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## THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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This article reflects some aspects of research dedicated to the formation of a positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in physical education teachers. Exploring the theoretical dimensions of the stated topic, the author reveals the connection between the attitudes of physical education teachers and psycho-pedagogical strategies, based on the identification of sources of negative/ stigmatic attitudes and sources of positive/ promotional attitudes (inclusive). The training program, proposed by the author, contributes to a certain extent to the understanding by teachers of their role in inclusive education, accepting that the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classes is not a problem but an opportunity.

**Keywords:** *teacher's profile, positive attitude, disability, adaptation, physical education.*

### ASPECTE TEORETICE ALE ATITUDINILOR PROFESORILOR DE EDUCAȚIE FIZICĂ FAȚĂ DE ELEVII CU HANDICAP

În articol sunt reflectate unele aspecte ale cercetării privind formarea atitudinii pozitive la profesorii de educație fizică față de incluziunea copiilor cu dizabilități. Explorând dimensiunile teoretice ale subiectului enunțat, autoarea dezvăluie conexiunea dintre atitudinile profesorilor de educație fizică și strategiile psihopedagogice, bazată pe identificarea surselor de atitudini negative/ stigmatice și a surselor de atitudini pozitive/promovatoare (incluzive). Programul formativ, propus de autoare, contribuie într-o anumită măsură la înțelegerea de către profesori a rolului acestora în educația incluzivă și acceptarea faptului că includerea elevilor cu dizabilități în clasele obișnuite nu este o problemă, ci o oportunitate.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *profilul profesorului, atitudine pozitivă, dizabilitate, adaptare, educație fizică.*

### Introduction

According to UNICEF' data (2018), across Europe and Central Asia, children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to stigma and discrimination, and are often segregated. While data on the estimated 5.1 million children with disabilities across the region remain scarce, they face multiple rights violations, from a lack of early detection or diagnosis of their disabilities, to the exclusion from education and participation in their communities [1].

Over the years, disability policy developed from elementary care at institutions to education for children with disabilities and rehabilitation for persons who became disabled during adult life.

Salamanca Statement (1994) highlighted importance to enhancing teacher education as regards provision for special educational needs [2]. Teacher education has a crucial role to play in ensuring that classroom teachers are prepared for the challenges of educating students with disabilities – who, contrary to some misconceptions, can achieve in inclusive classrooms.

Preparing general education teachers for the changing demographic profile of today's schools is receiving renewed attention both at home and abroad under pressure to perform well on international comparisons and compete in a global economy. To realize high expectations for all students, including students with disabilities, teachers must be prepared to work collaboratively to utilize specific, evidence-based teaching practices that both challenge and motivate all of their students [3].

### Teachers' attitudes concept

Many different authors, researchers explored the professional and transversal competences of teachers. According to the European Qualifications Framework 'competence' means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/ or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development [4]. One of the important components is attitude.

Allport (1935) defined attitude as "a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, and exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with

which it is related" [5]. "An attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) [6].

Several student and teacher related variables have been significantly and consistently linked with specific teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Avramidis E, Norwich B, 2002) [7]. Research on teacher variables has revealed that attitudes were related to self-perceptions of competence, educational preparation, and experience in teaching students with disabilities (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011). Specifically, teachers' attitudes toward inclusion were more likely to be favourable if they perceived themselves as better teachers (Dart, 2007; Mangope, 2002) had greater education preparation (Kuyini & Mangope, 2011), and had more years of experience in teaching children with disabilities (Mukhopadhyay, 2009; Kuyini & Dessai, 2005) [apud 8].

The majority of studies in physical education have also assumed that a positive attitude towards inclusion was necessary for the successful inclusion of children with disabilities into physical education (Loreman, Forlin, & Sharma, 2007) [9].

The approach had been found suitable to defining subjects' attitudes, as stipulated in our context, is as a common denominator of all human beliefs to others or to social phenomena or as an emotionally charged opinion which serves as the basis for a series of behaviors toward a particular social phenomenon. This definition reflects the three main characteristics (consciousness, emotional, and behavioral) of the attitude.

During the analysis of specialized literature, we identify different terms of teachers' attitudes in relation with disabilities and physical education (PE): positive attitude, negative attitude, inclusive attitude and reserved attitude. Thus, positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in physical education means acceptance of children with disabilities at physical education lessons. Negative attitude means non-acceptance of children with disabilities at physical education lessons or discriminatory approach/ discriminatory attitude. Reserved attitude is a skeptical approach, formally, acceptance, but in reality, non-supporting attitude. Very often, inclusive attitude is understudied as positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in PE.

From our point of view, the positive attitude is larger than inclusive attitude towards the inclusion of children/ students with disabilities in physical education, including friendly approach and respect, support/ encourage, empathy, oriented to individual needs and preferences of the disabled students, without any limitations. The positive attitude includes the aspect of promoting and encouraging (active support) of disabled students.

As we can mention that, although the movement toward "inclusive education" is anchored in the broad human rights agenda which has become a global issue influencing countries that are committed to democracy like Israel, including the Arab sector, when coming to the practical implications, it is easy to realize that many educators still have serious reservations about supporting the widespread placement of students with disabilities in their lessons within mainstream schools.

The existing research findings reveal that physical education teachers might have negative attitudes toward inclusion itself and its challenges, which are probably derived from their fear that they did not have adequate training and might be lacking the experience and knowledge to successfully include students with disabilities in the general school system. Some researchers argue that most PE teachers may have mixed feelings and express obvious reluctance to the practical inclusion claiming simultaneously that their general attitude toward inclusion is positive; teachers may also vary according to the type of disability (Obrusnikova, 2008) [10]. The same author found that physical education teachers' beliefs were favorable toward teaching children with specific learning disabilities and less favorable toward teaching children with emotional and behavioral disorders.

Significant predictors of positive beliefs in Turkey study were: perceived competence, positive teaching experience with children with disabilities, and course work in Adapted physical activities (APA). The results of this study emphasize the role of pre-service education in Turkey, which did not include coursework in APA before 2000. The lack of training may explain the difference in attitudes between teachers with up to 10 years in service and those who enrolled into service before the teacher preparation program in Turkey was changed.

Mentioning the merit of inclusive schools as they are capable of providing quality education to all children [11], we would like to highlight that the creation of such schools is a crucial step in helping different categories of population to change discriminatory attitudes.

We consider that inclusive education is not only the process of quality education of all children with disabilities, but also together with regular children and students. The establishment of inclusive schools is a tool

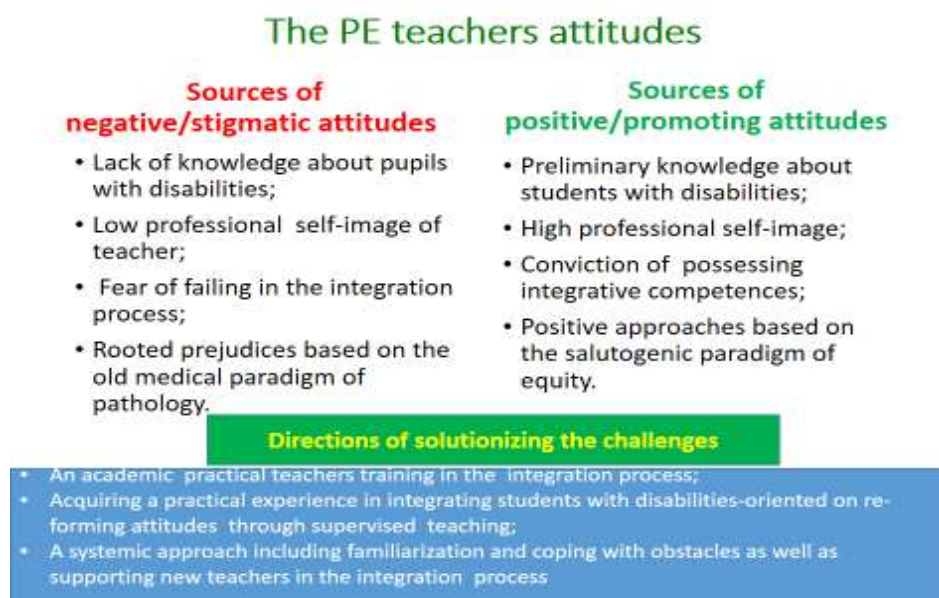
in developing an inclusive society. *From our point of view, inclusive education should be the process of quality education of all children and students, together regular and with disabilities, which aims better exploring their potential, and offer opportunities to all for future inclusion and personal and professional development.* Inclusive education is a precondition in creating welcoming / "friendly" communities and establishing the inclusive society. At the same time, inclusive education can be a tool to change discriminatory attitudes but also, vice-verso – forming the inclusive attitude is a precondition in establishing the inclusive education/ inclusive school.

Based on the importance of special teachers' training on special needs education, we would like to propose the following principles:

- *A human rights based approach:* treatment of all persons as human beings, despite of disabilities
- *A noncategorical approach:* encompassing all types of disabilities should be developed as a common core, prior to further specialization in one or more disability-specific area
- *Complementarity and mobility:* specialized training in special needs education leading to additional qualifications should normally be integrated with or preceded by training and experience as a regular education teacher
- *A gender equality based approach:* equal treatment of girls and boys, prevention of sexual harassment and sexual abuse, etc.

At the same time, the focus on social inclusion and citizenship through formal and non-formal learning also entails that special attention is paid to learners from vulnerable groups, including with a migrant background, from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, roma, LGBTI and learners with special needs [12]. Thus, the content of social inclusion in relation with citizenship has a much larger content, including many vulnerable groups. Respectively, social inclusion of people with disabilities or learners with special needs should be mentioned express.

The current research is focused gradually on the specific factors connected to the implications of teachers having to cope with disability in a regular demanding setting, and the required methodology and finalities of developing adequate coping strategies.



**Fig.1.** The connection between PE teachers' attitudes and psycho-pedagogical strategies.

Figure 1 reflects the connection between PE teachers' attitudes and psycho-pedagogical strategies, based on the identification of sources of negative/stigmatic attitudes and sources of positive/ promoting (inclusive) attitudes. Thus, as sources of negative/stigmatic attitudes were identified the following: lack of knowledge about pupils with disabilities, low professional self-image of teacher, fear of failing in the integration process, rooted prejudices based on the old medical paradigm of pathology. As opposite, as sources of positive/ promoting

(inclusive) attitudes can be mentioned: preliminary knowledge about pupils with disabilities, high professional self-image of teacher, conviction of possessing integrative competences, positive approaches based on the salutogenic paradigm of equity.

### Teachers' responsibility to integrate pupils with disabilities

So, the challenging pedagogic process of training physical education teachers' inclusion strategies includes a flowing unit of the main components- goal, objectives, content, methodologies and finalities.

In order to decide on concrete steps to modify stigmatized attitudes of learners, this diagnostic model was drawn up (Fig.2), aiming at identifying the main type of attitudes, which would be its physio-psychological aspects, trying to define the directions of pedagogical solution of the problematic situation that hinders the integration of students with disabilities. As challenges were identified the following: disconnection between will to integrate & fear to fail; lack of needed pedagogical strategies; deterioration in number of pupils integrated in main school – in spite of integration policy.



**Fig.2.** Diagnostic Model for Changing Stigmatized Attitudes: Challenges vs. Goals and Practical Steps.

Thus, the present situation and the new challenges related to the vocational needs of the PE teacher, who is required to de facto face the inclusion of disabled students, have been diagnosed.

In order to ensure/ form the positive attitude of PE teachers, the teacher's new promoting role as a mediator/ model in the integrative process of students with disabilities was proposed.

As important basic points served the profile of an inclusive teacher prepared by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012), with four main values that should be practiced by teachers working in inclusive educational systems: (a) respect for the student's diversity and basic education while treating differences as resources and opportunities, (b) providing support while expecting the highest achievements for each student, (c) collaboration and work in a team, and (d) continuous professional development and taking responsibility for lifelong learning [13].

The intervention program included 10 meetings, 2 hours each. The objectives of the program were:

1. Enhance student with disability engagement to PE lesson and to the school.
2. Increase education aspects of all the teachers-students in regard to inclusion, such as participation in PE lessons and all the activities, motivation, self-efficacy for both teachers-students and also sense of belonging to school.
3. Reduce risk factors such as discipline problems and involvement at violence.
4. Reduce risk social factors such as develop a sense of social rejection.



The program based on the factors associated with the adapted physical education, which mean that the teacher must provide activities for all the children. Social psychologists have long been interested in understanding the conditions under which attitudes influence behaviors; thus, a growing body of research has highlighted the importance of affective attitudes as a key correlate of various behaviors. We must understand and predict behaviors, which means, that behavior is determined by intentions, which are in turn determined by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Underlying these three factors are beliefs that can form the basis of interventions to change behavior. In school, engagement is reflected in the relationships among students themselves and with their teachers. Students who are at risk tend to have poorer relationships in school, and that fact, they feel lonely in the school. The program sought to change that set of circumstances by teaching PE teachers to become more aware that they have significant control over many important aspects of student's life, especially relationships.

During the program implementation teachers were taught a "language" of relationships that they could use to discuss and understand how relationships work and how their behaviors contribute to the positive or negative outcomes of interactions with others. The interpersonal language and model of relating to others used in the intervention derives from the theoretical model for the study of classroom teaching. According to the theoretical model, it is important to prepare future physical education teachers in engaging with inclusive practices for students with disabilities in GPE settings. According to proposed model of teachers' reaction to having to include students with disabilities we could understand the motivational factors affecting intentions, which mean, it is possible to understand the relationship between attitudes and behavior, so then we accept the assumption that people are decent creatures that may result from their actions considerate, so only the position cannot be used to guide behavior.

In addition to learning a relationship language and a model for understanding relationships, teachers in the program were taught how to understand the connection between the goals, beliefs, predictions and success and participation in physical education. The behavior of the participants on exercise depends on their orientation about the goals of the activity. Thus, this program gives the teachers the chance to understand the orientation for the students to participate in PE lessons.

### Conclusions

The comparison between pretest and posttest stages based on the experience of physical education teachers in working with children with disabilities elevated positive changes in their attitude, comparatively with the control group. The experimental group, both experienced and inexperienced teachers, changed their attitudes regarding physical education with children with disabilities.

All teachers should be trained/ prepared to act on the belief that all students, including students with disabilities, belong in general education classrooms. *We note the importance to help/to conduct teachers to understand their role in education and inclusive education, that the inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom is an opportunity, not a problem.*

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