

PRIMARY SCHOOL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES ON THE VALUE OF INCLUSIVE MOTOR ACTIVITY AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION LESSONS

GLI ATTEGGIAMENTI DEGLI INSEGNANTI DI SCUOLA PRIMARIA IN FORMAZIONE SUL VALORE DELL'ATTIVITA' MOTORIA INCLUSIVA E DELL'EDUCAZIONE FISICA

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Abstract

In recent years, Italian schools have focused increasingly on inclusive physical education. Physical education classes and motor activities in general contributed in fundamental ways to the growth of the child in primary school, not only from the psychological standpoint but also in an educational perspective of development and the acquisition of life skills. Teachers are considered key players in the implementation of inclusive education. This research intends to examine the value that the teachers themselves attribute to motor activity and physical education within the inclusive curriculum, through an exploratory study that uses a mixed qualitative-quantitative method. The sample consisted of 73 future teachers, in training at the University of Rome's "Foro Italico" campus in the academic year 2020-2021. The *Survey of Teacher Attitude Regarding Inclusive Education* (Kern, 2006) was administered to these future teachers, introducing specific questions about motor activity and physical education. The research project subsequently provided for the organization of two focus groups to examine the results of the survey in depth. The results reveal an inclusive attitude on the part of the teachers, noting some problems with regard to motor activities and disability. The results underscore the need of inclusive training in the field of motor activities and education to guarantee every student full right to participation and instruction.

Negli ultimi anni, le scuole italiane hanno mostrato una crescente attenzione nei confronti dell'educazione fisica inclusiva. Le lezioni di educazione fisica e di attività motoria in generale sono una parte fondamentale della crescita del bambino nella scuola primaria, non solo da un punto di vista psicologico ma anche da una prospettiva educativa e di sviluppo di competenze per la vita. Gli insegnanti sono considerati attori chiave nell'implementazione dell'educazione inclusiva. L'obiettivo di questa ricerca è analizzare il valore che gli insegnanti attribuiscono all'attività motoria e all'educazione fisica all'interno del curricolo inclusivo, attraverso uno studio esplorativo che utilizza un metodo misto qualitativo-quantitativo. Il campione è composto da 73 futuri insegnanti in formazione iscritti presso l'Università degli Studi di Roma "Foro Italico" nell'a.a. 2020-21. Il questionario *Survey of Teacher Attitude Regarding Inclusive Education* (Kern, 2006) è stato somministrato a questi futuri insegnanti, introducendo domande specifiche sull'attività motoria e sull'educazione fisica. Il disegno di ricerca ha successivamente previsto l'organizzazione di due focus group per approfondire i risultati del questionario stesso. I risultati mostrano un atteggiamento inclusivo degli insegnanti, rilevando alcune difficoltà verso le attività motorie e la disabilità. I risultati evidenziano il bisogno di una formazione

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inclusiva nel campo delle attività motorie e dell'educazione per garantire a tutti il diritto all'educazione ed alla partecipazione.

Key-words

inclusion, teachers, physical education
inclusione, insegnanti, educazione fisica

Introduction

Research on motor activities and sports and studies concerned with their inclusive educational in the last ten years has yielded a number of highly interesting results (Gomez Paoloma, Ianes, 2014; Magnanini, 2018; Casolo, Mari, Molinari, 2019; Benetton, Visentin, 2021; Magnanini, Morelli, 2021). The significance and value of motor activities and sports from the physical, psychological, and social standpoint have been confirmed by a great many studies (Bailey, 2006, Sport England, 2017), and they acquire an added value of inclusiveness when they are employed as a tool with educational intent in which all the individuals involved can participate. It is only within a solid educational framework that the programming of inclusive motor activities and sports makes it possible to pursue the ultimate aim of education: the growth and development of independence and decisional capacity and orientation of the individual's own life. From this standpoint, sports and physical education are a wonderful opportunity, on condition that their value is recognized and that they become central to the teacher's planning. Teachers are, in fact, the central node in this direction.

It is just their skill, their ability to give meaning to inclusive physical education that enables it to perform a primary role in the process of inclusion and valorization of all the students. Every teacher has to acquire a profound understanding of inclusion, because it is only in this way that the work of the class can be organized so as to support all the students, and not just the student with disabilities. The inclusive process requires a significant change in the teachers, in fact, focusing on the utility of offering a plural space (Gaspari, 2012, p. 21), in which the uniqueness of each individual can thrive.

The inclusive view is characterized by its ability "to conjugate singularities, without rendering them essential. They are often disarming singularities, in relation to the infinite number of other singularities of the whole, where everyone has the right to stand out and be different. And, at the same time, to live, to be, to grow with others; to enrich the common story with their personal story, made of resemblances and distinctions, without feeling separate from their peers, or confused with them, or assimilated to them" (Gardou, 2018, 18). It is in this direction that, to develop activities of physical education in an inclusive direction, we must necessarily start from inclusion and not from the activity in and of itself. If we start from the activity, we would risk reductionism and the creation of individual solutions for specific deficits, while starting from inclusion means, on the contrary, bringing the key elements of the inclusive process into the activity, by viewing it from the outset as intended for everyone. For the teacher, this means having a broadly pluralistic view of the whole, capable of implementing solutions and planning, and open to universality (UDL, Munster, Grenier, Lieberman, 2019).

1. Research Design

Based on the background outlined above, the objective of the study was to investigate the attitudes and values that primary school preservice teachers attribute to motor activities and sports for inclusion. As the primary school has not yet undertaken recruitment for teachers of physical education (confirmed by the Budget Law of 2022 with the introduction of the teaching of motor education in the fifth grade starting in the academic year 2022/2023) this is a valuable area of research, in the attempt to “discover” the sense of inclusive physical education in a sample of preservice teachers, not drawn from a specific curriculum of studies in motor sciences and sports. Studies often focus either on inclusive attitudes among primary school teachers in general (Loreman et al, 2007; Varcoe, Boyle, 2013; Kraska, Boyle, 2014) or on attitudes toward inclusion among teachers of physical education (Shropshire, 1997, Magnanini, 2021).

This study, however, will examine the attitude of preservice teachers in the field of inclusion on the value of motor activities and sports in an inclusive sense. The results of studies carried out at the national and international level show that positive attitudes generate a virtuous process with regard to inclusive practices (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012), while negative ones affect social relations and learning (Darrow, 2009). Numerous studies have reported significant differences with regard to the attitudes of the teachers toward disability and inclusion, depending on specific variables such as age (Forlin, 2011), gender (Aksamit, Morris & Leunberger, 1987) degree of disability (Campbell & Gilmore, 2003; Koutrouba, Vanvakari & Steliou, 2006, Fiorucci, 2016), training (Freitag, 2001), years of experience teaching, role in the class (Canevaro et al., 2011), experiences with contact (Vianello & Moalli, 2001; Zambelli & Bonni, 2004).

The research has exploratory aims and the reasoning applied to the sample was based on the following criteria of selection: a) The preservice teachers did not need to have a specific background in motor activities and sports (no degrees in motor sciences and/or master’s degrees pertaining to the field of inclusive physical education), b) they were taking a course on inclusion (in this specific case they were engaged in a program of specialization for Teaching Support of students with disabilities; c) they had not yet attended the Workshop of Motor Activities that is part of the course of specialization for these support teachers.

The study also plans to consider, highlighting possible differences, any previous experience of the future teachers at school, or acquired during assignments as substitutes.

The Sample in this study consisted of 73 preservice teachers at the University of Rome’s “Foro Italico” campus, enrolled for the academic year 2020-21 in the Specialization Course for Teaching Support. (Primary School).

The central point is the awareness that training in the field of inclusion and disability can be an opportunity for repositioning and constant revision of our own beliefs, and a chance to reflect on all the subjects in an inclusive sense. Fiorucci claims, in fact, that “The training and updating inherent to Special Education is one of the greatest variables that affects didactic effectiveness and the educational relationship” and that “teachers who have taken specific training courses actually appear more willing to try new pathways focused on scholastic inclusion” (Fiorucci, 2019, p. 275). A number of studies, however, warn that while the idea of inclusion is well accepted, in practice there are still a lot of questions, linked to the difficulties surrounding different types of disability (Chichevska-Jovanova, Rashikj Canevska, 2020) and the dangers of a process of stigmatization that reduces the complexity of people “with” disabilities to the diagnosis and certification of their deficit (Fiorucci, 2016).

The intent of this study is therefore to open the way, in this direction, for research to continue to explore the problem, also through empirical study (Sgambelluri, Vinci, 2020), to foster the development of processes of inclusion that are increasingly focused on the global development of the individual and in the construction of receptive contexts in which they can participate.

2. Stages of the research

The research was divided into the following stages, according to a quali-quantitative approach: Early January 2022 – Administration of the *Survey of Teacher Attitude Regarding Inclusive Education* (Kern, 2006), revised to include specific questions about motor activity and physical education. The questionnaire was administered online. The original purpose of the questionnaire was to ascertain the attitude toward inclusion of preservice teachers. A high score on every item suggested positive attitudes toward inclusive education (Kern, 2006, 32). The questionnaire was translated into Italian (according to the TC Guidelines for Translating and Adapting Tests⁴¹) with a multi-phase approach. This approach consisted of the following steps: back-translation, revision by a committee of experts (consisting of 4 university research scholars in the field of special education and 4 primary school teachers) and a pre-test on a small group. After positive outcomes, it was administered to the sample. Administration of the questionnaire, instead of the items inherent to motor activities and sports, serves the purpose of testing the coherence of the questionnaire itself, first on the sample and later on a broader scale. January 17-19, 2022 – Focus Group meetings with 12 teachers (6 per group) who had responded to the call for participants. The group was led through a structured questioning session that included open questions, also with retrospective purposes, following the funneling technique (presentation of topics in order of importance). The purpose of the Focus group was to investigate, more in depth than was possible with the questionnaire, the opinions of the participants with regard to the subject of the research. The focus groups were organized through the TEAMS platform, with the informed consent of the participants and recorded via audio and video.

3. Sample

The sample consisted of 73 preservice teachers (F=71, M=2). Most are between the ages of 36 and 45 (49%), in possession of a 5-year teaching degree (60%) and reside in central Italy (52%). They have taught mainly in primary schools (61%), an average of 6 hours a week. 77% of the sample were engaged in scholastic activities for special needs students. The experience of teaching of the participants was fairly heterogeneous. On average, the participants have taught for 4.55 years (with a standard deviation of 5.14). Specifically, the years of teaching in common positions were 2.08 (with a deviation of 3.43), while the years of special needs teaching were 2.05 (with a standard deviation of 1.88). 15% of the sample report no teaching experience. This factor can be useful to check possible differences or similarities with those who, on the contrary, already have some teaching experience.

| Gender | | Total | % |
|-----------|--------|-------|------|
| | Female | 71 | 97.3 |
| | Male | 2 | 2.7 |
| Age | | | |
| | < 25 | 3 | 4.1 |
| | 25-35 | 11 | 15.1 |
| | 36-45 | 36 | 49.3 |
| | 46-55 | 21 | 28.8 |
| | 55+ | 2 | 2.7 |
| Education | | | |

| | | |
|----------------------------|----|------|
| Three-year degree | 16 | 29.1 |
| Five-year degree | 33 | 60.0 |
| University Master's Degree | 5 | 9.1 |
| PhD in research | 1 | 1.8 |
| Teaching Experience | | |
| Pre-school | 16 | 22.2 |
| Primary | 44 | 61.1 |
| Middle School | 0 | 0.0 |
| High School | 1 | 1.4 |
| No experience | 11 | 15.3 |

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participant demographics.

4. Results

a. Analysis of the questionnaire

The attitudes toward inclusion revealed by the responses to the *Survey of Teacher Attitude Regarding Inclusive Education* indicate, as predicted, a good level of inclusive attitudes among preservice teachers (89%), but pinpoint a number of critical aspects with regard to the type and degree of disability (71%), and to application of inclusive methods in the classroom (52%). These data can be understood considering that the teachers are currently engaged in a training course. The percentage of preservice teachers without experience who worry about the difficulty of management of methods rises to 80% in the sample.

The data were processed through the SPSS program of statistical analysis (version 27), performing a descriptive non parametric analysis (Anova). Specifically, of the items connected to the purposes of this study, the support primary teachers considered motor education very important for the children (98.5%) but did not always feel competent to manage the class in these activities (79% of them felt inadequate or partially inadequate). All the participants felt that motor activities were useful for purposes of inclusion and many of them had already heard mention of inclusive motor activities (63%). However, the majority did not perform any interdisciplinary activity on corporality (54%) and had never performed any extra-scholastic activities with special needs children (73%). They often lack training in this sector: 81% report that they have never taken specific courses. They generally spend fewer than two hours a week in classes on motor activities (57%). On average, they stop at 1.7 hours/week. Their experience in the field is not very extensive. 83% of the teachers do not hold any lessons on motor activities but turn them over to outside experts or other colleagues (the latter may not always be competent in the sector). Many report that the mathematics teacher is usually appointed to handle this. In rare cases, they report that the children in their primary school do not engage in any motor activity or physical education at all. The spaces in which motor activities are usually performed are the school gym (48%), outdoor area (41%) or an adapted classroom (11%). Speaking of the inclusive aspects of motor activity, 95% of the teachers often encounter difficulty when there are students in the class with special needs. In spite of this, 59% of them manage in any case to make some adjustments to allow all the students to benefit from the educational offering. Concluding, all the preservice teachers think that motor activity is very important for children with special needs, and that motor activity is a useful tool of inclusion.

| Item | Average | DS |
|--|---------|------|
| 11. Have you ever attended courses on motor activities? | 1.82 | 0.39 |
| 12. Do you devote at least two hours a week to motor activities? | 1.58 | 0.50 |

| | | |
|--|------|------|
| 15. Do you teach the hours of motor education yourself? | 1.84 | 0.36 |
| 17. Do you feel adequate to teach the hours of motor education yourself? | 2.21 | 0.74 |
| 18. Do you have difficulties when you have children with special needs in your class? | 2.49 | 0.62 |
| 19. Do you use adaptations for children with special needs in your motor education activities? | 1.55 | 0.50 |
| 21. Do you perform interdisciplinary activities on corporality? | 1.60 | 0.49 |
| 22. Do you think motor activity is useful for purposes of inclusion? | 1.02 | 0.16 |
| 23. Have you ever held extra-scholastic activities with special needs children? | 1.75 | 0.43 |
| 24. Have you ever heard of inclusive motor activities? | 1.39 | 0.49 |

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the items on the questionnaire

There are no statistically significant differences between those who have experience teaching and those who do not, as regards the responses to the items on motor activity and physical education.

b. Analysis of the focus group

Using the Focus Group technique (Albanesi, 2014) the data for the participants in the two groups were as follows: 12: 10 F, 2 M; age 6: 36-45; 4: 25-35; 2: 46-55; origin: central Italy, education: three-year degree 6; five-year degree 6: with teaching experience 9, 3 without teaching experience.

The focus group meeting was managed as follows:

Opening questions: introduction of the topic and personal presentation. Specifically, the leader clarified the central theme: motor activities and sports, and inclusion.

The leader then posed a number of transition questions to consider together based on individual experiences, as follows: 1) Based on your experience, do you think motor activities and sports are inclusive? Also, based on your experience, do you remember any activities in which you were able to involve the children in activities of physical education? Where were you unsuccessful?

Key questions: Do you feel prepared to lead activities of inclusive physical education? What are the strong points of these activities for everyone? What aspects do you consider critical?

The final questions concerned important aspects or positions arising from the discussion. The leader highlighted the key elements of the discussion, emphasizing certain key words like “inclusion”, “disability”, “training”. The two focus groups were recorded via audio and video and later transcribed for additional processing, coding, characterization and content analysis.

The data obtained from the focus groups were processed according to the guidelines of content analysis, in the form of hermeneutic analysis, confirming the quantitative analysis data.

Specifically, 3 key words were identified which described the attitudes of the future teachers about inclusive motor activities and physical education through which the analysis is developed, faithfully reporting the content strings deemed most significant contributed by the participants (coded for identification). They were:

| Inclusion | Disability | Training |
|--|--|--|
| Motor activities are inclusive, but to some extent this depends on how they are managed and planned (a1) | Once at school I had a child in a wheelchair and I wasn't able to have him do anything (a3). | I'm not prepared to manage motor activities (a2). I think I need more training in this field; I don't feel competent (a5) |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Through the medium of physical education, everyone can play together (a4) | Serious disability creates a lot of problems for me when it comes to motor activity (b5). | The teacher isn't always able to take charge of physical education; in my class the math teacher always does it because she has taken specific courses (b5). |
| I remember that a colleague participated in a project called "I'm playing too", and that was when I realized that motor activity was good for the inclusion of children (b2) | I've always wondered: if there is a serious disability what can I do? b1 | For me, play and movement are important, but what I can offer doesn't really make a difference, because I don't have any specific training (a1) |
| Movement helps people be together and being together fosters inclusion (b5) | A tetraplegic child once asked to be allowed to participate in the activity, and I didn't know what game to suggest (a2) | Maybe a degree in motor sciences is necessary, someone who has studies, who has training, but maybe it's also important to understand what is meant by inclusion. The two things have to go together" (b6). |
| Activities are only inclusive if the teacher knows how to adapt them, otherwise it turns into individual activity (a3) | I've found a lot of books with games for children with disabilities, but I find it very hard with sensory deficits (b4) | |
| Physical education involves everyone and helps them all to participate. It's important to be careful to include everyone (b5) | Severe disability is a huge problem for me (a5) | |
| | I'm a little worried if I have to include a tetraplegic in an activity (a3) | |
| | It depends on the disability, they can't all do the same things (b5) | |
| | I don't think children with severe disabilities can participate in motor education at the same conditions as the others, or at least I don't know how they can (a4) | |

Table 3. Results of focus groups.

The content analysis highlights the difficulties reported by the participants interviewed, related to the type and degree of disability. Many of the participants are discouraged by severe disabilities. Most of the sample believe that motor activities and physical education have inclusive value, if well organized and well planned by the teacher. In this direction, indeed, participant (b2) stresses, "every educational action depends on the intentional orientation given to it by the teacher. So even motor activity can have inclusive aims, but it must be well organized". Everyone reports feeling poorly prepared and lacking specific training or experience alongside an expert teacher. One of those interviewed (b3) actually said: "I've never seen anyone try to teach math without training. If a teacher needs training for that, the same should apply to motor activities. What's the sense of having me do it when I can't even bend a leg?". These preservice teachers, despite their many questions, believe in the value of motor activities and sports for inclusion. One of those interviewed, in fact, said "I think physical

education is important for health, wellbeing and certainly for inclusion (b3), and also “Inclusion needs movement (b4).

The reiteration of the terms, processed through the program Voyant Tools confirms the key words mentioned above.



Figure 4. Data processed with the Content Analysis software Voyant Tools.

5. Discussion

The results suggest that preservice support teachers are very much aware of the need and importance of inclusive physical education for the disabled children in the class, but encounter problems with severe disabilities and feel they are given insufficient preparation on the subject of the body and of movement, exactly as reported in many international studies (Mangope, 2013, Wihelmsen, 2017).

Implementing inclusive processes in physical education and motor activity in the class has many positive aspects. Students with disabilities (1) can be included successfully when they receive adequate support, (2) it has no negative effects on their classmates without disabilities, and (3) they tend, indeed, to have moderately positive attitudes toward their disabled classmates (Block, 1995). Inclusion in physical education has educational effects on all the students involved, even if some studies have found that students with disabilities engaged less strenuously in motor activities than their classmates without disabilities (Qi, 2012), indicating training that does not place inclusion at the center of the educational vocation, but focuses more on the motor activity. In line with the international literature on the subject, analysis of the data indicates (2.21) that preservice teachers feel inadequate and insufficiently prepared, to the point that during the time devoted to motor activities and physical education, they find inclusion a difficult goal to pursue (Reeka, 2018). Preservice teachers find it difficult for children with disabilities. In the Focus group, they pointed out that this depends on the type of activity and the support they receive with the presence of a teacher's-aid, in line with the findings of Morley (2005).

Preservice teachers who already have classroom experience report that they are often expected to manage the hours of motor activity (1.84), generally making adaptations to the activities (1.55), guided above all by good sense and personal study, as was clear from the responses to the Focus Groups (a3, b5). The preservice teachers who said they had taken courses in motor activities (1.82) were more knowledgeable and able to enhance their work in the field with different styles (Combs, 2010); they were also more attentive to processes of inclusion (Justin 2015) and less fearful toward the disabled children (Pederson, 2014). In the Focus Groups led for this study, the data was emblematic: those who had more information and knowledge felt less frightened. Participant a4, when interviewed, for example, declared, “after attending a course offered by the Italian Paralympic Committee, I was able to understand that preparing activities for the whole class does not depend on the disability, but on the ability to plan inclusively”. Participant b1 added, “to work in the inclusive motor activities field, we need teaching skills but also knowledge of the activities themselves”. In this direction, Block claims

that there is a strong correlation between favorable attitudes toward disabled students and attendance of courses of special education and teaching (Block, 2015). Blinde also stresses that often the teachers feel inadequate in the hours of physical education, and do not find the support and resources they need to include students with severe disabilities, because of the lack of adequate training (Blinde, 2015). Tagliaferro (2015) points out that specific courses on inclusive motor activities have positive effects on the teachers' attitudes, even toward specific disabilities. The data obtained through the questionnaire and Focus Groups are in line with the literature and reveal that biases and fears still exist on the part of many teachers.

In the Focus Groups, in connection with the survey data, the preservice participants complained of the lack of attention given at school to the subject of the body, the absence of interdisciplinary programs, the few hours devoted to physical education, in spite of the fact that the body and movement are central to the training curricula for education in the primary grades. The studies also indicate that experience with disabled people, professional and academic training, a process-oriented rather than a results-oriented approach of the education in general, have significant influence on an inclusive attitude (Hutzler, 2017). De Caroli and others point out that "people who have direct experience with the disabled report less difficulty managing disabled students, both individually and in groups, compared with those who have no direct experience (De Caroli et al, 2007, p. 3).

Analysis of the Focus Group responses also indicate that preservice teachers attach great importance to Internship. Participant (a6) said in her interview that during her internship the activities of physical education she observed gave her a number of suggestions and ideas for activities even different from physical education.

Generally, the answers to the questionnaire, and in the Focus Group discussions, stressed the cogent need of training in the sector. In fact, although the Italian school system chose the route of inclusion back in the Seventies, the field of physical education and motor activities still presents significant obstacles that have not been dealt with properly. One of the participants interviewed said that, as teachers, we need to learn skills and techniques that are both inclusive and knowledgeable in the area of corporality and movement, because "bodies are everywhere in the school" (b3).

Training courses can certainly provide support teachers with the necessary knowledge, but what about all the others?

Conclusions

The study emphasized that support preservice teachers are certainly cognizant of the value and importance of physical education for the body and movement of children with and without disabilities in the class, in line, also, with the studies of Morgan (2008) and Morgan and Hansen (2008), which stress the positive value of inclusion in the primary school of motor activities and physical education. At the same time, however, preservice teachers call attention to their need to receive adequate preparation to be of help to the class teacher in that area and to know how to handle situations in the classroom, even on their own, during activities of motor education. The teachers point out all the possible difficulties that may arise with severe disability and inadequate preparation.

While a broader study sample would be necessary, the responses of these preservice teachers point to a real need of teachers with a strong background in the field of inclusion in general, and physical education in particular. It is not enough to make constant reference to the government's introduction of instruction in motor and physical education in the primary school, but serious consideration should also be given to the training of both curricular and support teachers, because inclusion concerns the entire educational program and is a fundamental aspect of the educational process (Gamelli, 2011). The teacher must be trained through an

embodied process capable of involving everyone, in respect of individual uniqueness, valorizing the potential of every member of the class.

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