

## Representation of the notion of competition in adapted sport by physical education and sports teachers in the centres of inclusive education in Timișoara and in the Timiș County

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### **Abstract**

The notion of competition has various connotations within adapted sports and varies from the Paralympic Sports to the Special Olympics. The purpose of this research is to analyse the way in which adapted sports is perceived by P.E. and sports teachers from the school centres of inclusive education in the Timiș county. The pupils of these centres have intellectual disabilities and can take part in sportive competitions such as the Special Olympics that are organized according to the athletes' abilities by using 'divisioning' (splitting into value groups according to sportive abilities). By using the semi-directive interview method, 6 teachers (3 female, 3 male) from Timișoara and the Timiș county were interviewed, each having between 8 and 40 years' worth of teaching experience. The thematic analysis of the interviews has highlighted the fact that without a concrete specialization in the field of adaptive physical education and sports and only based on a course of special psycho-pedagogy, the teachers have tried to conceive by themselves a curriculum based on the one given the Ministry of Education on physical education and sports for general education schools, this being also reflected on the Special Olympics competitions in which teachers can take part with pupils in order to win, this representing the main objective of their involvement and participation in competitions.

**Key words:** *adapted sports, Special Olympics, intellectual disabilities, sportive abilities, competition.*

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## Rezumat

Noțiunea de competiție are diferite conotații în cadrul sportului adaptat și variază de la Sportul Paralympic la Special Olympics. Scopul acestei cercetări este de a analiza modul în care sportul adaptat este perceput de către profesorii de educație fizică și sport din centrele școlare de educație incluzivă din județul Timiș. Elevii acestor centre sunt cu dizabilități intelectuale și pot participa la competițiile sportive de tipul Special Olympics care sunt organizate în funcție de abilitățile sportivilor folosind divisioning (împărțirea pe grupe valorice în funcție de abilitățile sportive). Folosind metoda interviului semi- directiv au fost intervievați 6 profesori (3 femei și 3 bărbați) din Timișoara și județul Timiș cu o vechime de predare cuprinsă între 8 și 40 de ani. Analiza tematică a interviurilor a relevat faptul că fără o specializare concretă în domeniul educației fizice și sportului adaptat ci doar cu un curs de psiho-pedagogie specială, profesorii au încercat să-și conceapă singuri propria programă școlară pe baza programei elaborate de ministerul educației pentru educația fizică și sportul din școlile din învățământul general, acest lucru reflectându-se și asupra competițiilor Special Olympics la care profesorii participă cu elevii pentru a câștiga, acesta reprezentând principalul obiectiv al implicării și participării lor în cadrul concursurilor.

**Cuvinte cheie:** sport adaptat, special olympics, dizabilități intelectuale, abilități sportive, competiție.

## Mențiune

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## Introduction

Even if it has as a main objective the education of the pupil through physical activities, being a physical education and sports teacher does not exclude the stimulus and development of a competitive spirit through sportive activities. Many times confusions are produced because some physical education teachers base their approach significantly from this point of view and less on the educational dimension. But what happens to the need of competition felt by physical education teachers working in special education centres with intellectually disabled pupils?

The focus of this research is on the physical education and sports from the centres of inclusive education from Timisoara and the idea of competition. Given that in Romania there is no

concrete specialization within the physical education and sports faculties on adapted physical education and sports, we can sometimes notice a failed approach of the discipline by the specialists in this field. If between physical education and sports there can be noticeable differences and the common point may be competition, the same can be said about the link between adapted physical education and adapted sports.

The Romanian educational system, previously established on the basis of segregation, has organized the educative process for persons with intellectual disabilities within the School Centres for Inclusive Education, as they are presently known in Romania. At a global level, competitions are being

organized for the people with intellectual disabilities under the guise of Special Olympics. Physical education teachers from the school centres of inclusive education can participate with pupils in these competitions which have now been organized regularly for a number of years in Romania with the purpose of increasing self-esteem, self-confidence, self-perception and social competences gained by practising sports (1, 2).

However, the competition at this level has another connotation, the objectives being connected to the level of sportive abilities, even though they are also linked to performance.

In the Special Olympics competitions, athletes with an IQ score lower or equal to 70 may be admitted. (3). Regarding the pupils' IQ, it will determine the level of sportive performances that will not be reached. Thus, pupils with an IQ score lower than 20 (profound mental retardation) will have the intellectual level of a 2 year old child, and from a motor point of view, only strict motor skills can be pursued under permanent assistance. For pupils with an IQ between 20 and 34 (severe mental retardation), the level of development is one of a 3 year old child and the motor skills are poor compared to the pupil with an IQ between 35 and 49 (average mental retardation) that corresponds to a level of 6-7 year olds and the psychomotor abilities are simple, with the possibility of memorizing and some attention span. Pupils with an IQ between 50 and 69 (slight mental retardation) can reach the level of development corresponding to a 12 year old. In relation to this IQ, but also to their motor skills, the sportive competitions of the Special Olympics are organized (4) according to the level of physical abilities (low, average and high) and within them divisioning comes into place – a separation into value groups respecting the principle of difference between competitors of plus minus 15%. Only the

Special Olympics require that athletes compete with adversaries of the same value/level by taking into account that higher differences at the level of abilities would not do justice to the athletes. Thus, being defeated by an opponent who is closer in value is much more constructive than by an opponent who is clearly superior. The latter would lead to a disappointment of the competitor due to his/her disability being highlighted.

### **Purpose of the research**

The purpose of this research is to analyse the representations of physical education and sports teachers from the centres of inclusive education on their work through the notion of competition.

### **Research hypothesis**

The role of physical education and sports teachers is integration and socialization of pupils and not necessarily to stimulate the need for competition.

### **Material and method**

Using the semi-directive interview method, 6 physical education and sports teacher, (3 female and 3 male) from the Special Centres of Inclusive Education in Timisoara and the Timis county, were interviewed (name that appears in brackets is fictional). The experience of these teachers in this field is between 8 years (the most limited) to 40 years (the most extended).

The interviews have been audio recorded and had an average length of 35-45 minutes. As a method of analysis of the interviews, the thematic analysis (5) was used because it permits the approach of the whole corpus of interviews conducted, which would allow the making of explicative models of the physical education and sports teachers' practices and representations of their chosen job (6).

## Discussions

### a. Professional training

Compared to other countries, in Romania there is no separate study programme for undergraduates within faculties who wish to become teachers of physical education and sports for pupils with disabilities (sensory or intellectual). There are only a few courses that offer familiarization with these disabilities, out of which one bears the generic title Course of special psycho-pedagogy. The selection of the teachers for special teaching is conducted on the basis of the same criteria as for general education: “No, sadly he have not been trained in our faculty to work with this branch, with handicapped children – then, no emphasis was being placed on these children, as it is being placed today and more so after the revolution” (Stefan). After some time, teachers were sent to undergo such a course of special psycho-pedagogy: “Sadly, no. Neither did we undergo training in such schools, nor were we prepared in our faculty days as to how to treat them” (Eva). “In faculty we underwent teacher training, but in normal schools, and in the theoretical high school Iris, were I have previously worked, I took a course of special psycho-pedagogy, but only after I had been hired on my teaching position” (Carmen). In this sense, the teachers interviewed have recognized that they had not been trained for this job and that they gradually adapted to the system: “Coming to this school, I established contact with these children, I underwent a course in special psycho-pedagogy, during which I have perfected my work means and methods with the children” (Stefan).

A lack of scientific training in the field has been noticed, which determined each teacher to build his/her own system, especially since there was no curriculum for adapted physical education: “I have always based my work on the classic school

curriculum and have tried my best to follow the general requirements” (Maria). For some teachers, working after the regular curriculum seemed normal: “It is not a problem; it is the same physical education for the pupils with disabilities. I cannot see why differences should be made between them. I have always tried to take them to the sportive competitions organized by the inspectorate for those without disabilities. I did the same as concerns teaching” (Vasile).

### b. Personal impressions of physical education and sports teacher on pupils with intellectual disabilities

As regards the impressions that the teachers gained after getting to know these children, we have noticed that the majority spoke about the orphanage. Their impressions were not exactly good because the children came from orphanages and generally had disturbances in behaviour, sometimes deviant. “In the beginning when I came to school, I was a bit touched by the children’s attitude, because this school also had in that time an orphanage for girls and these girls behaved differently from normal girls. Growing up in the orphanage, they had a more masculine and aggressive behaviour; it was a bit hard for me until I adapted, but I realised that these children also deeply want to do sports, more than anything else in school” (Stefan).

Still, these special schools did not always house children with intellectual disabilities but it happened that based on the lack of social conditions, some children without disabilities also entered these institutions: “The truth is that until 4-5 years ago this was more of a social school. Gypsies, penitents, pupils that came from families with numerous children, who were given everything from tooth paste to toilet paper – this became a refuge” (Vasile).

If initially, from not knowing the state of things, the teachers began walking this path hesitantly, later on they got used to the children and satisfactions shortly followed: "These children have serious issues and, by working with them daily, I realized that one can set them on the right path. I had a child in my physical education class that used to stand staring into the palm of his hand. I tried taking him and giving him the basketball in his hand but he did not want to take it. I started to double with it and he saw me and grabbed my hand. We started passing the ball from one to the other from a distance of about a metre, a metre and a half. We evolved to 1 to 1 passing from a distance of 10 metres. After that I began dribbling with my left hand and he took the ball by himself and started dribbling with his left and his right hand. It really is something fantastic, seeing a child sitting a whole class staring into his palm, scratching his leg and after being given the ball, effectively scoring. I told him: "take the ball and throw it to that ring with a net" – I felt extraordinary when I saw him doing so" (Carmen).

*c. Sportive activities conducted with the pupils*

The sportive activities conducted with the pupils with disabilities represent the most pleasant part of the didactic process. "Yes, we took part in the Special Olympics. Even in this years' 2010 edition I had a child with Down syndrome who placed 1st at target throwing. Last year, the same child obtained the gold medal. There are another three children with medals in athletics, dribbling through cones and speed" (Carmen).

The need for competition and sportive achievement dominates in the case of some teachers and the similarity with the valid and performance sports represents the better part of the didactic process. "Yes, I have participated for this school and the school's highest achievement of preparing a child for

sports was the pupil Balanescu Ciprian. This pupil is currently: a national triathlon champion, multiple times triathlon champion both in the junior and in the senior categories and is nominated for the 2012 Olympic Games. I have another pupil, one of our athletes, Salazan Florina, who participated in the Athens Special Olympic Games, where she took two gold medals and one silver medal. She brought great fame to the school and to the country. We have participated in various editions of the Special Olympics in national finals" (Stefan).

*d. Observations linked to adapted sports*

The first highlighted aspect was the difficulty of working with the pupils with disabilities as opposed to the pupils from general education. The way of working and approaching the exercises varies significantly: "It is very difficult. It is extremely difficult work" (Carmen).

A difference underlined between the types of education is that these pupils cannot take part in all the sportive branches: "There are significant differences. Our athletes can take part in fewer branches of sports and I can mention some of them: football, table tennis, basketball, gymnastics, athletics..." (Stefan).

The fact that they must compose a certain grid of exercises, another system of grading and that they have to adapt the exercises to the pupils' abilities is also mentioned: "It is normal to adapt to those physically impaired. It is normal to have other requirements for those who are intellectually impaired and to set a level that they can aspire to. If you grade them differently and set another level for them, then you must necessarily take into account their degree of physical or mental handicap, but usually those with physical handicap and an IQ of around 70 can work suitably" (Vasile).

*e. The pupil-teacher relationship*

A certain relationship is implicitly formed between pupils and teachers, especially a special relationship when it comes to these children. "As bonding in concerned, you bond with every child that you work with" (Vasile), however it is also him who said that he tried to maintain the same relationship even if he worked with normal children or with other children, as are those with special needs: "...but I, in relation with them, have maintained the same teacher-pupil relationship, regardless of the fact that I was working in an informatics school or in this school for disabled children".

In the majority's case, we received the answer of bonding with these children who come to be regarded by some teachers as their own children: "The teacher-pupil relationship is a special one. I personally have bonded very much with them. I love them as if they were my children" (Carmen), by creating a special relationship, almost family-like, due to the fact that they spend a significant amount of time with each other: "here, pupil become fond of us and we of them, because we are like parents to them during the week, as they arrive on Monday and leave on Friday" (Stefan).

However, the didactic process is sometimes conditioned: "Generally, these children do not have such a nice character. They were used to receive a lot of gifts, love you only when you offer them something. They take part in competitions only if they know that they will be rewarded for their effort – this has always bothered me tremendously. Because I am stricter with them, the relationship has been strictly professional. They have respected me and have always tried to do what I had asked of them" (Eva).

*f. Evolution or involution?*

Touching on this subject, we again noticed common points in our 6 interviewees, but to the same extent noted some diverging aspects. Evolution has been observed, especially in the case of the children with whom the teacher has worked extensively, through the awards won in competitions and through the way in which they have managed to organize their way of life.

"As regards their evolution, always, with those with whom I started, I tried to teach them how to behave, to socialize, to eat correctly, to dress accordingly. Truly, with those with whom I spent a lot of time, a certain evolution can certainly be noticed" (Eva).

As regards their social life and the way of life that they have formed after the years spent in the inclusive centres, concrete cases of evolution have been noticed: "We have obtained a number of gold and silver medals with female athletes who managed to make their own lives afterwards; they started working and have started their own families. One could not actually tell that they had left from schools such as this" (Stefan).

Another point of view, the negative side of this problem, is that of children's involution. The majority of the children came from the inclusive centres with severe issues and have left worse than they had arrived: "Some have remarkable evolutions but there are others who have registered cases of involution. They came here with a certain situation and when they left, they left worse than they had arrived. This was the nature of their illness: nothing could be done with them" (Maria).

"What is surprising is that they do not have an evolution, but an involution. From a physical point of view, they have no problems because during physical education classes we would use the general curriculum, sometimes even surpassed it, they liked it and they replied suitably to it, but while increasing

in age, their intellectual possibilities decrease, in the sense that they no longer completely understand what you want” (Vasile).

*g. The public opinion: positive vs. negative*

In this regard, opinions were mixed, because, from the answers of the 6 teachers, we wanted to find out the opinions of family and friends. These were divided in for and against when it came to outside support of if they were judged by those around them.

Thus, in the first two cases, we faced a positive situation and of support of this aspect: “They support me; they encourage me, especially the family, who give me confidence and help me go on. My friends often ask me how hard is it to work in the school in which I teach, but I answer them that I like what I do and, above all, I like working with children” (Carmen).

“No, on the contrary, no. Even if I heard certain talks, I tried to clarify the fact that these children deserve all the attention, that they are people who must participate in the life of society on all the plans that a regular person does and that we must never marginalize them. My family supports me” (Stefan).

The situation changed and went in a different direction when we received the answers of the other two subjects, in which in the battle positive vs. negative the latter sadly seems to have won. “Yes, even my own boy characterizes them in an incorrect way. I told him that every job has its ups and its downs” (Eva).

“You know how it is with these children; the Romanian society will continue to look upon them as retarded because they have been taken out of the other environment. When my family heard that I had left the Informatics High School, where I used to work with pupils out of whom 30% were national elites, to relocate to a special school, they were

shocked. I have to confess that it was not all the same for me with this category, but it is worthwhile because there are still people who wish to work with them. The bad news is that there are no people adequately trained in the field” (Vasile).

## Conclusions

It has been noticed that physical education and sports teachers from the Centres of Inclusive Education in Timisoara and the Timis county do not have a special training because there are no such courses available in Romania at an undergraduate or masters’ level. The only way to prepare is represented by the courses in special psycho-pedagogy. Due to their initial training (undergraduate studies in physical education and sports), they take part with interest in the Special Olympics competitions organized at a local, regional, national or international level, placing significant emphasis on the titles and medals awarded to the athletes. When these competitions no longer suffice, some of the teachers also ask the students to take part in the school competitions from the general education. The importance of competition and victory in these competitions has been noticed, while a level of ignorance towards the main objectives of adapted sports has also been noticed. Some of these objectives are the social ones: social integration and inclusion, socialization, acknowledgment of the human value by the others, as opposed to sportive value, etc. The teachers trained in the classic competitive system ignore the real needs of this category of people with intellectual disabilities and promote the same principles as in classic sports.

We have tried to find out what is the role of the physical education and sports teachers from inclusive centres. Based on the research conducted,

we have deduced that their role is that of integration and socialization of their pupils. Without being a deliberate decision, the teachers have learned to know and respect the reality from the field and to help children socialize.

Within the specialized institutions from this field, special relationships between teachers and pupils are formed, because the children from these schools spend more time in the company of their teachers than with other children and due to the deficiencies that they have, the teacher bond quicker with them than with normal pupils.

A relevant and important aspect of the paper that the teachers we have interviewed have proudly mentioned is the participation of these children in sportive competitions. Their participation in these competitions, as well as winning numerous awards, have brought them fame, pride and satisfaction to them and to their schools.

Special Olympics competitions play a very important role in the lives of these children.

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