

Review article

**INCLUSIVE PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN VOJVODINA:
THE CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS***

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Abstract. *The inclusive model of education in the Republic of Serbia has been intensely developed since 2009. The process of its practical application in physical education teaching faces multiple challenges. Inclusive PE can bring considerable benefits to all the participants in the educational process and contribute to social inclusion. The paper presents the major results in Stage One of the scientific project entitled Inclusive Teaching of Physical Education in Vojvodina's Schools: Challenges and Prospects, those regarding the work of the interdepartmental committees, material/technical conditions for the realization of inclusive PE, initial training, as well as the attitudes of pre-service and currently working PE teachers to inclusive physical education. The results obtained in the initial stage of the implementation of inclusive education show that inclusive practices and inclusive culture insufficiently keep abreast of the inclusive policy as defined by related legislation. Improvements in inclusive physical education in Vojvodina's schools are possible through: 1. The provision of necessary material, organizational and professional resources; 2. closer ties between all of the stakeholders; 3. improvements in the program of initial and continual education of the implementers of inclusive PE; 4. innovations in the curricula and planning of PE; and 5. further development of inclusive culture and practices.*

Key words: *Inclusive physical education, PE teachers, attitudes, initial teacher training, schools in Vojvodina.*

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INTRODUCTION

Physical education is extremely resourceful in supporting the participation and learning practices of all students, regardless of their educational needs and individual characteristics. Inclusive PE can bring considerable benefits to all students, teachers and the local community. "All children, and especially those with disabilities, learn to communicate and interact with others and develop cognitive and motor skills in physical education" (Rouse, 2009:2). Inclusive PE exposes children with developmental disabilities to a more stimulating environment and peer-involving models, increasing their chances of getting accepted by peers and of full social inclusion. Their participation in PE classes can contribute to the promotion of physical activity as an integrated part of an active lifestyle and to the development of basic motor skills necessary for practising physical activities. Moreover, it can raise the children's self-respect and social skills (Block, 1999; Physical education for children with disabilities: A guide for families and educators, n.d.). Expected benefits for the children of mainstream abilities include a more positive attitude to individuals with disabilities, a higher level of social skills, readiness to help others and the increase of self-respect. Teachers working in inclusive classes can also benefit from it: they can gain a better insight into individual differences between students, consult related specialists, increase/broaden their professional competence.

Apart from the positive effects of inclusive physical education, it has been ascertained that students with disabilities need additional time and assistance, which may hinder the educator's task to efficiently carry out instruction with the class on the whole. Besides, some teachers feel insufficiently competent to instruct students with disabilities. There are also remarks about both these and mainstream students failing to make desirable progress when attending inclusive classes. The burnout syndrome affecting PE teachers is positively correlated with the number of disabled students in the class, poor material/technical conditions and lack of specialist support (Fejgin, Talmor, & Erlich, 2005).

Inclusive physical education in the schools in Serbia/Vojvodina must be observed within the context of the progress made in the Republic of Serbia regarding the inclusive educational model. Subsequently to the adoption of the basic enactment dealing with education (The Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, 2009), a project was implemented in pilot schools aimed to elaborate and apply an efficient model of inclusive education. Early in the following year, another important document was published, Additional Child and Student Education, Health and Social Support Regulation (2010); also, at the Ministry of Education, coordination and implementation teams were formed to deal with inclusive education. The Ministry of Education has developed a support-providing network to aid teachers and schools to introduce inclusive educational practice, while teachers and other related professionals in schools have attended training courses aimed at strengthening the professional abilities needed in conditions of inclusive education. A special place in the development of inclusive education system is given to *interdepartmental committees*, and these have been established for the purpose of implementing inclusive policy on the local scale. What the interdepartmental committees do is assess the need for additional support; assessment is accessible to children of all socially vulnerable groups when they need additional support in education, or health care, or social care – for reason(s) of social deprivation, developmental delays, disability, learning difficulties, etc.

According to the information provided by the Provincial Secretariat for Education, Administration and National Communities, the 2010-11 school year – the first year of

implementation of the inclusive model of education – 213 of the regular primary schools on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina enrolled 2,358 pupils within an individual education plan (IEP). In the next schoolyear, the number of schools attended by IEP pupils rose to 230, but the number of such learners decreased to 1,988. Considering their grades, the number of IEP pupils experienced a decrease in the higher grades of primary schools (fifth to eighth grade). Currently, on the territory of the A. P. of Vojvodina, there are pupils using IEP in two thirds of regular primary schools, the average being nine per school (Đorđić & Tubić, 2012a).

The objective of the long-term scientific project *Inclusive Teaching of Physical Education in Vojvodina's Schools: Challenges and Prospects*, launched by the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education in Novi Sad, is to identify obstacles standing in the way of good physical education of *all* students in the regular schools of Vojvodina and to help overcome them by developing inclusive education, policy and practices concerning physical education. This paper presents the major results in Stage One of the Project, those regarding the work of the interdepartmental committees, material/technical conditions for the realization of inclusive PE, initial training, as well as the attitudes of pre-service and currently working PE teachers to inclusive physical education.

EARLY EXPERIENCES IN THE WORK OF INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEES

Interdepartmental committees are the key driving force in the implementation of inclusive education on the local scale. At the beginning of 2011, as part of implementing new regulations related to inclusive education in the Republic of Serbia, 39 interdepartmental committees were established on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The information obtained from 30 local governments (76.9%), and coming from all of the administrative districts, show that the total number of children referred to the committees was 595 in the schoolyear 2010-11 (Đorđić & Tubić, 2011). Among the children referred to IDC's, boys prevailed over girls to a statistically significant degree: 360 boys (60.5% of all children referred) and 235 girls (39.5%). $\chi^2=12.78$, $df(1)$, $p=.0003$. In terms of the age of these children, most of them were at primary school level (460, or 77.3%), followed by pre-school children (113; 19.0%), while secondary school students were smallest in number (22; 3.7%). $\chi^2=268.76$, $df(2)$, $p<<.0001$.

In the earliest stage of the committee work, educational institutions played the most active role (58.5%) when it came to the identification of the children that might need additional support in the areas of social care, health care, or education; in all probability, this has been so owing to the fact that they possess the best information and insight. On the basis of information coming from 28 local governments, for 378 children (77.2%), out of 487 referred to the committees, individual support plans were suggested.

In compliance with Article 13, Paragraph 2 of the *Additional Child and Student Education, Health and Social Support Regulation* (2010), a registry is kept as to the number of children with impaired abilities and the kinds of impairments. According to the obtained data, out of the 364 impaired children, 84 are physically disabled (23.1%), while 274 suffer from intellectual disability (76.9%). In practice, that means that educators will have to deal with students with difficulties in the mental sphere of functioning more than those with a physical handicap. The available research results, however, show that teachers are more or less ready to accept inclusion of learners with a mild disability of the body, while they rather reluctantly accept work with students with severe physical dis-

ability or mental retardation (Center & Ward, 1987; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Forlin, Douglas, & Hattie, 1996; Rainforth, 2000).

The collected data on the work of the interdepartmental committees have indicated some significant shortcomings in the Additional Child and Student Education, Health and Social Support Regulation (2010). In practice, this document imposes limits on the application of the suggested individual support plans. Considering the fact that for most children/students referred to the committees, supplemental support has been suggested in the sphere of *education*, a number of these will request special measures and services in *physical education*. In some cases, proposals for supplemental support may envisage extra sport activities at school free of charge, engagement of a personal assistant, adapted or special apparatuses for motor skill exercises, correctional swimming in pools, free transportation, removal of physical barriers and the like. Provided a committee does not manage to ensure financial resources for such activities/services, or proves unable to locate and oblige the service-provider in the local community (and/or beyond), supplemental support cannot be carried out.

From the viewpoint of inclusive PE, the committee's Evaluation Report is extremely useful, for it offers a thorough insight in the child's needs for additional support: it describes the child's living conditions, the child as a person and his/her functional characteristics; it records the support (legally) claimed and the support already enjoyed, plus the out-of-system services resorted to. In the educational field (which may include physical education, too), the identification of obstacles faced by the child and his/her family, as well as of the supports enjoyed, make the first step in planning inclusive teaching. The empirical data obtained have rendered the 'picture' of a "typical" student referred to the Committee for evaluation of his/her needs for supplemental support: it is a boy whose age corresponds to primary school age (grades one through eight) and whose problem is intellectual disability. In the time to come, intense enhancement of educators' professional competence is a must, and it concerns PE teachers and the elementary schools teachers (for the full curriculum in grades one to four) who practise PE in inclusive classes. The initiative to launch evaluation procedures regarding the needs of children/students for supplemental support has most often been generated within educational institutions; the fact accentuates the importance and role of all educators, including PE teachers, in identifying children from vulnerable social groups (Đorđić & Tubić, 2011).

MATERIAL/TECHNICAL CONDITIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE PE

Inadequate infrastructure and insufficiencies in terms of equipment (apparatuses and other gear) pose a global problem in physical education (Hardman, 2008). The issue becomes even more striking as we step into the area of inclusive education. In the Republic of Serbia, many schools lack the prescribed material resources, which is a great challenge for the implementation of good physical education. One whole half of the primary and secondary schools in Vojvodina fail to fulfill the equipment standards for PE teaching. In a recent study, a mere 12 per cent of primary schools assess their equipment as complete in terms of the standards required for PE (Information on Adaptation, Refurbishment and Equipment of Schools' Sport Facilities in AP Vojvodina, 2003). A study, carried out on a large national sample involving 1,533 primary and secondary schools, indicated the unfavorable situation with the facilities and equipment available for physical education in schools. Nearly 37% of schools cannot boast large gymnasiums, while almost one half

(48.5%) have small ones (which means less than 450 sq m). The quality and quantity of equipment lag far behind the prescribed standards, so that only a quarter (24%) of schools meet these. Swimming pools are available only to 0.8% of schools; less than 3% have a fitness facility. (Report: Study of Current Situation of School Sport in Educational Institutions in Serbia, 2008).

On the other hand, the size of classes in schools in Serbia/Vojvodina is often inadequate with regard to inclusive teaching practice. The current standards say that the number of pupils in a primary school class should be 30-34. An inclusive class can take up to two pupils with disabilities, as is recommended (Tripp, Rizzo, & Webbert, 2007). If a class does have students with disabilities, the size of the class can be reduced (3 students less per 1 disabled student). A personal or teaching assistant might help disabled children and/or the teacher in the inclusion process, but this opportunity is not widely used.

INITIAL TRAINING FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE PE

An analysis of the currently existing programs at the parent faculties in the region (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, FYR Macedonia) has shown that the curricular contents related to inclusive physical education are most frequently studied within the frame of optional subjects/modules, or – to a limited extent – as part of other subjects, especially Kinesitherapy (Đorđić, 2012a). Monitoring all three levels of university studies as a whole (undergraduate, postgraduate/master, doctoral; i.e., in terms of Bologna Process, 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles) has revealed the fact there is no continuity in the provision of content, courses or modules dealing with inclusive physical education. As to the availability of professional consultants or associates in the field of inclusive PE, it is noteworthy that only two institutions of higher education in Serbia educate experts who can be of relevant support to PE teachers; those are the Faculty for Special Education and Rehabilitation in Belgrade and the Department of Special Rehabilitation and Education at the Faculty of Medicine in Novi Sad.

The legislation related to continual further training of the teaching staff prescribes 100 hours of mandatory advanced improvement for a 5-year period. Teachers can choose programs of further professional training from the Catalogue of Accredited Programs published for each schoolyear and offering more than 800 programs on average. The number of accredited seminars profiled for inclusive education has been on the rise: compared to the year 2006 when the Catalogue offered 12, the 2010 Catalogue edition put forward 53. One has to bear in mind that inclusion of students with disabilities and marginalized categories of children has been proclaimed – by the Ministry of Education – as one of the priorities in the advanced training plans for the next 3-year period.

THE ATTITUDES OF FUTURE AND CURRENTLY WORKING PE TEACHERS TOWARD INCLUSIVE PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The teachers' attitudes are one of the major factors in successful inclusive education, and, accordingly, in inclusive physical education (Folsom-Meek & Rizzo, 2002). The research conducted has shown that positive attitude of teachers is enhanced through a larger training corpus of the related profile received during their education, increasing experience in teaching students with disabilities and a positive perception of their own compe-

tence with regard to teaching these students (Avramidis, Baylis, & Burden, 2000; Block & Rizzo, 1995; Folsom-Meek & Rizzo, 2002; Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996; Rizzo & Kirkendall, 1995). Some studies have ascertained that female teachers have more positive attitudes (Downs & Williams, 1994; Hutzler, Zach, & Gafni, 2005; Papadopoulou, Kokaridas, Papanikolaou, & Patsiaouras, 2004), yet this has not been the case in a number of others (Hodge, Davis, Woodard, & Sherrill, 2002; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1991). As to the possible correlation of the teachers' age and their attitude to inclusion, some earlier research suggested that senior teachers tended to have a less positive attitude (DePauw & Goc Karp, 1990); however, the conclusion has not been confirmed by other studies. The combination of unfavorable teachers' opinions about inclusion and the insufficient training they had received for work in inclusive classes often leads to failure in the inclusion process when it comes to physical education (Block, 1999). In the research conducted by Đorđić (2012b), the majority of teachers (58.3%) confessed a lack of self-confidence in teaching children with developmental disabilities, while a mere 9.1% did attend some seminar(s) dealing with inclusive PE. The teachers with experience in teaching such children and those who had a chance to meet and know people with developmental disabilities manifest a more positive perception of their own competence. As the teachers' beliefs and attitudes change to the greatest degree when they gain practical experience and/or participate in effective programs of advanced training (Ben-Yehuda, Leyser, & Last, 2010), the fact should serve as a guideline as to the priority steps to be taken in order to further develop inclusive PE in our country/province.

In order to explore the attitudes of the pre-service and currently working professionals in the field of inclusive PE, a study was undertaken within this project on a sample of 418 participants (155 university students and 263 school teachers). The student-subsample involved 45 male and 110 female participants, while the teacher-subsample included 77 men and 186 women. The students were representatives of the population of the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, Faculty of Teaching Science and Faculty of Medicine (Department of Special Rehabilitation and Education), all three a part of the University of Novi Sad; as for the teachers, they were all employed by schools on the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

To explore the views about inclusive physical education, we applied the attitudes towards including students with a disability in PE lessons questionnaire (ATIPE) four-point scale of attitudes (Hutzler, Zach, & Gafni, 2005). This 4-point Likert-type scale (no neutral attitude allowed) consists of 15 items, 11 of statements being formulated negatively (e.g.: "The children with disabilities often cause problems of discipline during PE classes."), and four were positive (e.g.: "The children with disabilities can greatly benefit from participation in PE with other children."). The rating scale shows a high reliability ($\alpha = .844$). The respondent's score on the scale is an average score (the sum of scores in individual items/15), so that the result ranges from 1 to 4.

As to the students' attitudes to inclusive PE (Đorđić, 2012b), the medium score obtained was $M=2.77$, with a standard deviation of $SD=.39$, whereas the range of values varied from $M=1.47$ to $M=3.67$. In the entirety of the results, the gender differences are not statistically significant; nonetheless, female students noticeably manifest a tendency to a more positive attitude to the attitudinal object (in 10 out of the 15 items, they achieved better scores).

Of the total number of students, 65.13 % had an opportunity to become familiar with persons with disabilities, while 34.87% had not. Yet between these two groups of stu-

dents no statistically significant differences emerged regarding their attitudes to inclusive PE: the average score of the students who had some previous experience with individuals with disabilities was $M=2.77$, the statistical deviation being $SD=0.39$, while the medium score for the students lacking such experience was $M=2.77$, with $SD=0.39$. Considering the possibility of evolution and a change in the attitudes, what is necessary to undertake in the course of initial university studies is to train future professionals in education for work with students with impairments, to foster an inclusive culture and to create conditions for direct experiences with these students, that is, to prepare pre-service educators for inclusive education as a certainty awaiting them; such an approach may prove to have impact on their more positive attitudes, as some previous studies have demonstrated (Avramidis et al., 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Ben-Yehuda, Leyser, & Last, 2010; Jerlinder, Danermark, & Gill, 2010).

The subsample of educators as participants, which was made up of primary school full-time teachers (teaching all subjects in lower grades) and PE teachers, the medium score – based on the abovementioned assessment scale for attitudes toward inclusive physical education – was $M=2.71$, with a standard deviation of $SD=0.43$ (Đorđić, 2012b). The scores ranged from $M=2.19$ to $M=3.19$. Taking into account the mean value and standard deviation, as well as some other dispersion measures, it can be said that the average scores of the teachers, like the average scores of students, tend to signal moderately positive attitudes to inclusive physical education.

Although female participants had numerically higher scores than their male colleagues, gender differences in the respective attitudes toward inclusive PE are not statistically significant. Within the teacher subsample, 63% had had a chance to become familiar with disability-stricken individuals, while the rest of the 37% had not had such a personal experience. The former and the latter group do not show any significant mutual differences in terms of their attitude to inclusive PE.

Considering the professional experience in working with students having developmental disabilities, 49% of teachers had gained some, while 51% had never taught students with disabilities. Such professional experience, or lack thereof, has not been reflected significantly on the teachers' attitudes to inclusive PE.

By comparing the attitudes of pre-service educators to those currently working toward inclusive physical education (Đorđić & Tubić, 2012a), it has been ascertained that there is no statistically significant difference ($M=2.63$ and $M=2.76$, respectively).

CONCLUSION

In the initial stage of implementing inclusive education in our milieu (in Serbia/Vojvodina), inclusive practices and an inclusion-fostering culture insufficiently keep abreast of the inclusion policy as defined through related legislation. Improvement of inclusive physical education in the schools in Vojvodina is achievable through strategic actions along several lines: 1. The provision of material, organizational and professional resources needed for further development of inclusive PE; 2. The establishment of closer ties among all stakeholders – educators, parents, various related experts and services, relevant institutions/organizations; 3. betterments in the programs of initial training for the immediate participants in inclusive PE and provision of continual expert support and advanced professional training; 4. innovations in PE curricula and planning; and 5. further development of inclusive culture and practices.

The faculties/universities that educate future PE teachers have a special responsibility to yield professionals capable of tackling any challenge in the field of inclusive PE. Therefore, a task of high priority in the time to come is to set up and improve modules/courses that would round off the graduates' competence for the job of PE teaching. At the same time, good programs of advanced training have to be designed for the educators who already teach physical education in inclusive classes. And it is this very corpus of issues which will be in the focus of Stage Two of this Project.

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INKLUZIVNO FIZIČKO VASPITANJE U VOJVODINI: AKTUELNO STANJE I PERSPEKTIVE

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Inkluzivni model obrazovanja u Republici Srbiji intenzivno se razvija od 2009. godine. Proces primene ovog modela u nastavi fizičkog vaspitanja prate brojni izazovi. Inkluzivno fizičko vaspitanje može doneti značajne koristi svim učesnicima obrazovnog procesa i doprineti socijalnoj inkluziji. U radu su prikazani najvažniji rezultati prve faze naučnog projekta "Inkluzivna nastava fizičkog vaspitanja u vojvođanskim školama: izazovi i perspektive", koji se odnose na rad interesornih komisija, materijalno-tehničke uslove za realizaciju inkluzivnog fizičkog vaspitanje, inicijalnu obuku, kao i stavove budućih i aktuelnih nastavnika fizičkog vaspitanja o inkluzivnom fizičkom vaspitanju. Rezultati dobijeni u početnoj fazi implementacije inkluzivnog obrazovanja, ukazuju da inkluzivna praksa i inkluzivna kultura ne prate u dovoljnoj meri inkluzivnu politiku uobličenu u odgovarajućim zakonskim propisima. Inkluzivno fizičko vaspitanje u vojvođanskim školama moguće je unaprediti: 1) obezbeđivanjem neophodnih materijalnih, organizacionih i stručnih resursa; 2) čvršćim povezivanjem svih stakeholdera 3) unapređivanjem programa inicijalnog i kontinuiranog obrazovanja realizatora inkluzivnog fizičkog vaspitanja 4) inoviranjem nastavnih planova i programa fizičkog vaspitanja i 5) daljim razvojem inkluzivne kulture i prakse.

Ključne reči: inkluzivno fizičko vaspitanje, nastavnici fizičkog vaspitanja, stavovi, inicijalna obuka nastavnika, vojvođanske škole.