

PLAYING FOR CHANGE: EXPLORING INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION IN YOUTH COMMUNITIES THROUGH PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

Sports play a pivotal role in adolescent development, offering opportunities for physical, social, and emotional growth. However, participation in sports is shaped by broader social structures, reflecting patterns of inclusion and exclusion that extend beyond the playing field. This study, conducted within the framework of the DIALECT3 project¹, titled “*ADdressIng intersectionAL stEreotypes*,

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1. The project aims to prevent and combat intolerance and discrimination in lower secondary schools through physical education, with a particular focus on integrating the football3 methodology developed under the DIALECT1 project. Using an intersectional approach, the project seeks to develop an action plan that empowers youth in marginalized communities through football, fostering resilience against racism and xenophobia.

building sChool communities of Tolerance through physical education", examines how gender and migrant background influence adolescents' engagement in school and extracurricular sports. Importantly, adolescents' identities were approached through an intersectional lens, acknowledging that they interact in complex ways rather than functioning as independent variables.

Sports: a social exercise for inclusion

Although commonly understood solely as a means of entertainment and physical activity, sports form a significant social, economic, and cultural phenomenon, influencing and influenced by societal structures and values. They hold a unique role in young people's lives globally (both children and adolescents), taking into consideration that nearly all school-aged pupils follow a physical education curriculum, through their mandatory education (DfEE, 2000). Nevertheless, despite the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans' (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024) recommendation of 1 hour of physical activity every day for children and youth ages 6 - 17, only 20% to 28% of youth meet this suggestion, while 66% participate in sports 4 times per week. As for Europe, evidence from the Eurobarometer study (European Commission, 2022) regarding sport and physical activity in the general population, underscores that only 6% of Europeans exercise on a weekly basis. In Greece, the percentage score is 4%. Meanwhile, 45% of Europeans and 68% of Greek people never exercise or play sports (European Commission, 2022). Simultaneously, European and Greek students distance themselves from physical activities and sports with 30% and 39%, respectively, being inactive (European Commission, 2022). The above introduces alarming questions as to the quantity and quality of physical activity, both in children and the general population.

In particular, the issue of insufficient physical activity participation among youth that was first stated almost 20 years ago (Health Education Authority, 1998; Department of Health, 1999) is still being observed to this day (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024), and exacerbated issues of gender and ethnicity in sports (YRBSS, 2023).

There is a noticeable gender gap in youth physical activity levels, with males consistently being more likely to be involved in all sports than females. Physical activity levels vary by gender, with 23% of males and 17% of females aged 6-17 within the U.S.A. meeting the recommended guidelines for 1 hour of daily activity (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024). Likewise, among high school students, 32% of males and 17% of females meet these standards (YRBSS 2023). In Europe and Greece, the rate of those who do not exercise sports varies, depending on gender and age, with 27% of European males 15-24 years old and 29% of Greeks being inactive (European Commission, 2022). At the same time, 42% of European females, and 66% of Greek women in the same age group, are inactive in physical activity. Past research evidence from Greece indicates that boys favor team sports while girls prefer individual activities or certain team sports (Kelperis et al., 1985). Additionally, the variable of gender influences the viewing of sports, with boys engaging more frequently (Kelperis et al., 1985). Illustratively, in football matches, most viewers were men under 35 years old, while women attended to accompany their male counterparts (Konstantopoulou, 2010). Historically, women were excluded from sports due to societal norms. In Ancient Greece, sports were a male-dominated space, linked to war preparation, (Konstantopoulou, 2010). In the 19th century, concerns over femininity further discouraged female participation (Hult, 1994). Women were excluded from the Olympic marathon until 1984 (Mertens, 2024) and banned from baseball until 1952, as it was viewed as “too strenuous” for them (Mannion, 2016).

Despite the societal changes and institutional efforts for women’s inclusion in sports, disparities remain. Women’s sports have received alarmingly low media coverage in the past (Rowe and Silva, 2023) reinforcing perceptions of lesser significance. Recent findings demonstrate a limited increase in women’s visibility in sports, rising to only 4% of ESPN’s total sports coverage (Yingnan and Gualiang, 2023). Additionally, when covered, the reporting tends to be briefer and less detailed than that of men’s sports. A global study analyzing sports news in newspapers from more than 20 countries found that just 11% of the coverage is focused on women’s sports (Yingnan and

Guoliang, 2023). Meanwhile, the gained visibility of female athletes in sports is mainly emphasized in their appearance or personal life, rather than their performance (Yingnan and Gualiang, 2023), which further discouraged their participation (Schmalz, 2006).

Ethnic minorities also face barriers, with lower participation rates due to cultural factors, discrimination, and lack of role models (Rowe and Chapman, 2000; SportScotland, 2001). Specifically, studies from the U.S.A. show that among children and youth, 23% of non-Hispanic White individuals engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily. In comparison, participation rates are lower for Black and Hispanic youth at 17% and Asian youth at 14% (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024). Similarly, only 16% of disabled youth engage in extracurricular sports, versus 45% of their non-disabled peers (Finch et al., 2001), hindered by self-consciousness, low confidence, and negative school experiences (EFDS, 2000). In the Eurobarometer's question regarding barriers to sports participation, the third most common response between Europeans and Greek people was the existence of a disability or illness (European Commission, 2022). The most common factor (41% for Europeans and 46% for Greeks) was the lack of free time, while the lack of interest and the expensive sports fees were also raised as issues that distance people from physical activity.

However, as societies become increasingly diverse due to various socio-economic, demographic, and cultural factors, a new reality is reflected in classrooms where students from different ethnic backgrounds engage in education. Diversity affects both tangible and intangible attributes, such as behaviors and perceptions, shaping identity groups based on perceived differences. Understanding the fluidity that surrounds children's identities supports more inclusive education. While diversity was once seen solely as a challenge, nowadays, global efforts are being made to value it as a strength in schools and society (Brussino, 2021). Efforts for inclusion and participation for migrants and refugees can be located all around the E.U. through various projects, such as the "Level Playing Field" and "Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe (SIVSCE)". These projects focus on enhancing the participation and inclusion of marginalized groups, including refugees and migrants,

through sports. Initiatives as such, aim to create equal opportunities, promote social integration, and address barriers that refugees and other disadvantaged groups face in accessing sports (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2016).

While Inclusive Physical Education (PE) is a continuously evolving research field, studies on student engagement in learning and participation within this context remain limited (Bertills et al., 2018b). A study using time sampling found engagement highest in lessons with skilled teachers employing structured educational formats and strong teacher-student communication (Bertills et al., 2018b). Close communication with teachers fosters inclusive learning, benefiting students with disabilities and lower academic performance. However, access alone does not ensure inclusion. Individualized support and adaptive teaching strategies are essential (Myklebust, 2006). Autonomy-supportive environments enhance motivation and learning (Furrer and Skinner, 2003; Reyes et al., 2012), yet non-inclusive methods undermine disabled students' identities (Loja et al., 2013; Giese and Ruin, 2018). Adapted strategies, such as modified sports, improve participation and outcomes (Tant and Watelain, 2016; Bertills, Granlund and Augustine, 2019).

Ultimately, sports can foster personal growth and social inclusion, but access, quality instruction, and inclusive policies are crucial (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002; Long et al., 2002). Addressing gender and race disparities, socio-economic barriers, disability inclusion, and structural inequalities is key to ensuring sports that promote development rather than reinforcing divides.

Methodology

Aim

As part of this initiative, researchers from the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE) conducted a needs analysis involving multiple stakeholders to assess the challenges and requirements for effectively integrating anti-discrimination strategies in Greek lower secondary schools through physical education. This needs

analysis aimed to identify key areas where intervention is necessary to promote inclusivity and combat discrimination within school settings. The project was funded by the European Union's Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values Programme (CERV) and implemented in Greece by ActionAid Hellas (AAH), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), and the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE).

Research objectives

Within this broader framework, we conducted a needs analysis with adolescents with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds aged 12-15, which sought to achieve several key objectives. First, it aimed to identify the existing values, framework, beliefs, and attitudes of both migrant and non-migrant adolescents, with a particular focus on their level of intolerant beliefs and how these are expressed within the school context, especially in physical education and sports. Second, for adolescents from migrant backgrounds, the research examined their experiences with discrimination in the school environment, including the challenges they face regarding racist incidents and the nature of their relationships with non-migrant peers and educators. Third, for non-migrant adolescents, the study explored whether and how they contribute to or challenge the persistence of stereotypes and discrimination in sports and school settings, offering insights into the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within these environments. Together, these objectives aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing tolerance and discrimination among adolescents in Greek lower secondary schools.

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing structured interviews to explore participants' perspectives on sports, socialization, discrimination, and inclusivity, allowing for an in-depth exploration of adolescents' lived experiences, values, beliefs, and attitudes. The research design was developed by the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE) under the scientific supervision of Joanna Tsiganou and Natalia Spyropoulou. Building on the experience and insights gained

from the DIALECT1 and DIALECT2 projects, which also involved conducting interviews with students, the methodology incorporated child-friendly research methods, prioritizing participant comfort, ethical considerations, and engagement strategies tailored for adolescents.

Before conducting the interviews, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken by EKKE researchers to examine the correlation between physical education and the formation of stereotypes related to ethnicity, cultural diversity, and gender roles. This literature review informed the design of the interview guides and the selection of key areas of investigation. Two distinct interview guides were developed to align with the study's objectives, differentiating between migrant and non-migrant adolescents. The research also involved selecting three geographical areas of intervention, including both urban and rural settings. These areas were chosen based on specific socio-demographic characteristics, such as high poverty and unemployment rates, weak social networks, limited opportunities, increased support for political extremist parties, and incidents of racism and intolerance. This selection ensured a diverse range of socio-demographic backgrounds among participants.

Participant selection and sampling

A total of 24 adolescents participated in the study, consisting of 12 participants of Greek origin and 12 participants with a migrant background. The sample included 15 boys and 9 girls, ensuring representation of different perspectives based on gender, ethnicity, and social context.

Participants with non-migrant backgrounds

The 12 participants of Greek origin were between 12 and 15 years old, with an equal split of 6 girls and 6 boys. Four participants lived in the center of Athens, two in Chalandri—a middle to upper-class suburb—one in Neos Kosmos, and five in working-class neighborhoods of Attica, such as Kamatero, Peristeri, and Nikaia

in Piraeus. Another participant resided in the center of Corfu. All students lived with their families, except one who came from a single-parent household. Most parents were employed in various professions, ranging from manual labor to scientific fields, including roles such as administrative officer, university professor, and director of a prison school. One father owned a locksmith shop, where the mother also worked, as mentioned by the interviewee. Only two mothers were unemployed.

Participants with migrant backgrounds

The 12 participants with migrant backgrounds were aged 12 to 16, with most living in Athens. Their fathers primarily worked in manual labor, while their mothers were largely unemployed. The group included children of Egyptian, Albanian, Congolese, Pakistani, and Armenian origin. Most of these participants had a social life involving both migrant and non-migrant friends from school, neighborhoods, and sports activities.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with priority given to adolescents actively involved in physical education and extracurricular sports activities. Many of the participants from migrant backgrounds were beneficiaries of ActionAid Hellas and had previous exposure to the DIALECT1 methodology, making them well-positioned to provide insights into the role of football and sports in social inclusion. The geographical distribution of participants was carefully structured to include both urban and rural areas, ensuring a mix of different social and economic backgrounds. The selected locations included neighborhoods of Athens, Thessaloniki, and Corfu, incorporating areas known for their socio-economic challenges and diverse student populations.

Data collection

Interview process

The structured interviews were conducted in May 2023 and lasted between 20-30 minutes. They were carried out in ActionAid's Community Center in Kolonos (Athens), individual settings

convenient for participants in Athens and Thessaloniki, and one online interview with a participant from Corfu. The interviews were conducted in Greek and followed a structured format based on predefined research questions. Visual stimuli were integrated into the interview process to enhance engagement and ensure clarity in responses. Participants were presented with images depicting sports activities and social interactions, helping them articulate their perspectives on abstract concepts such as fairness, inclusivity, and discrimination. This approach, in line with child-friendly research methods, facilitated a more natural and open discussion.²

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the structured templates developed by the scientific supervisors of EKKE. The analysis aimed to identify recurring themes and patterns in participants' responses, particularly concerning their values, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences with sports, socialization, and inclusivity. The first stage of the analysis involved coding the interview transcripts using a combination of inductive and deductive techniques. Initial codes were developed based on the literature review, research questions, and interview guide, while additional codes emerged from the participants' narratives. The second stage involved theme development, where coded data were categorized into broader themes, including "sports and physical activities in school and after school", "beliefs about sports", "values in sports and general attitudes", and "discriminatory behaviors in sports and school". The analysis was conducted manually by the research team, ensuring consistency in interpretation.

2. Regarding the ethical considerations of the study, ethical approval for the research was obtained by the European Commission, the Ethics Committee of EKKE, and the DIALECT3 Project Steering Committee. Informed consent was obtained from both participants and their legal guardians through an *informed consent form*, ensuring that participants were fully aware of the study's objectives and their rights. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, with all participant data anonymized to protect identities. Audio recordings of interviews were only made with participants' consent, and all data was securely stored by the research team at EKKE.

Results

Sports participation and preferences

Both groups (migrant and non-migrant adolescents) described active social lives, forming friendships through school, neighborhoods, and extracurricular activities. The role of sports in socialization was evident, as many participants mentioned that sports provided them with opportunities to meet new people, strengthen friendships, and feel part of a team. Specifically, participants from both groups engaged in physical education and extracurricular sports, with football, volleyball, and basketball emerging as the most popular.

In physical education classes, students reported that physical education teachers offered both mandatory and optional “free” sports activities, which were also affected by the weather conditions, with the latter being the most popular suggestion. While most students enjoyed participating in physical education classes, some expressed neutral to negative feelings about physical education for various reasons, including lack of equipment, exclusion by peers, lack of motivation, or disappointment with their physical education teachers. Extracurricular sports were highly valued by both migrant and non-migrant students, with many participating in local teams and clubs, athletic tournaments, or informal play in public spaces in neighborhoods, such as parks and community courts.

A key difference between the two groups was the long-term value placed on sports. Several migrant adolescents, especially boys, expressed a strong desire to pursue professional athletic careers, reflecting the role of sports not only as recreation but as a potential pathway to professional career and social mobility. In contrast, most non-migrant adolescents, while valuing sports and engaging in extracurricular sports, prioritized school performance over athletic excellence, viewing sports primarily as a hobby rather than a career option. This difference may reflect the broader socio-economic realities shaping each group’s opportunities and aspirations.

Discrimination and inclusion in sports

While most participants supported the principle of equality in sports, emphasizing mutual respect, their experiences suggested that inclusion was not always fully embedded in their everyday lives. Migrant students generally felt integrated into school and community sports, with most stating that they had not personally faced discrimination in sports settings. However, Roma students were sometimes perceived differently, with some participants of both migrant and non-migrant backgrounds expressing concerns or being reluctant to engage with them in sports. This suggests that while multicultural environments foster inclusivity, certain ethnic biases and deep-seated stereotypes persist.

Non-migrant students generally expressed acceptance toward migrant peers in sports and vice-versa, though some non-migrant adolescents acknowledged that casual jokes about ethnicity were common. While these remarks were often dismissed as harmless teasing, they could still contribute to subtle forms of discrimination. A few participants noted that sports could sometimes reinforce existing social divisions, as teams were often formed based on friendship groups rather than skill or diversity. Notably, participants reported that schools did not actively encourage deeper relationships through sports, and teachers often did not engage with students in this context. Students had the autonomy to choose sports and form teams, usually based on gender and existing friendships.

Participants rarely discussed disability inclusion during the interviews, highlighting a lack of awareness about how to integrate students with disabilities into sports. Schools did not appear to have systematic initiatives to promote inclusive physical activities for students with disabilities.

Remarkably, gender norms played a crucial role in shaping adolescents' sports participation patterns, interactions, and perceptions of ability. Boys were more likely to dominate and opt for traditionally male sports such as football and basketball, while girls were often encouraged, both socially and structurally, to engage in volleyball or individual activities such as rhythmic gymnastics. However, regardless of gender, participants reported that the choice of sport, especially as an extracurricular activity, often depended on

other factors like the proximity of the facilities, convenient practice schedules, or influence from relatives.

Several female participants expressed frustration over being excluded or underestimated in male-dominated sports. Indicatively, a non-migrant girl who played football recounted how she was initially discouraged from joining boys' teams, but later became the first girl to integrate into football groups at school, paving the way for others. However, she described that direct exclusion remains common, as boys frequently refused to select girls for teams or reacted negatively to female participation. Additionally, one migrant girl recalled that when she attempted to play football, she was maltreated by her male peers, and only after a teacher intervened to encourage her participation did attitudes begin to change.

Male perspectives on gender inclusion varied. Some boys acknowledged that girls could be skilled athletes, yet others upheld stereotypical assumptions about male physical superiority. One non-migrant boy remarked, "Boys are stronger, run better, they can lift more weight and have more stamina", reinforcing the assumption that male athleticism is inherently superior. Another participant justified the exclusion of girls in football by stating, "It is unfair for both girls and boys to play football, as girls will lose the game". These attitudes reflect the deep-rooted nature of gendered divisions in sports and highlight the need for more proactive interventions to foster gender inclusivity.

Sportsmanship, conflicts, and hooliganism in sports

Both migrant and non-migrant students recognized sports as an important tool for personal development, socialization, and emotional well-being. Most participants valued the joy of the game over winning, emphasizing teamwork, fair play, and companionship as core values. One participant highlighted how sports helped her develop friendships across different regions and countries through tournaments, while another noted that playing with friends made the experience more meaningful than just competition. However, some students, particularly those in competitive sports, viewed winning and personal improvement as equally important.

Participants generally believed that sports could increase self-confidence and emotional well-being, though some noted that negative experiences, such as exclusion or criticism, could discourage participation. While sports were widely regarded as a positive force, some students expressed concerns about competitiveness leading to exclusion or aggression and reported that conflicts during sports were not uncommon. Boys, in particular, noted that competitive games could lead to tensions and verbal disputes, often as a result of frustration over losing or perceived unfairness in the game. Participants described how stronger players often dominated games, which could either motivate or discourage less skilled teammates. A few participants mentioned that aggressive behavior sometimes occurred, but it was usually temporary and resolved after the game ended.

Teachers' responses to sports-related conflicts varied. Some students reported that teachers intervened to separate fighting students, but did not address the root causes of disputes, leaving tensions unresolved, while others described teachers as indifferent to tensions within teams. This lack of proactive engagement left students to navigate conflicts on their own, reinforcing existing power imbalances within sports environments, as well as a lack of accountability in managing aggressive behavior.

Despite the above and although most boys reported being fans of specific sports teams, both migrant and non-migrant students universally condemned hooliganism, recognizing it as a destructive force in sports culture. However, discussions on sports-related discrimination and violence were rare in schools. The murder of Alkis Kampanos, a 19-year-old Greek student who was killed in 2022 in an attack resulting from football hooliganism, was one of the few instances that sparked wider discussions on the dangers of fanaticism and aggression in sports. Beyond such isolated instances, schools did not systematically integrate discussions on discrimination, inclusivity, or fair play into their curricula, demonstrating that schools tend to address these issues reactively rather than proactively.

Conclusions

The findings from both groups highlight patterns and variations in adolescent experiences and perceptions of sports participation in school. Across both groups, participants generally recognized the social and emotional benefits of sports, emphasizing team bonding, cooperation, and the joy of participation over competition. However, both groups of adolescents raised concerns about gender-based exclusion and stereotypes. Notably, adolescents from migrant backgrounds seldom reported experiencing discrimination based on their origin. However, challenges were observed in interactions with Roma children, while discrimination based on disability was also noted, though primarily as an issue witnessed rather than personally experienced. These findings reflect broader societal inequalities in sports participation. Although restricted, findings regarding gender segregation and bias in sports were evident in both groups, with girls in both cohorts expressing frustration over being underestimated or excluded from male-dominated sports like football and basketball. The fact that some teachers actively intervened to counter discrimination among migrant students suggests a role for institutional support, but the lack of systematic discussions on hate speech and inclusion highlights gaps in school-based efforts to foster equality in sports. Crucially, both groups identified a lack of proactive engagement from teachers and schools in fostering inclusive sports environments, despite recognizing sports as a vehicle for socialization, respect, and solidarity.

Overall, despite the globally low participation and engagement rates of adolescents in sports, the qualitative approach employed in this project revealed that participants exhibited a positive outlook on sports, reflecting an encouraging attitude toward physical activity, even in the face of existing barriers. Notably, no extremist views or strongly exclusionary ideologies were detected. This underscores the potential for developing more inclusive sports settings, provided that schools take a proactive role in addressing inequalities and facilitating discussions on discrimination and extremism in sports. These findings reinforce the argument that structured, equity-driven physical education programs can serve as crucial spaces for promoting social cohesion and challenging exclusionary practices in youth sports.

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