

IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS FOR COMBATING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION THROUGH PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that sports have the potential to become a vehicle for positive social change and social cohesion. Sports can teach values such as fairness, teambuilding, democracy, diversity, tolerance, equality, discipline, inclusion and respect (UNODC, 2020; Council of the European Union, 2018; UNESCO, 2018).

Similarly, in the context of formal education, Physical Education (PE) can play a significant role in fostering social inclusion and promoting values such as respect, teamwork, and accepting diversity among students. When implemented effectively, PE can be a powerful platform for challenging stereotypes, building intercultural understanding, and encouraging cooperative learning environments (Bailey, 2006). It can provide opportunities for students from different cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds to interact in meaningful ways, helping to reduce prejudices and promote mutual respect. On the other hand, PE classes can sometimes be characterised by discriminatory attitudes, exclusionary practices, and unequal access to participation, mirroring broader societal inequalities (Munk and Agergaard, 2015; Thorjussen and Sisjord, 2021).

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The role of the PE teacher is fundamental in this respect for promoting inclusion¹ and combating intolerance and discrimination among students. In order to do this, the PE teacher should have the capacity, the knowledge, the skills and the tools for inclusive teaching strategies.

This paper presents the views of the PE teachers as regards the current situation of racism and discrimination prevailing in lower secondary schools in Greece and asks for their needs self-assessment in order to better respond to phenomena of racism and discrimination and to effectively promote social equality and inclusion through PE classes.

It is based on the outcomes of the Report titled “Assessment of the needs to combat racism and discrimination through physical education in schools”, which was produced in the framework of the EU co-funded DIALECT3 project.² The current paper focuses on the research results that refer to the identified needs of the physical education (PE) teachers in lower secondary schools.

Methodology

The paper relies on a synthesis of primary data deriving from both quantitative and qualitative research methods and tools, which were used in the framework of the EU co-funded DIALECT3 project.

Firstly, quantitative data were collected from an online survey addressed to PE teachers of public secondary schools in Greece. In order to reach the PE teachers, a formal letter explaining the purposes of the research and providing the link to the on-line questionnaire was sent by e-mail to public lower secondary schools and to organisations representing PE Professionals, inviting their PE teachers to participate in the survey. The online survey was

1. In the framework of this paper, the term inclusion and inclusive education is not used for students with special education needs, but for all students, including vulnerable and disadvantaged student groups.

2. For the full Deliverable, please see: https://dialectproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/dialect3_d2.1-needs-assessment-report-for-fighting-and-discrimination-in-schools-through-physical-education-1.pdf

conducted through self-completion by PE teachers, anonymously, of an electronic questionnaire which was built through google form. The aim of the online survey was to assess the existing level of competencies and practices in promoting tolerance through physical education. In addition, Physical Education teachers were asked to provide information with regard to phenomena of intolerance and discrimination that prevail in schools today.

Secondly, qualitative data were collected from four focus groups discussions with members of the school community, mostly PE teachers but also school directors and other members of the school community. Focus group discussions were conducted face-to-face in the four intervention areas of the project (Athens, Thessaloniki, Igoumenitsa and Chalkida). Here again, we tried to engage PE teachers and members of the school community to participate in the focus groups discussion through multiple ways, including formal letters, telephone calls and networking. A common focus group guide for all 4 areas of intervention was prepared. The aim of the focus group discussions with representatives of the school community was to identify relevant day-to-day challenges faced by physical educators and school' directors concerning racism and discrimination in the school environment, and ways employed so far for handling such cases.

Both the quantitative and the qualitative research were approved by EKKE's Research Ethics Committee.

The population of the study

The quantitative data come from a total of 78 Physical Education (PE) teachers working in secondary schools who responded to the on-line questionnaire, out of whom 42.3% men and 57.7% women. More than half of them (53.8%) work in schools in the wider Athens area, in Attica prefecture. Most of them are over 51 years old (66.7%), hold a bachelor's (48.7%) or a master's degree (46.2%), and have more than 11 years of experience in the education field (84.6%). Most respondents work as permanent staff (70.5%) in general schools (91%), with 300-500 students (57.7%).

The qualitative data collected from the four focus groups come from twenty-nine (29) participants of the school community (secondary school principals, physical education professionals, school psychologists etc) out of which 16 were female and 13 males. More than half of the participants (17 persons) were older than 51 years, 9 aged between 41 and 50 and 3 aged between 31 and 40. As to their educational attainment, 16 were graduates and 13 were post-graduates.

Research findings

The findings presented in this section refer to four thematic areas: namely the views of the PE teachers in relation to the existence of racism, discrimination and intolerance in the school environment, the existence of such phenomena in PE classes, their competencies and skills in order to deal with such phenomena and finally, barriers identified for combating intolerance and discrimination in PE. Quantitative and qualitative data are used in this paper in a complementary manner so as to give a more comprehensive picture of the issues analysed.

The school environment

In the school environment, incidences of intolerance and indirect discrimination exist among students, while any intervention is still a matter for school administration and teaching staff at the micro level. In particular, with regard to the presence of phenomena of intolerance and inappropriate behaviour at school, 86% of PE teachers who responded to the on-line questionnaire have witnessed such incidents between their students. It is interesting that female PE teachers seem to notice such incidents more often than their male colleagues. In particular, 11.1% of female PE teachers responded that they often see such incidents against 6.1% of male PE teachers, while 21.2% of male PE teachers reported not to having noticed such incidents at all against 8.9% of female PE teachers. These incidents involve mostly verbal teasing, mockery, and bad language (88.1%,

$N = 59$). The main reason of discriminatory behaviours, according to PE teachers, is discrimination because of origin/nationality (32.8%) and because of gender, sexual orientation (31.2%).

Participants of focus groups also mentioned that adolescents are often engaged in competition among themselves that can sometimes be intensified by ethnic differences but not only, leading to micro-conflicts in school. According to their sayings, when adolescents are asked to justify an incident of conflict at school, they usually attribute it on "*just having fun*" covering up in this way different kinds of abusive behaviours. Also, PE teachers underlined the fact that in many cases students use discriminatory linguistic discourse or words. In their opinion, this is a result of different influences coming from the internet/social media that are commonly used by youth.

Discriminatory behaviours in school are more readily recognised among children with different skin colours. These behaviours are typically not articulated openly, but are enacted through subtle and systematic practices. For instance, during group formation activities, certain students are persistently overlooked. Such patterns of exclusion contribute to the marginalization and eventual social withdrawal of these children. Also, in the case of refugee children, teachers' individual actions to include them in the school environment have been unsuccessful. Most refugees remain "invisible" at school, hanging out with each other. Factors that go beyond the school environment such as frequent changes of schools and the transitional character of their stay in the country have also a bearing on that. As a teacher noted, this is a complex issue deriving mostly from "...a political exclusion, not social, nor educational". Finally, Roma children were also mentioned by the teachers, with most of them facing problems in participating on an equal basis in school activities.

Physical education classes

Focusing on the quantitative data for PE classes, in half of the respondents' classes (53.8%), there are students who inexcusably don't participate, while 46.2% of PE teachers report that they have

noticed phenomena of exclusion of pupils when groups are formed “sometimes” (64.1%) and “often” (9%). The main reasons for exclusion reported are: capabilities (63.8%), appearance (12.1%) and origin/nationality (8.6%). However, there is also a 25.6% of PE teachers who have not noticed such phenomena in their classes. Here again, male physical education professionals notice less “exclusion” compared to females (39.4% of male PE teachers have not noticed such exclusions against 15.6% of female PE teachers).

As it has been mentioned in the focus groups, the physical education class is, for most refugee students, their favourite class. The students that PE teachers consider as more difficult to participate in physical education classes, are girls wearing headscarves (hijabs) “... *their culture does not allow them...*”. Gender inequality was evident in some cultures, when a brother and a sister were in the same PE class. An example was provided in which a teacher encouraged a male student’s sister to participate in football, only for the male student to respond, “*My sister should not be playing football*”. Roma girls in this age also participate less in PE classes, while there are still phenomena of them dropping out of school due to the Roma culture of “early marriage” which, although illegal, persists in many cases.

Nevertheless, most teachers try to include all students in their classes. Physical Education teachers believe that PE offers flexibility in its structure and delivery. Some of them reported using alternative versions of sports in order to create groups and rules that promote cooperation in a ‘diverse environment’. For example, it was mentioned that in collective sports teachers can shape the rules in a way so as to promote gender equality.

In addition, when forming teams, the teachers themselves decide the composition of the team, in order to avoid the exclusion of children who are not particularly “popular” or “able” to play the game. In most cases, “*the obese, the very tall and the very thin are always chosen last, while girls are never chosen*”. According to them, the key to success is to find “the appropriate balance” among the team, so that students who are more “competent” in sports do not get “bored” while the ones less “competent” are not reluctant to participate. However, all PE teachers agree that when a student is very good at

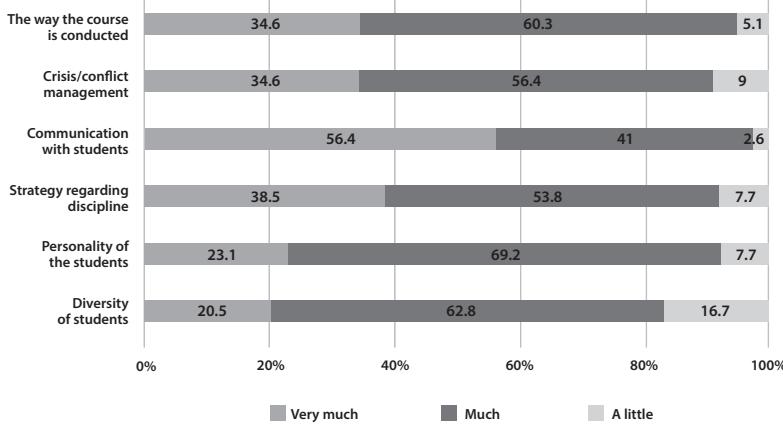
sports, then no other personal characteristic or condition is taken into consideration by its classmates. As stated, “*nothing else matters during the game, because the main goal for them is to win*”.

PE teachers' competences and skills in promoting tolerance and social inclusion

In terms of their own competences and skills, measured on a four-level scale, the majority of PE teachers who responded to the online survey believe that, in general, they have “much” (51.3%) or “very much” (38.5%) the necessary skills to promote tolerance. However, there is also a 10.3% that feels it possesses “a little” of the necessary skills for promoting tolerance.

Asking about the acquisition of their skills, 1 in 3 PE teachers reports that these skills were mainly acquired through their practical experience in schools (34.5%) and another 1 in 3 through personal involvement and reading on these subjects (30.8%). This can be partly explained by the fact that according to PE teachers' responses, in more than 1 out of 3 schools, no PE-specific training programme (37.2%) and no general training programme (35.9%) on social inclusion and tolerance has been conducted in their schools over the past five years. As a result, 42.3% of the PE teachers have not attended any training seminar.

Figure 1: PE teachers' satisfaction with the skills they possess in relation to:



Evaluating their own skills and knowledge, from a given list, PE teachers feel “very much” confident with their skills for “communication with their students” (56.4%), while they feel less confident with the skills they have for “dealing with student diversity” (16.7%) and for “crisis/conflict management” (9%) as shown in Figure 1 (p. 97).

Barriers to promoting tolerance and combating discrimination at school

Asking PE teachers about the most significant barrier to an inclusive school promoting tolerance and equality for all students, they opted for: a) the entrenched stereotypical perceptions of society (about gender, diversity) that are reproduced in the school environment (32.1%) b) the lack of a supporting framework for the integration of new techniques and activities by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (32.1%), and c) the lack of specialised knowledge on inclusion issues (24.4%).

With regard to the entrenched stereotypical perceptions of society, the role of the family was particularly highlighted at the focus groups. For teachers “...*the problem nowadays is parents. It is not the children!*”. According to the teachers of the focus groups, parents hold many stereotypes and are more difficult to deal with, while they sometimes generate issues at school through their behaviour.

With regard to the framework and the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education for inclusivity in schools, these are considered not enough. In fact, as it was mentioned in the focus group discussions, each school decides by itself depending on the culture at the microlevel, namely the director along with the teachers’ association, how issues will be resolved and what policy the school will follow for the interventions in this respect. The same applies for the guiding implementation of the principles and good practices of the syllabus for promoting inclusive physical education. According to the on-line survey results, more than half of the PE teachers (52.6%) believe that these are “a little” adequate.

Nevertheless, physical education class is characterized as “...*a tool for pupils to relax, but also an opportunity to get activated within certain limits and discipline*”. In particular, all respondents agree that PE

classes have the potential to effectively incorporate both prevention actions -such as strengthening children's self-control, mutual respect, and empathy- and intervention actions, such as addressing incidents of discriminatory behaviour, promoting conflict resolution, and facilitating inclusive group activities. However, in order for that to actually happen, a lot of things need to be further elaborated.

The abolition of the school championships is considered a negative development by the PE teachers that needs to be reconsidered by the State, because in many cases it has left children with no upper motive for their participation in class. In other words, the school championship used to function as a "tool" for the PE teachers because it gave them the power to set rules and discipline for the students in order for them to participate in the championship.

Similarly, the reduction of teaching hours in Physical Education in lower secondary schools significantly reduces opportunities for action to enable children to accept the 'other' in terms of race, gender, disability, sexual preference and also to become resilient to the risks they face. It takes time to invest systematically in empowering young people, to bond with children, to observe their needs, to trust and be trusted. And time is missing. Following from that, the teachers who participated in the focus groups appear to be quite skeptical about the ability to achieve multiple objectives exclusively through the PE class when it is offered only twice a week. They conclude that, under these conditions, despite good intentions, the only realistically attainable goal in class is the development of certain motor skills.

Data from the on-line survey to PE teachers, shows that 59% believes that the physical education class today contributes "very much" (and 33.3% "much") to the promotion of equality, the inclusion of diversity, and the fight against discrimination. In addition, in a question on how much emphasis they give in their PE class, "the development of teamwork cooperation, respect, and acceptance of diversity" (82.1%) and "the creation of positive attitudes towards lifelong learning" (70.5%) had the most PE teachers' responses in placing "very much" emphasis.

The third barrier, namely the lack of specialised knowledge of PE teachers on social inclusion issues was also found during our research.

Indeed, as already mentioned earlier in the competences and skills section, PE teachers feel less qualified to address students' diversity and to promote the "development of teamwork cooperation, respect, and acceptance of diversity". Following from that, PE teachers feel less satisfied with their information on inclusive education (48.7%), with the school's inadequate infrastructure (48.7%) and with the frequency of training seminars (46.2%).

The importance of training teachers through hands-on seminars was emphasized also in focus group discussions as a way to support inclusive education. However, as focus group participants mentioned, "*just learning the theory isn't enough*", because without practical experience, it's hard to apply it in the classroom or adapt it to specific situations that require flexibility and creative solutions.

Another barrier which was highlighted by both the quantitative and the qualitative data, was the lack of appropriate spaces for practicing physical education. Indeed, in the on-line survey, 47.4% of PE teachers were "a little bit" satisfied with the school's sports facilities, and 6.4% "not at all" satisfied. As mentioned in the focus group, there are schools with a large number of students, most of them located in disadvantaged and crowded neighbourhoods in central Athens, that suffer from inadequate infrastructure. In some instances, the conditions are so poor that there isn't even a proper schoolyard for students to use during breaks, let alone facilities for organizing sports activities. It has been quoted that "...*even prisons have larger courtyards for prisoners to exercise in*", while another participant of the focus group commented about vulnerable students who live in disadvantaged areas and go to deprived schools "*they are children of a lesser God, they are abandoned. These schools... should have been strengthened, instead, they have been abandoned*".

Discussion

The findings of our research activities agree, to a large extent, with those from previous studies that have investigated the perspectives and competencies of teachers (Brussino, 2021) and, in particular, of Physical Education (PE) teachers regarding the issues of racism,

discrimination, and intolerance in school settings in Greece (Dagkas, 2007; Aslanidou and Derri, 2013; Karamesini et al., 2024).

Aslanidou and Derri (2013) literature review study, examining teachers' perceptions of racism and intolerance in schools, concluded that, although PE teachers often express a willingness to support all students, their understanding and practices regarding cultural diversity and intercultural pedagogy are often inadequate, while their knowledge of the social challenges that immigrant children face is limited. This limited awareness can undermine their capacity to implement inclusive pedagogical practices and effectively identify and address discriminatory behaviors within the school environment. Many educators enter the profession without having received sufficient preparation on how to address the diverse cultural, social, and educational needs of their students, particularly those from immigrant or minority backgrounds (Aslanidou and Derri, 2013; Ntina, 2002).

On the other hand, it seems that the years of experience of PE teachers and their personal pursuit of knowledge in the pedagogical context have helped them to deal with the arising needs for teaching practices that promote the inclusion of all and support the diversity of the student population (Papageorgiou et al., 2021).

Indeed, most PE teachers claim to have the necessary skills and competences to deal with phenomena of intolerance, discrimination and exclusion in their classes; however, these are mainly acquired through personal involvement, effort and years of experience. Our findings comply with other studies that stress the need to strengthen PE teachers' intercultural skills in order to effectively respond to the promotion of wider inclusion of students (i.e. Chepyator-Thomson, 2006; Dagkas, 2007; Papageorgiou et al., 2021).

As to the barriers faced by teachers, here again, our findings are consistent with those identified in relevant studies, the most frequently cited being: specific student characteristics, inadequate professional development, and limited resources and support (Karamani et al., 2024).

According to PE teachers, the inclusion of muslim girls in PE classes is an indicative example of students with specific characteristics that hinder their participation due to primarily

cultural factors. Furthermore, parental influence plays a significant role in this context (Patsiaouras, 2008). The absence of ongoing professional development opportunities related to inclusive and anti-discriminatory education leaves educators unequipped to adapt to the evolving needs of increasingly diverse student populations (UNESCO, 2018).

Finally, inclusion was also found to depend on factors such as school culture (supportive school environment), policies (consistency and clear targeting), and adequate resources (in terms of equipment, space, class size but also in terms of adequate time) (Karamani et al., 2024, p. 14).

The fact that the PE class in Greece is rather autonomous and flexible regarding the curriculum allows PE teachers to follow alternative practices in class. Indeed, it was mentioned that various creative interventions are being promoted by many PE teachers who try to become aware and inventive, even when the conditions are not met and the infrastructure for sports is insufficient or completely missing. The latter is considered a big problem especially in densely populated schools without suitable and free spaces and equipment.

Conclusion

In our view, PE teachers are not simply implementers of specific educational policies, but active agents of change within the school system. Their role in combating intolerance and discrimination is considered therefore crucial. Despite their willingness and openness to addressing these issues, several barriers hinder the effective combat of intolerance and discrimination in physical education (PE) classes in Greece, posing challenges to the creation of inclusive and equitable learning environments. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of professional training among PE teachers in the areas of diversity, inclusive education and intercultural competence. This deficiency can result in uncertainty or discomfort when addressing issues related to discrimination, racism, or social exclusion within the PE class.

In this respect, PE teachers have emphasised the importance of ensuring that the provision of training seminars is promoted

through an institutional framework and in a systematic way for all, but equally important is the content of these seminars. According to them, the state should offer experiential rather than theoretical content seminars as a means of meeting the needs for inclusive education. The findings confirmed that there is a need for training actions addressed to PE teachers to promote equality, tolerance and inclusion for all students, as participants felt that they lacked comprehensive knowledge about such practices.

Another critical barrier is the limited institutional support provided to PE teachers by the broader educational system. Schools and educational authorities often fail to offer the necessary resources, structured programs, or policy frameworks that would enable the effective implementation of inclusive pedagogical strategies. As a result, teachers are frequently left to navigate these challenges independently, without adequate guidance or tools. The role of PE coordinators is characterised by most participants as "absent". This lack of systemic backing can lead to fragmented and inconsistent practices that fall short of fostering a truly inclusive environment.

In light of these challenges, PE teachers believe that addressing intolerance and discrimination in PE requires a comprehensive and sustained approach that includes responding to the above-mentioned barriers. Targeted and systematic teacher education, institutional commitment, and policy-level interventions designed to support PE teachers and promote equity and inclusion in the school context should be among the top priorities.

Research limitations

A limitation of the paper relates to the representativeness of the PE teachers engaged in our research activities, who may not reflect the broader population of PE teachers, but rather those mostly interested on issues of social inclusion and familiarity with online completion of questionnaires. As a result, findings may be influenced by a degree of self-selection bias, potentially limiting the generalisability of the results to the wider PE teachers' population.

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