

Inclusive Classes in Physical Education: Teachers' Difficulties

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Abstract

The successful inclusion of students with special needs in physical education classes requires much planning and preparation. Lack of preparation of physical education teachers working in inclusive settings in Brazil has demonstrated the need for specialized training in strategies for implementing inclusion. The goal of this study was to identify, through self-reporting, common difficulties physical education teachers experienced while teaching children with special needs in inclusive environments. Two focus groups of physical education teachers who taught children with special needs were interviewed to provide data. Focus groups met twice for an average of two hours each meeting. An interview guide was employed to encourage discussion and idea sharing. Verbal interactions were transcribed and subjected to content analysis. Data analysis identified seven subthemes related to difficulties commonly experienced by the teachers working in inclusive environments: 1) access to diagnoses; 2) physical education syllabus; 3) inclusion and physical education; 4) architectural and administrative barriers; 5) family collaboration; 6) relationships with other professionals; 7) teacher training. Identifying these subthemes of commonly shared difficulties relating to successful inclusion may help guide the development of a training program for including students with special needs in physical education classes.

Keywords: physical education teachers, inclusion, special education

INCLUSIVE CLASSES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION: TEACHERS' DIFFICULTIES

Education changes experienced during this decade have increased the complexity of and added challenges to the educational system. Schools practicing inclusion often face many issues, and must make controversial decisions even before to include students with special needs. In many cases controversies regarding inclusion must be resolved before the students with special needs experience day one in school. Although, most inclusive schools have sought appropriate responses to inclusion issues and have increased the quality of their inclusion programs. However, it remains that many schools introduce students with special needs without first adopting a flexible and heterogeneous teaching technique (Goès & Laplane, 2004).

Greguol, Gobbi, and Carraro (2013) found that the gradual process of including increasing numbers of students with special needs in Brazilian schools reflects positively on efforts to increase inclusion. However, they noted that in general, there still exists a lack of space, equipment, appropriate information, and positive teaching experiences to offer students with special needs. There is the impression that inclusion in Brazilian schools is happening because of the increasing numbers of students admitted to programs. Yet the reality is that inclusion is far from happening (Silva, Gonçalves, & Alvarenga, 2012). As Brazilian education professionals seek ways to make inclusion viable, such as increasing teacher trainings, physical educators cannot remain indifferent to the movement toward Inclusive Education, especially when inclusion is part of the curriculum offered by their schools.

Darido (1996) argued that physical education traditional curricula in Brazil focused on the appreciation of sport rather than other educational practices and the role of the physical educator became similar to that of a coach. However, adding concepts to the new curriculum from new disciplines such as exercise physiology, motor learning, and sociology does not appear to effectively change pedagogical practice, as it shows that the teachers cannot transfer the knowledge acquired from such disciplines within pedagogical practice, for instance the same thing can be happening with the adapted physical education discipline¹. In this context, how is the issue of inclusion in physical education addressed in Brazilian undergraduate training?

Undergraduate students need opportunities to work with students with special needs to understand inclusion issues and experience the realities of including special needs students in physical education classes. When searching the literature for information that contextualizes undergraduate training of physical educators to work with students with special needs (Fiorini, 2011; Mauerberg-deCastro, et. al, 2013; Silva & Araújo, 2005; Toloi, 2015;), it emerged that one of the most important considerations is the relationship between theory and practice during initial teachers training.

Sato, Cardoso, and Tolocka (2002) state that physical education is very important to the process of inclusion of students with special needs. They also noted that teacher training must be renovated and curricular adaptations made to better meet the requirements of schools practicing inclusion. Ribeiro and Araujo (2004) commented on the importance of teachers in training to work with special needs students in an inclusive environment to build their practical knowledge and shape perspectives. Sherrill (2003) states that physical educators are deeply influenced by their beliefs regarding disabilities and individual differences. Giving teachers the opportunity to work with students with special needs before teaching in inclusive environments is a powerful pedagogical model.

Carmo (2001), researching physical educators in inclusive environments, noted that in their classes they preferred to improvise their actions rather than plan adapted activities or use assistive technology to meet the needs of each student. Teachers in mainstream schools with lack of professional training and no understanding of resources available to help them to teach in a inclusive setting, can also develop insecurities when faced the increasing numbers of students with special needs at regular schools. Thus, in the area of physical education, it is important to provide effective practice experience with students with special needs before working in an inclusive

environment. This familiarity allows them to acquire a deeper knowledge of how to teach, manage, and meet the physical education needs of a special population (Mauerberg-deCastro, et. al, 2013; Toloi, 2015). Thus, it was important to know and learn about the experiences of physical education teachers in inclusive environments, identify common difficulties, and use this information as a guide for future study.

METHOD

Data collection

The study was based on the collaborative and reflective research method (Jesus, 2010; Mendes & Toyoda, 2008; Pimenta, 2005) and utilized focus groups (FG) for data collection. The choice for this method is justified once focus group is indicated to carry out assessments such as difficulties in addressing students with disabilities (Gatti, 2005). Morgan and Krueger (1993) noted the FG aims to provide an exchange of experiences and information in a way that would be very difficult to collect through other methods. At this study participants collaboratively and reflectively shared their experiences regarding inclusion of students with special needs in physical education classes.

Prior to data collection, an interview script was developed. As proposed by Manzini (2003; 2014) the script had several functions. It guided the interviewer in collecting information to support the research objective, and it also standardized the language used during questioning. Research suggests that judges check the language used in the instrument (Manzini, 1990, 1991, 2002; Rea, & Parker, 2000). A script was produced to be used in the FG and went through two revisions before judges approved the final version. A pilot interview was conducted to verify the efficacy and utility of the script instrument.

Participants

All fifteen physical education teachers working in inclusive settings at the school system in Bauru City, São Paulo, Brazil, in 2012 were invited to participate in this study. The criteria for participation in the study were pre-established: 1) have a degree in physical education; 2) have worked in an inclusive setting more than one year; 3) not have been a substitute teacher; 4) accept voluntary participation in the study.

Ten teachers met the criteria and volunteered to participate in the study. Dates and times to meet in focus groups were scheduled to accommodate teacher preferences and availabilities. Two focus groups were formed. The first focus group (FG1) had six participants and the second focus group (FG2) had four participants. Gatti (2005) recommends the ideal composition of a FG should not be less than four and not exceed ten members. Larger

¹ The Adapted Physical Education is a mandatory discipline offered in undergraduate Physical Education Courses in Brazil.

groups might limit the participation of all and could reduce the opportunities for interaction and information exchange. All participants signed a consent form approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee - UNESP, Marília, Brazil and a Statement of Informed Consent, which included permission to collect data.

Procedure

A Sony digital audio recorder was used to record the FG meetings and each meeting had one moderator/researcher to conduct and facilitate the interviews and two writer/research assistants; one assistant helped writing up the group interactions and the second assistant helped to note the order of the speakers' comments. These same procedures were carefully reproduced for each FG meeting. As suggested by Gatti (2005), after the conclusion of each FG, all information recorded was checked and confirmed by writers/students and moderator/researcher. A total of four FG meetings were conducted, two meetings per group. Meeting durations were between 1 hour and 30 minutes to 2 hours. The conversations provided throughout all four meetings were fully transcribed and underwent content analysis (Bardin, 2011).

According to Queiroz (1983), the content analysis of the transcription is done as a second copy of the original speech. This duplicate transcript contains the identical sequence and components as in the original. From this duplicate transcript, the researcher can more easily manipulate and interpret the data contained in the statements. This technique is the process of organizing data into categories and this categorization is a crucial and mandatory step when performing content analysis. To Manzini (1990, 1991) the analysis begins when the researcher separates the lines in parts, and captures information contained in these parts, turning on data. After the data was analyzed from all FG, the researcher identified four major themes: 1) concepts related to disability; 2) pedagogical practice; 3) assistive technology; 4) difficulties. Although four themes were identified, the objective of this paper is to discuss the theme difficulties.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is important to note that the normal course of classes is disrupted when the teachers face the need to include students with special needs in their physical education classes. This is especially in mainstream schools. After the information was characterized, analyzed and discussed, the data suggested the difficulty theme be organized into seven subthemes, as seen in Table 1.

Theme 1: Access to diagnoses

The first subtheme teachers discussed concerned their lack of access to information regarding students' diagnoses. This concern regarding lack of access to

information about their students with special needs was common across all FG participants, and of any subtopic, caused the most consternation among teachers. Some teachers reported that they believed that other professionals in their school settings felt it was not important to pass the information about students with special needs to physical educators. However, study data indicates that in reality, there is no common protocol in place among schools to facilitate the dissemination of information to physical educators for students with special needs. Some schools have informal lines of communication in place, but other teachers reported they received no information about students with special needs and had difficulties adapting their lessons to accommodate inclusion and provide quality physical education for all students in their classes.

Teachers were aware that information such as diagnoses and medical records for students with special needs existed within their schools, and expressed concerns and frustrations about why student information was not routinely forwarded to physical educators as it was to teachers in other disciplines. They mentioned that weekly staff meetings would provide an opportunity for dissemination of student information, but such information exchange did not routinely happen. Most teachers in this study agreed that they want access to information regarding students with special needs, at least to be more prepared to receive those students.

Theme 2: Physical Education Syllabus

The second subtheme identified discussed the difficulties in determining how to adapt physical activities in relation to the physical education syllabus. Teachers reported that they had many difficulties planning lessons that would include students with special needs. This seemed reasonable because it is hard to adapt activities to meet their needs without access to student information and without understanding children's diagnoses. However, some teachers who learned of children's needs through exposure to them during the semester continued to not plan for their inclusion, possibly as a means of resisting inclusion. Other teachers said that due to their lack of information about the students and not knowing how to properly adapt physical education lessons to accommodate them, they simply cancelled planned activities instead of adapting them. Souza, and Pitch (2013) in their study of the pedagogical reorientation in physical education toward inclusion, confirmed these FG teachers' anguish. This subtheme revealed the significance of physical education teachers not knowing about resources and strategies of using assistive technology. Teachers reported a lack of knowledge about how to prepare their lessons and adapt materials and activities to ensure the participation of students with and without special needs.

Table 1.
Themes and Teachers' Speeches

THEMES	Teachers Speeches
1. Access to diagnoses	Researcher: How do you know that a person with SNE is in the school and will be your student? Rosana: Realizing his attitude within the school, because in no moment they notified us, look there is a student with disability in the school. When he goes to the physical education class for the first time, then a class teacher says: be careful he is special. Mauro: At the same class day, they say, you have a student with disability; they do not specify which disability and say: now is your problem. When you go to the class the teacher says: this class has a student with disability. I ask: which disability? The teacher answers: you will realize.
2. Physical Education syllabuss	Fagner: I had difficulties; actually I think I still have difficulty in planning the lessons. Many activities I have to cancel rather than try, because I know that my student with disability will not be able to participate. In some moments I prioritize the group and in others I prioritize the student with disability. Adriana: The goals are others, and I do not specify in my lesson plan, things are going to change as the class is happening, at the moment. When the situation happens then I think how I do, how I adapt. Lesson plan does not work for me. Mauro: I do have lots of difficulties in some contents. I feel a little lost in some contents.
3. Physical Education and Inclusion	Vitoria: So, there is no way. Adriana: The inclusion is only possible by the presence of this caregiver Fafá: I have a student that has muscular dystrophy. . . , sincerely I have a lot of difficulties, there are times that I think: - I cannot do anything else with her. I think I am depriving the class from doing other activities, because she couldn't do it. Isadora: They want to participate, but I have some difficulty with some students.
4.	
4.1 Architectural Barriers	Isadora: I have a student who has an orthosis on her leg, she uses crutches, is complicated because it has no ramp, to get water is far and have stairs, so if I had a student in the wheelchair, would be impossible. Carlos: where I am has ramp and handrail, but specific bathroom for students with disabilities I do not know, I have to check, but as outbound access from the classroom to go to the gym is fine.
4.2 Administrative Barriers	Fagner: I had the impression that the school considers the student an obstacle, but I also have had impressions on the opposite, perhaps are some moments, which I really do not know. Mauro: Yes, the direction supports the inclusion, supports that a student with disability be part of the school, but just in terms of personal help. They accept without any rejection but also do not support.
5. Family Collaboration	Rosana: Look, I think that, Adriana mentions a factor that I think has been forgotten, the mother, sometimes the mother of a child with disability is the biggest problem within the school. Isadora: She does not accept that the child has a disability. Was already in her third year, and the mother had never done anything. For this mother the girl had no disabilities,.... it's complicated. Mauro: the mother is complicated.
6. Relationship with others professionals	Carlos: We did not stay at the parents meetings, because while the meeting is going on, we are with the students, and in many cases the classroom teachers are somehow our spokesperson Adriana: And including, when occurs a parents meetings and you want to participate, you realize that the class teacher gets kind a bothered that you are disrupting his speech.
7. Teacher training	Fafá: Many special courses that I have been taken, is for all professionals, what I learned was what the other teachers learned. I think we need a specific course for Physical Education. Fabia: we need to have better teacher training

When considering that physical education works mostly with body language and movement skills, differently abled students will stand out among their peers. Keeping different abilities in mind, physical educators must develop strategies to include all participants in activities. Sanches Junior (2009) describes working in a heterogeneous classroom as always demanding because the needs of all students must be accommodated. Morley et al. (2005) indicated that a major concern of physical educators was that including children with special needs in classes would cause harm to their typical peers. Ten years later, this attitude still prevails among physical educators as confirmed in this study. Interestingly, Gasser, Malti, and Buholzer (2013) concluded that children who had contact with students with special needs during school showed more tolerance towards inclusion than peers who had no contact with students with special needs.

The FG data illustrated the difficulties teachers have in adapting physical activities to meet lesson objectives on the physical education syllabus and the needs of all children. Teachers need to demonstrate flexibility when planning lessons. However, being flexible when lesson planning assumes teachers are aware of inclusive strategies, have resources available, and have modified equipment to accommodate all students prior to classes. Teachers in this study revealed they seldom planned for inclusion and rarely modified activities and equipment to promote inclusion. However, despite the concept that planning has to be flexible, it needs to be done, and throughout out the data collected, what it seems is that the activities are happening during the lesson without any criteria or planning.

Another subtle aspect of this study showed that while teachers were having difficulties modifying syllabus to meet the needs of all students, they focused on seeing only the perceived disabilities and deficiencies of the students with special needs. Teachers are well advised to focus on promoting the participation of all students, regardless of abilities, to maximize all children's opportunities for a quality education. Sousa, and Pitch (2013) corroborate and affirm that physical education teachers find it difficult to follow a curriculum for inclusion and have problems recognizing the positive responses of children with special needs, claiming that in inclusion there are few, if any, positive results.

Silva, and Araujo (2005) explain that while it is important to understand the implications of students with disabilities, teachers must not categorize students by their disability. According to Aranha (2003), most of the Brazilian educational system still resists toward the possibility of curricular flexibility, noting that teachers give greater focus on disabilities as individual conditions rather than on the individual's potential. Silva, Gonçalves, and Alvarenga (2012) observed that teachers are educating

students with special needs following the same requirements of the standard curriculum, including structuring education and conducting assessments in traditional ways (Martins, 2001; Abe, & Araujo, 2010), the same as schools without inclusion projects (Kafrouni, & Mags, 2001). It is important to note that in Brazilian schools the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is not commonly used, especially in the course of physical education. This makes constructing an appropriate curriculum for children with special needs difficult.

Theme 3: Physical education and Inclusion

Data from the subtheme of inclusion demonstrated two separate ways of thinking about and acting on inclusion. Some teachers' opinions indicated they were not accepting inclusion. Other teachers were more willing to embrace the concept of inclusion, but acknowledged difficulties implementing the concept. They found modifying lessons difficult, and were fearful of doing something improperly which could be viewed as being prejudicial against students. Sanches Junior (2009) points out that the presence of a student with special needs in a school with typical peers does not mean the student is included in classes. Educational support, teacher training, improved infrastructure and appropriate resources are needed to meet the needs of all students. While teachers are becoming more accepting of the concept of inclusion and recognize inclusion's value, they continue to improvise their teaching practices (Mauerberg-deCastro, Paiva, Figueiredo, Costa, Castro, & Campbell, 2013).

Furthermore, some teachers' comments in this study indicate they believe the only way to achieve lesson objectives for students with special needs is through the presence of their caregivers. As an example, one teacher stated, "Inclusion is only possible by the presence of this caregiver." The question arises then: Is the presence of a caregiver in a physical education class really the only way to ensure inclusion? The researcher believes this is certainly not true! Initiating the process of training teachers to provide inclusive physical education and providing them resources to be successful will go a long way toward changing teachers' attitudes. Brazilian educational trends toward including children with special needs in mainstream schools are no guarantee that those children will be included in class activities. Teachers' attitudes about inclusion must be nudged toward acceptance, "and change attitudes have to do with profound questions of human behavior" (Silva, Araujo, & Duarte, 2004, p. 7). A logical first step is to change the attitudes of professionals working in schools. Working with students with special needs in a school environment is a strong influence on teachers' attitudes (Block, Taliaferro, Harris, & Krause, 2010; Kurniawatia, Minnaert, Mangunsong, & Ahmeda, 2012; Mauerberg-deCastro et. al., 2013). The teachers' comments in this study indicate they have difficulties implementing

the process of inclusion, they also reveal that they know their students with special needs want to participate in activities, however the conception involved in this participation can be questionable.

Literature identifies two distinctly different goals toward the participation in physical education classes of students with special needs and those without such needs. Sousa and Pitch (2003) found that physical education teachers consider acceptance of the student with special needs by classmates to be the primary goal, while the primary goal for typical students is the improvement of motor skills, fitness and performance. Fiorini (2011) confirms that the physical educators see inclusion of students with special needs in the regular school system has a social function. Lamaster et al. (1998) and Moraes (2004) found that the special strength of the inclusion environment is that it favors the integration and socialization of all students, with and without special needs. Some studies show that students with special needs' participation in physical education classes focus on social integration rather than physical education activities. It must be remembered, however, that improving social skills cannot be the only educational goal for students in physical education classes.

Another issue worth consideration is fortifying teachers' undergraduate curricula with course content emphasizing elements of the process of inclusion. It is significant to be considered that the curriculum subjects for undergraduate courses may need to fit the inclusive components in other matters, otherwise will not meet the real aspects of inclusion. These measures need to be addressed in order to ensure and guarantee specific topics involved with an inclusion that is happening currently on the schools.

Theme 4: Architectural and Administrative Barriers

Interesting is that when mention architectural barriers everyone thinks directly into the lack of schools accessibility, which often appears in the discourse of teachers. Nevertheless, the teachers in this study identified architectural barriers they faced which limited their ability to conduct physical education classes, including reforms, material from construction left behind on a playing court, the issue of sharing floor space with other school activities, and dirt floors. When you are considering aspects related to accessibility, cannot imagine that dirt floor can be an issue, but in fact, one teacher reported that the physical education class assigned to an area with a dirt floor makes it impossible for the teacher to meet planning goals and ensure safety during class.

Aranha (2003) refers to accessibility to spaces as one of the first requirements to enable access in the school environment, and advises these spaces be used in a

functional way, whether they are classrooms or activity areas. The physical education classroom is often the same area as the sports court, and should always be in good working condition to meet planning goals and ensure safety during physical education classes. Teachers who reported administrative barriers to inclusion said when school policies were present, they were not efficient, especially with respect to physical education classes.

Sousa (2003) verified that the inclusion of students with special needs in Brazilian schools is viewed as something that is mandated by law, not from an understanding that everyone has the right to attend school and learn. Fiorini (2011) reports that teachers believe that students with special needs are included in mainstream schools only because the law provides them the opportunity to attend, and not because they can succeed there.

Theme 5: Family Collaboration

Teachers in both FG discussed the role of families in the inclusion process. They mentioned lack of information exchange, difficulties with relationships with parents, and few opportunities to meet directly with parents as areas of concern. Teachers also identified as an obstacle parents' refusals to acknowledge their children's disabilities. In the area of Physical Education is even more complicated this situation, because, at certain times, as shown in the earlier subtheme at this study, teachers do not even know the student diagnosis, imagine to hold a conversation with those parents. Thus, how to seek appropriate teaching strategies for students with special needs and to have a conversation with parents about goals, if the physical education teachers not even know who will be your student? These study data showed that FG teachers valued the opinions of students' parents.

Silva, Gonçalves, and Alvarenga (2012) concluded that there is a new social reality in Brazil, bringing students with special needs into school systems. It is very important that the students' families be involved in this process. The parents are primordial and essential part to structure any plan or action when it comes to seeking the involvement and development of students with special needs, but often the school may be making failures with regard to the inclusion of these students, which discourages this relationship. Schools that do not make adequate provisions to successfully include students with special needs, especially in physical education, risk alienating parents and losing a valuable resources to the students' success in an inclusive educational environment.

Theme 6: Relationships with Other Professionals

Some FG teachers reported that their school's structure prevented them from establishing working relationships with other professionals in the school regarding inclusion. Information about students with special needs was not

discussed or disseminated to physical education teachers. Other teachers reported cordial relationships with other school professionals; however the FG data showed a lack of communication and interdisciplinary cooperation as prevalent. Teachers complained about the lack of protocols in their schools to cover the creation and implementation of student IEPs and to set direction for teachers sharing student information. Physical education teachers working throughout the year with students with special needs learn much about the students' development. They could share this important information if they were included in the schools' communication processes.

Correia and Tonini (2012) point out that educational professional must collaborate and share information about the students to best meet the requirements of students with special needs. Schools must learn to value input from physical educators, and to include them with regular education teachers, special education teachers, other educational professionals and parents when communicating about students with special needs. However, as an alert, all the information that needs to be passed in relation to the educational plans of students with or without special needs cannot be linked to the degree of friendship of those professionals.

Theme 7: Teacher Training

Better teacher training could positively impact all of the seven subtheme difficulties identified in this study. Teachers participating in the study reported willingness to receive additional training in the area of inclusion in physical education for students with special needs. The study data obtained from the FG from older teachers who had no training in inclusion (undergraduated training over 20 years ago) and younger teachers who discussed inclusion in their coursework (undergraduated training less than 10 years ago) showed a common interest in receiving more inclusion training. They reported also the gaps in their knowledge and lack of experience working with students with special needs hindered their motivation to work to provide those students with the best possible education. Greguol, Gobbi and Carraro (2013) stress that placing a high value on teacher training is essential, along with providing decent working conditions and fair compensation.

The teachers need to know how to adapt activities, utilize strategies, seek sources for assistive technology, restructure syllabus, employ flexible teaching procedures and most importantly how to organize their time to take advantage of their skills and resources while providing the best physical education possible to students with special needs.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified, organized and categorized the difficulties physical education teachers face while trying to

implement inclusion in the schools of one city in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. Discussion subthemes revealed through this study can be one way to generate solutions to problems and resolve issues common to inclusion in physical education classes. Teachers involved in this study look forward to receiving additional training designed to ameliorate the enumerated difficulties the study identified. This information can potentially serve as a guide for developing teacher training programs. The intent is that the information learned from this research may help guide the development of a training program in inclusive physical education. The training program could address all subthemes identified by these teachers in real situations encountered in inclusive schools, and thereby improving services to physical education students with special needs. Additional research is needed to find achievable approaches to solving all the problems associated with implementing inclusion in physical education curricula throughout Brazil.

Despite the importance of identifying the difficulties physical education teachers face in their pursuit of inclusion, the quality of care these teachers provide to all their students with or without special needs must also be considered. Quality of care will only improve with adequate additional training and the acceptance of differences. Professional attitudes of acceptance and commitment to inclusion may follow spontaneously from the personal, emotional, social, and professional experiences of each teacher. Teachers may realize the value of offering a physical education curriculum with a diversity of activities including dance, sports, games, and gymnastics. Teachers may also come to realize the necessity of adapting teaching strategies and resources to best meet the needs of all students, including students with and without special needs. Teacher training on inclusion may help change the discussion from *difficulties* with inclusion experienced by physical education teachers to *successful actions* of inclusion used by physical education teachers.

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