

Embodied vulnerability as a formative resource: Body, emotions, and professional identity in Physical Education initial teacher education

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Abstract

This conceptual paper advances the concept of embodied vulnerability to interpret a specific form of professional exposure emerging in Physical Education Teacher Education. By bringing together structural vulnerability, Occupational Socialisation Theory, and body pedagogics, the paper argues that the transition from sport-based competence to pedagogical responsibility may produce a distinctive form of biographical disruption. Such disruption is not exclusive to Physical Education: teachers across subjects must transform disciplinary identity into didactic mediation. The specificity of Physical Education lies in the fact that the body functions simultaneously as teaching medium, curricular object, and tacit criterion of professional legitimacy. The article therefore clarifies the corporeal device, normative expectations surrounding the athletic teacher, and defensive strategies through which pre-service teachers protect professional credibility. It also specifies the conceptual boundaries of embodied vulnerability by distinguishing it from emotional vulnerability, professional insecurity, and corporeal capital. Embodied vulnerability is finally discussed as a formative resource, provided that it is supported by reflective spaces, mentoring, and practices grounded in care, inclusion, and pedagogical responsibility.

Keywords: embodied vulnerability; professional vulnerability; Physical Education Teacher Education; embodied pedagogy; initial teacher education; care; inclusion.

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1. Introduction

Teacher education is increasingly required to prepare professionals able to inhabit uncertainty, relational asymmetry, and ethical responsibility rather than simply apply technical routines (Fabbri *et al.*, 2008; Micheline, 2022; Oliverio, 2022). This demand is particularly salient in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE), where the teacher's body is not a neutral vehicle of instruction but a visible and evaluated part of professional practice. The present essay therefore revises a common assumption within PE cultures: that professional legitimacy derives primarily from athletic competence, physical demonstration, and technical mastery.

In many PETE trajectories, pre-service teachers enter university and school placement with a strong biographical investment in sport, movement competence, and bodily performance (González-Calvo *et al.*, 2021; Richards *et al.*, 2014). During practicum, however, these resources may become sources of exposure. The future teacher is not judged only on what the body can perform, but on how that body communicates, includes, manages uncertainty, and cares for pupils whose corporeal histories differ markedly from the teacher's own. This shift can produce vulnerability that is professional, emotional, and corporeal at the same time.

The essay proposes the construct of embodied vulnerability to name this convergence. The argument is theoretical and integrative: it connects Kelchtermans' account of teacher vulnerability (1996, 2005, 2009), Occupational Socialisation Theory (Lawson, 1983a, 1983b), and body pedagogics (Shilling, 2010; Evans *et al.*, 2008, 2009). The revised focus is deliberately narrower than a general programme for PETE reform. It aims to clarify the construct, specify its relevance beyond and within PE, and identify the conditions under which vulnerability may become a formative resource rather than a defensive burden.

More specifically, the paper pursues three aims: first, to delimit embodied vulnerability from adjacent notions such as emotional vulnerability, professional insecurity, and corporeal capital; second, to show how the corporeal device makes this exposure unequally distributed across bodies and biographies; and third, to identify the pedagogical conditions under which such exposure can support, rather than undermine, professional judgement.

2. Professional vulnerability and biographical disruption

Kelchtermans (1996) defines teacher vulnerability as structural rather than merely psychological. In this article, structural is therefore used in a limited

professional sense: it refers to the constitutive exposure of teaching to judgement, recognition, institutional constraint, and uncertain outcomes, rather than to a separate theory of structural vulnerability in health or social inequality studies. Teachers are exposed because their work depends on relationships, institutional expectations, and outcomes that they can influence but never fully control. Professional identity is therefore constructed under conditions of uncertainty and public evaluation. In later work, this vulnerability is connected to self-understanding, vulnerable commitment, and micropolitical literacy: teachers must interpret how their self-image, task perception, motivation, and future perspective are recognised or threatened within school organisations (Kelchtermans, 2005, 2009).

This framework is useful for PETE only if it is not reduced to emotional fragility. Vulnerability is not a deficit possessed by certain individuals; it is a condition produced by teaching itself. Lasky's (2005) sociocultural account reinforces this point by showing that vulnerability is shaped by identity, agency, and context. The Italian pedagogical tradition converges on this view from a different angle, framing teaching as a profession constitutively traversed by affective, relational, and existential dimensions that cannot be reduced to technical-didactic competence (Dato, 2019; Bruzzone, 2022). In recent educational literature, vulnerability has also been reconsidered as a pedagogical resource when it enables more authentic, responsive, and relational forms of teaching (Weston *et al.*, 2025).

The notion of biographical disruption helps to describe how such exposure is experienced. Originally developed in health sociology to indicate the disturbance of taken-for-granted assumptions about body, self, and life trajectory (Bury, 1982), the concept has been progressively extended to contexts in which an established corporeal narrative is unsettled by events that reorganise the relationship between body, self, and future, including sport-related career termination (Sparkes, 1998) and serious sport injury (Malcolm and Pullen, 2020). These extensions are relevant for PETE because many candidates arrive at initial teacher education with biographies in which the body has already been the site of identification, achievement, and, at times, loss. On this basis, the concept can be cautiously transferred to teacher formation. This transfer should not imply that teacher education is equivalent to illness, injury, or traumatic loss. Rather, the term is used here in a weaker but analytically useful sense: it indicates a form of biographical reorientation in which candidates' taken-for-granted narratives about body, competence, and future professional self become unsettled. The extension requires an important clarification. Biographical disruption does not concern only future PE teachers. Any teacher may experience tension when moving from disciplinary expertise to pedagogical mediation: the mathematician, historian, musician, or sport

scientist must all transform a relationship with a discipline into a relationship with learners.

The specificity of PETE lies elsewhere. In Physical Education, this transition is corporeally intensified because the body is simultaneously the medium through which one teaches (Aartun *et al.*, 2022), the object around which the curriculum is organised, and a tacit marker of credibility. The future PE teacher does not merely translate disciplinary knowledge into teaching; he or she must also renegotiate the meaning of a body previously associated with athletic success, health, or technical competence. For this reason, biographical disruption in PETE should be understood as a general professional process that assumes a distinctive embodied configuration.

3. The corporeal device in Physical Education Teacher Education

Occupational Socialisation Theory provides a second component of the argument. Lawson (1983a, 1983b) distinguishes acculturation, professional socialisation, and organisational socialisation. In PE, the acculturation phase is especially powerful because many candidates have long histories as athletes, coaches, fitness practitioners, or successful movers. These experiences create a subjective warrant: a pre-professional image of what PE teaching is and who is entitled to do it. Frequently, this warrant privileges technical expertise, demonstration, competition, and bodily confidence (Richards *et al.*, 2014, 2019).

Body pedagogics clarifies how such expectations are socially organised. Shilling (2010, 2017) uses the term to analyse the institutional production, transmission, and embodiment of bodily dispositions, distinguishing the general pedagogics through which institutions shape bodies from the specific pedagogies – the techniques, exercises, demonstrations, and routines – through which this shaping is enacted. This distinction is analytically useful in PETE, since it shows that aspirant teachers are not only exposed to explicit didactic content, but also to a continuous, often tacit, institutional formation of what a professionally credible body should look like, move like, and feel like. Evans, Davies and colleagues extend this insight through the concept of the corporeal device, developed as a corporeal specification of Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic device. Whereas the pedagogic device theorises the distributive, recontextualising, and evaluative rules through which knowledge is transformed into legitimate pedagogic communication, the corporeal device identifies the parallel set of mechanisms through which bodies are classified, valued, normalised, and evaluated as pedagogically legitimate (Evans and Davies, 2004; Evans *et al.*, 2008, 2009). This sociological grounding is

important: it signals that the production of credible PE bodies is not the outcome of individual judgements but of an institutional regulation of corporeal knowledge. In PETE, the corporeal device operates when particular bodies and movement styles become tacit evidence of professional suitability. The “fit”, athletic, confident, and demonstrative body functions as a form of corporeal capital (Evans and Davies, 2004), while bodies marked by disability, ageing, size, gendered expectations, or movement insecurity may be positioned as less credible.

Read through Bernstein’s categories, the corporeal device can be further specified. Its distributive rules define which bodily histories and movement competences are treated as valuable professional resources; its recontextualising rules translate sport, fitness, and health knowledge into teachable school practices; and its evaluative rules determine which demonstrations, postures, voices, and forms of bodily presence are recognised as evidence of pedagogical competence. This specification strengthens the claim that embodied vulnerability is not produced only by individual insecurity, but by the regulation of legitimate corporeal communication within PETE.

This concept is central because it explains why vulnerability in PE is not simply a private feeling. It is produced through institutional and cultural expectations that define which bodies appear pedagogically legitimate. Empirical studies have shown that pre-service and practising PE teachers often experience pressure to embody an idealised athletic identity (González-Calvo *et al.*, 2019, 2022), while corporeal expectations shape understandings of content, pedagogy, and the purposes of PE (Barker *et al.*, 2023). These expectations also intersect with broader gendered and exclusionary norms (Gerdin and Larsson, 2018).

The corporeal device is therefore not a neutral filter. It operates along intersecting axes of difference that shape which bodies are read as professionally credible and which are tacitly disqualified. Pre-service teachers may be differently exposed depending on gender, disability, body size, age, ethnicity, and prior sporting biography, since each of these dimensions interacts with the implicit norm of the athletic, fit, and demonstrative PE teacher. Empirical work has documented how gendered embodiment shapes the pedagogical practice of pre-service teachers, particularly in disciplines such as gymnastics where corporeal display is structurally central (McVeigh and Waring, 2023), and how visual representations of the ideal PE body sustain narrow expectations about size, shape, and athletic performance (González-Calvo *et al.*, 2022). Recognising this intersectional structure clarifies that embodied vulnerability is not evenly distributed: it concentrates on those bodies that the corporeal device positions further from its tacit norm.

The practicum is therefore a critical site. It confronts pre-service teachers with pupils, mentors, spaces, assessments, and institutional routines that may confirm or destabilise their subjective warrant. Evidence on PETE transitions suggests that becoming a PE teacher involves emotional turbulence, identity negotiation, and the gradual reworking of prior beliefs (Alves *et al.*, 2019; Backman *et al.*, 2023). The body is not a background variable in this process: it is the site where credibility is displayed, threatened, and reinterpreted.

4. Embodied vulnerability: definition and mechanisms

Embodied vulnerability can be defined as the condition in which the structural vulnerability of teaching is experienced, negotiated, and expressed through the body. It refers to the convergence of three dimensions. Its analytic added value lies in showing how resources that were previously experienced as signs of competence can become unstable when they are placed under pedagogical, relational, and institutional judgement. First, a somatic dimension: professional exposure is registered through voice, posture, tension, fatigue, gaze, breathing, or the difficulty of demonstrating movements before others. Second, an identity dimension: the athletic or technically competent self is unsettled when pedagogical responsibility demands care, inclusion, and relational judgement rather than performance alone. Third, a micropolitical dimension: the body becomes a strategic surface through which pre-service teachers attempt to appear competent before pupils, mentors, and institutions.

This articulation also clarifies the construct's boundaries. Teacher vulnerability identifies the structural exposure of the profession; occupational socialisation explains the persistence of pre-professional sporting biographies; and corporeal capital names valued bodily resources. Embodied vulnerability connects these dimensions by focusing on the moment in which valued corporeal resources become judged, insufficient, or pedagogically re-signified.

This definition distinguishes embodied vulnerability from two neighbouring ideas. It is not identical to emotional vulnerability, because emotions are not merely internal states subsequently expressed by the body; they are lived and interpreted through corporeal experience. Nor is it professional fragility, because it does not indicate an individual weakness to be overcome. It names a structural and pedagogically relevant exposure that becomes especially visible in PE because the body is both the teacher's instrument and the subject's cultural object.

One common response to embodied vulnerability is the use of pedagogical shields. These are defensive strategies through which pre-service teachers protect professional credibility: excessive reliance on flawless demonstration,

controlled posture, authoritative voice, suppression of uncertainty, or avoidance of activities that might expose limitation. Such strategies may be temporarily useful. They can help a novice manage classroom visibility and school micropolitics. However, if they become habitual, they risk reproducing the very corporeal norms that inclusive PE should question.

Pedagogical shields should therefore be read ambivalently. At an early stage, they may provide temporary containment, allowing novices to manage public visibility and maintain authority in unfamiliar school settings. Over time, however, they become problematic when they turn into a professional habitus organised around invulnerability: the teacher learns to conceal uncertainty, pupils learn that competence must appear effortless, and PE reproduces a narrow hierarchy between able, fit, and confident bodies and bodies perceived as less legitimate.

The claim that suppressing authentic corporeal experience can hinder reflexivity should therefore be understood in a precise sense. The problem is not that teachers must disclose every emotion or bodily difficulty. Rather, when bodily discomfort, insecurity, or limitation are systematically hidden, they cannot become objects of professional inquiry. The pre-service teacher loses an opportunity to ask why a situation felt threatening, which norms made it threatening, and how similar norms may affect pupils. Reflexivity depends on the capacity to transform lived experience into pedagogical understanding (Fabbri *et al.*, 2008; Mordal-Moen and Green, 2014).

Embodied vulnerability may become formative when this transformation is supported. For example, a future PE teacher who cannot demonstrate a movement perfectly may model adaptation, ask pupils to analyse movement possibilities, offer differentiated tasks, or discuss safety and confidence without shame. In this case, vulnerability changes the pedagogical relationship not by weakening authority, but by shifting authority from athletic infallibility to responsible mediation. The teacher remains professionally accountable while showing that learning movement involves plurality, adjustment, and interdependence. This is the point at which vulnerability becomes connected to care and inclusion rather than to exposure alone.

5. The Italian 60 CFU pathway as a critical context

The Italian context makes this issue particularly visible. The 60 CFU pathway for initial secondary teacher education, regulated by the Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri of 4 August 2023, is organised as a consecutive model: disciplinary formation in Sports Sciences is structurally separated from pedagogical qualification and school placement (Presidenza del

Consiglio dei Ministri, 2023). For prospective PE teachers, this means that a biomedical, technical, and performance-oriented academic trajectory may be followed by an accelerated encounter with inclusive, relational, and institutionally complex school practice (Cereda, 2025, 2026a). When this transition is not adequately supported, it risks producing graduates better equipped as movement technicians than as reflexive educators (Sibilio, 2018).

For readers outside Italy, the relevance of this example is not merely administrative. A consecutive pathway separates the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge from the subsequent professional qualification to teach. In PE, this separation may reinforce a sequence in which movement science, sport technique, and biomedical knowledge are learned before candidates are systematically asked to reinterpret them through inclusion, care, assessment, classroom management, and school micropolitics. This tension is consistent with recent physical literacy scholarship, which emphasises that teaching movement in educational contexts requires more than technical or biomedical expertise: it demands the integration of embodied, pedagogical, psychological, and sociocultural knowledge (Cereda, 2026c).

This arrangement does not automatically produce embodied vulnerability, but it may intensify it. The practicum asks candidates to translate movement knowledge into educational action with limited time to rework prior corporeal assumptions. The recent reconfiguration of PE within Italian school policy further increases this tension when holistic, inclusive, and relational aims are placed beside persistent performative expectations (Cereda, 2026b). In this context, the future PE teacher may experience the body that once guaranteed disciplinary confidence as the very site of professional exposure.

The formative implication is not to add another technical module to the curriculum, but to make embodied experience discussable. This may be done through carefully guided body journals, narrative-biographical reflection, peer micro-teaching, and mentoring conversations focused on situations in which the body felt judged, inadequate, authoritative, or vulnerable (González-Calvo *et al.*, 2020; Kelchtermans, 2009; Standal *et al.*, 2025). These practices should not romanticise vulnerability. They should help candidates distinguish productive openness from unsafe exposure, and pedagogical authenticity from the loss of professional boundaries.

These practices should be deliberately scaffolded. Body journals, for example, should not simply invite self-expression; they should guide candidates to connect bodily sensations with norms, power relations, and pedagogical decisions. Similarly, micro-teaching should include structured debriefing on how authority was produced, how pupils' diverse bodies were addressed, and how uncertainty was managed without reverting to performance-based legitimacy.

A pedagogy of embodied vulnerability would therefore have three modest but important aims. It would help pre-service teachers recognise the corporeal norms that shape PE; interpret bodily discomfort as data for professional learning; and design movement experiences in which pupils encounter difference, limitation, and competence as plural rather than hierarchical. Such a perspective aligns with an ethics of care because it relocates professional authority in responsiveness, responsibility, and attention to diverse embodied subjectivities. It also resonates with the Italian discourse on the ethical and pedagogical competence of the teacher, which links professional formation to the construction of shared educational responsibility and to the cultivation of a community of practice grounded in care (Benetton, 2022).

6. Conclusions

This essay has clarified embodied vulnerability as a conceptual construct for PETE. The concept does not claim that vulnerability is exclusive to PE teachers. Rather, it specifies how a structural condition of teaching becomes corporeally intensified when the teacher's body is simultaneously professional medium, curricular object, and cultural sign of legitimacy. This distinction responds to the need to situate PETE within wider teacher education while preserving the specificity of PE.

The argument also clarifies the role of the corporeal device. Embodied vulnerability is not only a personal reaction to school placement; it is produced through norms that make some bodies appear more credible than others. Defensive pedagogical shields may protect novice teachers in the short term, but they can also reproduce exclusionary ideals of the athletic, infallible PE teacher. When supported by mentoring and reflective practices, however, vulnerability can become a resource for care, inclusion, and pedagogical judgement.

Future empirical research should examine how embodied vulnerability is narrated and negotiated during the 60 CFU practicum, how it differs across gender, disability, age, ethnicity, sport biography, and body size, and how mentor practices either enable or constrain its formative use. Such work would test and refine the theoretical proposal advanced here, while contributing to a more inclusive understanding of what it means to become a PE teacher.

The central challenge for PETE is therefore not to eliminate vulnerability from professional formation, but to educate future teachers to interpret embodied exposure as a source of pedagogical judgement, ethical responsibility, and inclusive practice.

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