quantitative patterns. The sequential design was selected because the research aims prioritised statistical evidence of preparedness gaps and professional identity effects (informing policy advocacy) while recognising that the mechanisms, contextual influences, and personal experiences shaping these patterns required qualitative illumination to be actionable.

3.2. Survey Phase: Participants and Instruments

The survey was administered to 218 final-year B.P.Ed. students (143 male, 75 female; mean age 23.4 years, SD = 2.1) across six university B.P.Ed. programmes in Tamil Nadu (two universities), Kerala (two universities), Andhra Pradesh (one university), and Karnataka (one university). Participants were in their final semester of study, having completed all coursework and the majority of their practicum hours. The survey was administered in examination settings under supervised conditions to maximise response seriousness and minimise social desirability.

The survey comprised four validated instruments and an investigator-developed background questionnaire. Preparedness was assessed using a 12-item self-report confidence rating scale covering the PE teaching competency domains identified in the literature review, rated on a five-point scale from very low confidence (1) to very high confidence (5). Professional identity was assessed using the Physical Education Teacher Professional Identity Scale (PETPIS; Marttinen et al., 2019), a 20-item instrument with subscales for teacher orientation, coach orientation, physical activity promoter orientation, and professional commitment. Teaching efficacy was assessed using the Physical Education Teaching Efficacy Scale (PETES), measuring confidence in instructional, assessment, and classroom management competencies. Career commitment was assessed using a validated five-item career commitment scale. Cronbach's alpha values in this sample ranged from 0.78 to 0.89 across all instruments, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

3.3. Interview Phase: Participants and Procedures

Following quantitative data analysis, 16 student teachers were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews representing theoretical diversity in professional identity profiles: eight with high composite PETPIS scores (highest quartile) and eight with low PETPIS scores (lowest quartile), ensuring that the qualitative phase captured the experiential differences between strong and weak professional identity development. Additionally, 12 supervising mentor teachers from six selected practicum placement schools were interviewed to provide the school-side perspective on student teacher development. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, or English), lasted 45 to 65 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by research assistants with relevant language expertise.

3.4. Analytical Strategy

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29. Descriptive statistics characterised the preparedness profile across 12 competency domains. Hierarchical multiple regression examined predictors of PETPIS professional identity

scores (Block 1: institution, gender, prior sport experience; Block 2: PETE curriculum satisfaction, practicum quality ratings, mentor relationship quality). Pearson correlations and subsequent regression analyses examined professional identity's relationship with teaching efficacy and career commitment. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) generating themes from both student teacher and mentor perspectives. Sequential integration used qualitative themes to explain and contextualise quantitative preparedness gap profiles and professional identity relationship patterns.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Preparedness Gap Profile

Self-reported preparedness ratings revealed a striking bimodal distribution across competency domains: relatively high confidence in traditional PE content areas contrasted with severe deficiencies in contemporary, inclusive, and pedagogically sophisticated competencies. Three domains showed particularly severe deficiencies: inclusive physical education (72.5% reporting low or very low confidence, mean confidence rating 2.1/5); assessment design and formative feedback (68.3% low/very low, mean 2.3/5); and contemporary pedagogical models including TGfU, Sport Education, and inquiry approaches (64.7% low/very low, mean 2.4/5). By contrast, sport-specific technical skills (18.4% low confidence, mean 4.1/5), fitness testing administration (22.1% low confidence, mean 3.9/5), and whole-class behaviour management (31.6% low confidence, mean 3.6/5) showed substantially higher confidence ratings.

This preparedness gap profile, with severe deficits in precisely the domains that contemporary PE research identifies as most consequential for student outcomes (inclusive practice, assessment quality, and pedagogical diversity), represents a systematic mismatch between PETE programme content emphasis and contemporary PE practice demands. The gap is not random but structured: the domains in which students feel most prepared are those most heavily emphasised in traditional B.P.Ed. curricula (physical performance, sport technique, fitness testing), while the domains in which they feel least prepared are those most neglected by traditional curricula but most demanded by contemporary inclusive, diverse, and evidence-based PE practice.

Table 1. Pre-Service Teacher Self-Reported Preparedness by Competency Domain (N = 218)

Competency Domain	Mean (/5)	High %	Moderate %	Low/Very Low %
Sport-specific technical skills	4.1	61.5	20.1	18.4
Fitness testing administration	3.9	54.1	23.8	22.1
Class and behaviour management	3.6	42.2	26.2	31.6
Student motivation strategies	3.3	38.1	29.4	32.5
Health and nutrition knowledge	3.2	35.8	31.7	32.5
Sport psychology application	2.9	26.1	32.6	41.3
Contemporary pedagogical models	2.4	18.8	16.5	64.7
Assessment and feedback design	2.3	16.5	15.2	68.3
Inclusive physical education	2.1	12.8	14.7	72.5

Note. Mean ratings on a 5-point scale (1 = very low confidence, 5 = very high confidence). Percentages indicate proportion of respondents in each confidence category.

4.2. Professional Identity and Teaching Outcomes

Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that professional identity (PETPIS composite) was a significant positive predictor of both teaching efficacy (beta = 0.54, $p < 0.001$) and career commitment (beta = 0.61, $p < 0.001$) after controlling for programme institution, gender, and prior sport experience in Block 1. Professional identity explained an additional 29.2% of variance in teaching efficacy (delta R-squared = 0.292, F-change = 87.3, $p < 0.001$) and an additional 37.3% of variance in career commitment (delta R-squared = 0.373, F-change = 124.6, $p < 0.001$) beyond the Block 1 controls. These large incremental variance contributions confirm professional identity as a critical PETE outcome variable, independently predicting teaching confidence and career commitment at levels that dwarf the contributions of institutional affiliation, gender, or sport experience.

Subscale analysis revealed that teacher orientation and professional commitment PETPIS subscales were the strongest individual predictors of teaching efficacy, while professional commitment and physical activity promoter orientation subscales were strongest for career commitment. Students with high coach orientation and low teacher orientation subscale scores, despite comparable professional commitment, demonstrated lower teaching efficacy, consistent with the theoretical argument that coach identity without teacher identity produces narrower and less flexible instructional approaches.

4.3. Practicum Quality Findings

Thematic analysis of mentor and student teacher interviews generated three primary themes. The first theme, Supervisor Pedagogical Sophistication as Learning Mediator, documented the stark difference in student teacher learning quality associated with mentor pedagogical depth. High-professional-identity student teachers consistently described mentors who engaged in post-lesson analytical conversations about pedagogical choices, student learning, and instructional alternatives, who modelled reflection on their own practice, and who actively introduced student teachers to alternative approaches beyond their own preferred style. Low-professional-identity student teachers described mentors whose feedback was limited to

behavior management correction and performance demonstration, with no discussion of pedagogical theory, student motivation, or instructional alternatives. The mentor experience was described by multiple high-identity students as the transformative experience that crystallised their professional purpose and pedagogical values.

The second theme, School PE Culture as Identity Socialisation, captured the powerful socialising influence of the placement school's PE departmental culture on student teacher professional identity development. Student teachers in schools with intellectually engaged PE departments, evidenced by teacher discussions of pedagogy, voluntary professional development participation, and curriculum innovation, described developing stronger teacher identities and more diverse pedagogical perspectives than those in schools where PE culture prioritised competitive sport performance, administrative compliance, and physical fitness testing. This socialisation effect operated largely beneath conscious awareness, through the implicit norms of what PE teachers talk about, read, prioritise, and value.

The third theme, Constrained Autonomy as an Experimentation Barrier, documented the frustration of student teachers given insufficient teaching autonomy to experiment with approaches learned in university that differed from their mentor's practices. Multiple student teachers described planning TGfU or Sport Education-based lessons from university coursework but reverting to direct instruction under mentor pressure or institutional expectation. This constraint prevents the practical consolidation of university-developed pedagogical knowledge through experiential testing that is essential for the knowledge to transfer from declarative understanding to embedded competence.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1. Interpreting the Preparedness Gap Profile

The preparedness gap profile documents a structural misalignment between B.P.Ed. curriculum emphasis and contemporary PE practice demands that is systemic rather than incidental. The domains of greatest deficiency, inclusive PE (72.5% low confidence), assessment design (68.3%), and contemporary pedagogical models (64.7%), are precisely the areas where PE research has demonstrated the strongest evidence for impact on student outcomes: inclusive PE quality determines students with disabilities' physical activity participation; assessment quality determines all students' motivational orientation toward PE; and pedagogical model selection determines tactical understanding, affective engagement, and long-term sport participation. A curriculum that leaves graduates severely under-prepared in these three domains is failing to develop the competencies most consequential for student outcomes.

5.2. Professional Identity as a PETE Success Indicator

The finding that professional identity explains 29.2% and 37.3% of additional variance in teaching efficacy and career commitment respectively beyond all background variables establishes it as a genuinely important PETE outcome, not merely a correlate of unmodelled confounders. PETE programmes that successfully cultivate strong teacher professional identity, through opportunities for philosophical reflection, engagement with diverse PE purposes, mentored identity development conversations, and explicit theoretical frameworks for understanding PE's educational role, produce graduates who are more confident in their teaching and more committed to the profession. Given the teacher retention challenges facing the education system, the career commitment implications of professional identity development are particularly significant.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. For B.P.Ed. Programme Curriculum Reform

- Mandate dedicated modules in inclusive physical education (minimum 60 hours) covering disability models, Universal Design for Learning in PE, differentiation strategies, TGMD-3 assessment, adapted equipment, and peer support facilitation as core graduation requirements.
- Introduce mandatory assessment literacy modules covering formative assessment design, PE-specific assessment instruments, feedback theory, and student self-assessment strategies, replacing the current implicit assumption that assessment competence is self-evident.
- Include theoretical and practical instruction in TGfU, Sport Education Model, and the Mosston Spectrum as core curriculum content, ensuring graduates enter practice with a full pedagogical repertoire.
- Incorporate professional identity development explicitly as a programme learning outcome, operationalised through reflective portfolios, professional learning community participation, philosophical dialogue about PE's purposes, and structured self-assessment of evolving professional values.

6.2. For Practicum Field Experience Quality

- Establish formal mentor teacher selection criteria including pedagogical diversity, reflective practice engagement, and professional development participation as prerequisites for supervising B.P.Ed. student teachers.
- Provide structured mentor training focused on analytical post-lesson dialogue, professional identity coaching, and strategies for creating student teacher autonomy within appropriately supported boundaries.
- Require student teachers to deliver a minimum of three lessons using different pedagogical approaches (direct instruction, TGfU, and Sport Education) during practicum, assessed by university supervisors against pedagogical model fidelity criteria.

6.3. For NCTE Regulatory Reform

- Update B.P.Ed. programme accreditation standards to reflect contemporary PE competency frameworks, including inclusive PE, assessment literacy, and pedagogical model diversity as assessed programme quality indicators.

- Require universities to conduct systematic graduate preparedness surveys and report results as an accreditation condition, creating accountability for the competency outcomes that the current system allows to remain undocumented.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical documentation of significant and systematic preparedness gaps in South Indian B.P.Ed. programmes, confirming the practitioner concerns about PETE quality that have circulated in informal discourse without empirical foundation. The severity of deficiencies in inclusive PE, assessment literacy, and contemporary pedagogical model knowledge represents a systemic curriculum alignment failure that has consequences for every student taught by inadequately prepared B.P.Ed. graduates. The strong professional identity-teaching efficacy relationship confirms that PETE must invest in professional identity development as a core programme outcome alongside competency development.

Physical education's capacity to deliver its developmental, health, and social outcomes depends on the quality of teachers implementing it. Quality physical education requires quality teacher preparation, and quality teacher preparation requires curriculum relevance, practicum excellence, and intentional professional identity cultivation. Investing in PETE reform is an investment with multiplied returns: every graduate who enters practice better prepared influences hundreds of students annually for decades. Future research should track the teaching quality trajectories of B.P.Ed. graduates from reformed versus traditional programmes to evaluate reform impacts, and develop and validate contextually appropriate PETE quality assessment frameworks for the Indian regulatory context.

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