

**KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS BY
PHYSICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS**

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The purpose of this study was to examine the knowledge and attitudes of physical education undergraduate students towards children with special needs. A questionnaire of seven questions was submitted to 140 physical education students. Questions concerned the knowledge about the different kinds of disability, the acceptance of children with special needs in regular classes, the willingness of PE students to work with children with special needs, the objective of special education, and the sources of information about the topic. Results showed that mental retardation was recognized by the highest percentage of students, however, mental retardation was often confused with the general issue of special needs. Disability was correlated with the need for education in special schools. The partial awareness about special needs is related to the moderate willingness of the PE students to work with children with disabilities in their classroom. Assigning children with special needs to regular classes was not yet a familiar issue, due to insufficient information from popular sources. The findings of the study suggest that the limited awareness about schools, special education and integration cannot be dealt only with university efforts. Systematic information and interaction is needed in order to improve the knowledge and attitudes towards children with special needs.

Over the last 20 years in Greece the number of children and adults with special needs has doubled as more successful medical approaches have increased life span. The percentage fluctuates around 10%, so it is calculated that in Greece exist roughly 300.000 children and adults with special needs (Angelopoulou-Sakadami, 2002).

Adapted physical education is one of the most important sections in the field of special education. Its aim is to produce physically able individuals who live active and healthy lifestyles, which in turn enhances their progress toward self-actualization. (Rich, 2002; Sherrill, 1998).

Physical education teachers and students should be aware about the different kinds of disabilities and be sensitive concerning the integration of children with special needs in regular classes.

A number of researches have been conducted in an attempt to examine teachers' and students' attitudes toward children with disabilities. Kowalski and Rizzo (1996) examined the factors that influence the attitudes of physical education students toward individuals with disabilities, by using the Physical Educators' Attitude Toward Teaching Individuals with disabilities (PEATID – III). The results showed that the number of courses, coursework and adapted physical education programs, were significant predictors of favourable attitudes. Results also showed that students' perceived competence in teaching was the best predictor of favourable attitudes.

In a comparative study, Down and Williams (1994) examined the attitudes of undergraduate students toward the integration of people with disabilities in activity settings, with the use of the Physical Educators' Attitudes Toward Teaching The Handicapped, (PEATH) instrument. The sample consisted

of physical education undergraduates from England, Denmark, Belgium, and Portugal. Results revealed significant attitudinal differences in terms of gender, previous experience and classification of disability. Cross-culturally, the attitudes of Belgian students were found to be significantly different and negative compared to the attitudes of English, Danish and Portuguese students.

Theodorakis, Bagiatis and Goudas (1995) examined attitudes and intentions of physical education students toward teaching individuals with disabilities. All participants attended adapted physical education courses. Research showed that professional intentions to work with individuals with disabilities were formed as part of their social identity and affected by their confidence toward teaching individuals with disabilities.

Angelopoulou-Sakadami, Tsikoulas, Abatzides and Bagiatis (1994) developed a questionnaire that examined the knowledge and attitudes towards children with special needs of lyceum students, medical education students and physical education students, secondary education teachers and persons having an exceptional child in their immediate family. More specifically, they examined: a) the knowledge of 'categories' of children with special needs, b) acceptance of children with special needs in regular classes, c) the willingness to work with children with special needs d) the objective of special education and e) the sources of information about the topic. The research showed that the highest percentage of interviewed people recognized mental retardation as the main category of children with special needs. The education of exceptional children in special school and classes as more effective than in regular classes was supported by 50 to 75%. Lyceum students as well as teachers drew information about the specific topic from newspapers and television. The teachers were disappointed as they had not been taught about the needs of disabled children and they had little information about chronic disabilities. As a result, they often deprived children with disabilities from physical exercise. The results indicate partial awareness about children with special needs and negative attitudes towards acceptance and integration.

Due to the fact that there is partial awareness and negative acceptance of children with disabilities in regular physical education, further research is needed to examine this issue.

The purpose of this study was to explore the knowledge and attitudes of physical education undergraduate students towards children with special needs. In the light of the findings, the intention of the study was to answer the following questions:

1. Is there an improved body of knowledge concerning the different kinds of disability of children with special needs?
2. Is the issue of acceptance and integration of exceptional children in regular classes improved?
3. Which proposals can be made for further improvements aiming at the more complete preparation of future PE teachers?

Method

A questionnaire of seven items, which had been successfully used for first time in a sample of 1145 persons by Angelopoulou-Sakadami, Tsikoulas, Abatzides and Bagiatis (Perceptual and Motor Skills, 1994), was submitted to 140 students (55 males, 85 females) at the Department of Physical Education and Sports Science of the University of Thessaly. The 15,7% was first-year students, with the 28,6%, 32,9% and 22,9% representing the second, third and fourth year students respectively. The questionnaire was submitted personally to the students and was supplemented in the teaching classes of the Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, of the University of Thessaly. When it was necessary, the researchers were present to provide additional information. The classification of children with special needs was based on the DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). The questionnaire contained questions about the knowledge of PE students regarding the different kinds of disability, the acceptance of children with special needs in regular classes, the willingness of PE students to work with children with special needs, the objective of special education, and the sources of information about the topic (Table 1).

Statistical Analysis

The Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS 10) was used for the descriptive analysis of the results.

Table 1.
Questionnaire concerning children with special needs

1. Check the categories representing children with special needs
 - a. Speech delay or disorders
 - b. Learning difficulties
 - c. Emotional or behavioral disorders
 - d. Mental retardation
 - e. Orthopedic handicapping conditions
 - f. Blindness
 - g. Severe hearing loss-deafness
 - h. Multiple disadvantages
 - i. Blindness-deafness
 - j. Chronic organic diseases (epilepsy, diabetes melitus, cystic fibrosis, hemolytic anaemias, heart diseases, etc.)
2. Children with special needs can attend
 - a. Regular classes
 - b. Special school
 - c. Special classes in regular school
3. Would you like to have a student or schoolmate in your classroom?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Selective conditions
4. Would you like to work with exceptional children?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. According to your opinion, why do exceptional children need special education?
 - a. For self-helping
 - b. For school or academic education
 - c. For social integration
6. What is your source or information about the topic?
7. Is there any person with special needs in your immediate family?

Results

According to the results, the category with the highest percentage of appearance corresponded to children with mental retardation (92,1%), while the category with the smaller percentage was that of multiple disadvantages (30%). A high percentage of answers occupied the categories of cerebral palsy (81,4%), blindness-deafness (77,9%), severe hearing loss-deafness (75,7%), speech delay or disorders (74,3%) and blindness (72,1%). Smaller percentage of appearance had the orthopedics handicapping conditions (65,7%), learning difficulties (56,4%), multiple sclerosis (45,7%), chronic organic diseases (40%) and emotional- behavioral disorders (35,7%) (Figure 1).

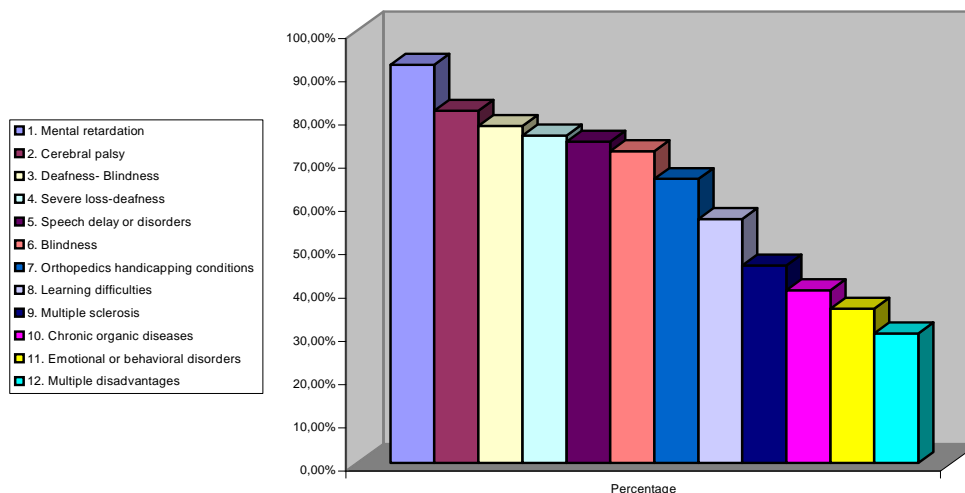


Figure 1.
Knowledge of PE students concerning different kinds of special needs.

The acceptance of children with special needs in regular schools was supported by the 7,1% of PE students, whereas the 45,7% of the PE students supported that children with special needs should attend special classes in regular schools. The 47,1% of the students believed that children with special needs should attend only special schools.

The 51,4% of the students would want to have a student or schoolmate with special needs in their class, while 54,3% expressed their desire to work with children with special needs.

The 49,2% of students answered that special education should focus on the development of self-helping skills of the individuals with special needs, 5,6% supported school \academic education and 44,3% considered the social integration of children as the major issue.

The students drew information about children with special needs from the university (32,9%), the means of mass briefing (22,1%), books (10%) and friends (10,7%), while a 24,3% of PE students had no information at all about the topic. The 15,7% of the students reported that they have a person with special needs in their family.

Discussion

As it is shown, most students were familiar with mental retardation as the main category of special needs and it appears that many times PE students confuse children with special needs with mentally retarded children.

The acceptance of children with special needs in regular schools was considerably moderate. Although systematic approaches to include students with disabilities in regular PE settings has been suggested (Block, 1994), assigning children with special needs to regular classes is not yet a familiar issue. In Greece, disability is still correlated with the need for education in special schools. It seems that there is still confusion about *how* school integration succeeds, due to further information that is needed.

The partial awareness about children with special needs is related to the moderate willingness of the PE students of this study to work with children with special needs or to have a student with disabilities in their classroom.

Social integration and the development of self-helping skills of children with special needs were equally considered as the main objectives of special education. Academic education was mainly supported as a goal of special education by the students reported having a person with special needs in their family.

As the study showed, university represented the main source of information for PE students. The improvement of knowledge and attitude towards children with special needs was directly analogous to their year of studies. No significant differences revealed in terms of gender.

The findings of this study suggest that the information provided for children with special needs is not yet effective or detailed. At present, information from popular sources is still incomplete. The limited awareness about schools, special education and integration cannot be dealt only with university efforts. Systematic information and interaction is needed in order to improve the knowledge and attitudes towards children with special needs. The organization of educational seminars for persons with special needs not only in Departments of Physical Education and Sports Sciences but also in other universities could be beneficial, because anyone can meet and cooperate daily with a person with special needs. Additionally, the course of special physical education could be one of the main courses in the Departments of Physical Education and Sport Sciences; therefore the students could have the opportunity to be informed about children with special needs. In conclusion, better and wide ranging information about persons with disabilities and their needs can lead to the increase of the acceptance of children with special needs in regular schools.

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