

The Perception of Overweight Pupils by the Group of Pupils during the Physical Education and Sports Class

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Abstract

Overweight produces discrimination and marginalisation during the physical education and sports (P.E.) class. The purpose of this research is to identify the way in which pupils with normal weight perceive their overweight peers, with the aim of identifying the problems of collaboration and co-participation within the teams and pairs established during P.E. classes. The semi-directive interview method was used; it was applied on a class of pupils aged 11 and 12 from a school in Timisoara. The interviews were processed using the thematic analysis and show the fact that pupils with normal weight avoid interacting with the overweight peers for fear of being identified with the latter.

Keywords: *overweight, physical education and sport, identity, fear.*

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Rezumat

Supraponderea produce discriminare și marginalizare și la lecția de educație fizică și sport. Scopul acestei cercetări este de a identifica modul în care elevii cu greutate normală îi percep pe colegii lor cu greutatea peste normele reglementate în vederea identificării problemelor de colaborare și coparticipare în cadrul echipelor și perechilor stabilite în lecția de educație fizică și sport. S-a folosit metoda interviului semi-directiv aplicat la o clasă de elevi cu vârsta cuprinsă între 11 și 12 ani de la o școală din Timisoara. Interviuurile au fost analizate folosind analiza tematică și releva faptul că elevii cu greutate normală evita interacțiunea cu colegii lor supraponderali din frica de a fi identificați cu aceștia.

Cuvinte cheie: *supraponderea, educație fizică și sport, identitate, teamă.*

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Introduction

A statistics made public in 2010 by the National Institute of Endocrinology “C.I Parhon” has shown that out of the 500 million obese people at a worldwide level, 4 million come from Romania. Moreover, 50% of Romanians i.e. approximately 10 million people are overweight and, thus, “candidates” for obesity. In Romania, 50% of the population has weight problems, and out of this percentage, WHO studies show that 20% are obese and 30% are overweight. Obesity in the case of children is as disturbing. One in four children is overweight or even obese. In these conditions, Romania is on the third place in the EU as regards the frequency of obesity.

As overweight is visible, it attracts with itself stigmatisation and marginalisation, especially in the case of minors; these problems are perpetuated to an adult age. The studies made underline the existence of various types of social stigmatisation and marginalisation of overweight children (1) and the psychosocial aspects that they live involve the increase of the number of depressive symptoms and the decrease in self esteem and body image (2, 3, 3bis, 4). Physical activities are recommended in the case of these pupils, with the aim of losing weight and improving health (5) however, during the P.E. class, they suffer from ironies and permanent attacks aimed at their weight from the pupils with normal weight and are marginalised or excluded (6, 7, 8) In this process, the role of the P.E. teacher is a major one (9) as he/she must design activities and actions aimed at involving all the members of the group, ensuring roles to every member of the group according to their possibilities, must educate against discrimination and try to be the binding factor as regards the socialisation of all the pupils by placing them in situations of contact.

The purpose of this research is to identify the way in which overweight pupils are perceived by the pupils with normal weight during the P.E. class.

Research hypothesis

Being a partner and in the same team with overweight children in the physical education class is perceived by the pupils with normal weight as a dreaded experience, because the latter fear they will be identified with the former.

Research method

For this qualitative study, the semi-directive interview method was used for data collection. The interview guide was compiled according to the issues detected (the difficulties of integrating overweight children and the way they are perceived by their peers with normal weight). The interviews were conducted on an individual basis; they lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and were recorded in audio form, maintaining the subjects' anonymity. The fact that there are no right or wrong answers has been clearly specified and that the pupils' personal opinion is the most important element to be recorded.

The thematic method was used, with the aim of analysing the interviews. This means that only a single theme or a number of significant themes or items comprised in a previously established code unit will be analysed (10). This allows for the identification of the components (or units of meaning) approached by the participant in every category. The components were grouped into independent subcategories, categories and themes and built according to the problematic approach with the purpose of comprehensiveness. This analysis was, first and foremost, an inductive one. Starting from the units of meaning taken from the interviewee's discourse, the subcategories were

built, which, in their turn, were grouped into categories and then into themes.

The credibility of this type of thematic analysis comes from triangulation, which consists in the independent encoding of the discourse by three researchers individually and then comparing the results obtained and debating on them until a consensus is reached.

Participants

The target group is composed of 24 pupils (12 girls and 12 boys) aged 12-13 (born in 1998 and 1999), representing the pupil of a class from a school in Timisoara. The group is relatively homogenous, as it had been formally composed 4 years ago. The group had been in the same form from the 1st grade up to the 5th grade, when small changes were made to its structure, as 3 new pupils coming from other schools became part of the group. The girls' BMIs are depicted in Table I, while the boys' BMIs are presented in Table II.

The girls have Body Mass Indexes (BMIs) between 14.3 kg/m² and 25.6 kg/m²; 4 are underweight, 4 have normal weight, 3 are overweight and one girl is obese.

The boys have body mass indexes between 14.8 kg/m² and 23.6 kg/m²; 2 boys are underweight, 8 have normal weight and 2 boys are overweight.

After calculating the BMIs, one can notice that, out of the group of 24 pupils, 5 are overweight (3 girls and 2 boys) and one girl is obese.

Table I. The girls' BMIs

#	BMI (kg/m ²)	Weight
1	14.3	Underweight
2	15.5	Underweight
3	16	Underweight
4	16.6	Underweight
5	17.7	Normal
6	18.4	Normal
7	19	Normal
8	19.2	Normal
9	21.1	Overweight
10	21.1	Overweight
11	22.3	Overweight
12	25.6	Obese

Table II. The boys' BMIs

#	BMI(kg/m ²)	Weight
1	14.8	Underweight
2	16.6	Underweight
3	17.7	Normal
4	17.9	Normal
5	18.1	Normal
6	18.4	Normal
7	18.8	Normal
8	19.1	Normal
9	20.3	Normal
10	20.8	Normal
11	21	Overweight
12	23.6	Overweight

Results

Following the analysis of the interviews, the established subcategories, categories and themes are presented in Table III.

Table III. Interviews ´ analysis

SUBCATEGORIES	CATEGORIES	THEMES
<p>“Our parents are friends”</p> <p>“He is the fattest in the class”</p> <p>“He helps me every time I need it”</p> <p>“I am ashamed of her”</p>	<p>a. Friendship is conditioned by the gain/loss ratio.</p> <p>b. Friendship is often conditioned by the family’s social circle and similar financial potentialities.</p>	PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
<p>“Why should I choose him/her if nobody wants him/her?”</p> <p>“Everybody makes fun of her”</p> <p>“All the teachers know she’s a fool”</p> <p>“My marks suffer because of her”</p> <p>“It’s because of her that I keep losing”</p> <p>“I am not like her”</p> <p>“If I am paired with him, everybody laughs at me”</p>	<p>a. Collective stigmatisation/labelling cancels the change of being integrated in a group</p> <p>b. The motivational lack of the objects of study through the teachers’ effort of valuing every child, regardless of potential</p> <p>c. The lack of a mentality of tolerance and acceptance of the difference between children</p> <p>d. Self-image is more important at this age than a moralising spirit.</p>	(LACK OF) COLABORATION IN SCHOOL
<p>“We do not have the opportunity to go together”</p> <p>“My parents do not let me go with her because she has bad grades”</p> <p>“Where can I go with him when everybody makes fun of me?”</p> <p>“Why doesn’t he go out with his fatsos?”</p> <p>“He doesn’t do any sports”</p> <p>“He has no idea of how to run”</p> <p>“Where should we go? She keeps on eating!”</p>	<p>a. There are insufficient activities outside of school</p> <p>b. Parents do not get involved in the children’s inclusive socialisation</p> <p>c. Social prejudice is emphasised by the family</p> <p>d. School does not create the opportunity for collaboration outside of school</p>	(LACK OF) COLABORATION OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL
<p>“He keeps complaining all the time” “</p> <p>“He laughs like an idiot”</p> <p>“She’s the school fatso”</p> <p>“He always expects us to go to him”</p> <p>“The teachers too say that he is stuffing himself”</p> <p>“She’s OK, but why should I be the only one to choose her?! I want to be in a good team too”</p> <p>“She has no way of winning, she’s obese”</p> <p>“You can see how fat she is through her blouse!”</p> <p>“Her parents cannot buy her a tracksuit because it cannot fit her!”</p>	<p>a. The physical aspect is very important factor in pre-teenagers’ choices</p> <p>b. The gain/loss ratio is a prime factor in each pupil’s interest</p> <p>c. By winning, one can win the teachers’ and parents’ sympathy</p>	STIGMATISATION

<p>"He has no place on the field"</p> <p>"Why should I lose?"</p> <p>"As an adversary? He's very good because he stays put"</p> <p>"Ha, ha, he's the size of the goalpost"</p> <p>"We'll show him a sandwich and make him run after it"</p> <p>"His team keeps winning all the time"</p> <p>"She's fat and cannot do anything"</p> <p>"Nobody picks her"</p> <p>"Everyone makes fun of the team he/she is in"</p>	<p>a. It is inconceivable that someone overweight can be anywhere near a sports field</p> <p>b. Picking someone overweight as a member of the team brings with itself failure – this is the opinion of everyone in the class</p> <p>c. Overweight pupils are not chosen to be part of teams in school or outside of school</p> <p>d. The competitive factor on all side eliminates the changes of those who are overweight</p> <p>e. The acceptance of such a behaviour and vocabulary by the parents</p>	<p>(LACK OF) COOPERATION</p>
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Discussions

From the interviews conducted, one can find four directions as regards the participation of overweight pupils in sport-related activities:

a) Marginalisation when the members of the teams are chosen

The moment in which the teams are formed through the pupils' free will, one can notice that the pupils with sportive abilities are the first to be chosen, so inevitably those who are overweight remain the last to be chosen; they become a burden for the team's captain, who, in the end, does not choose the overweight pupils, but, through elimination, he/she is distributed to a team, even though he/she "is fat and cannot do anything", "nobody chooses him/her", "everyone makes fun of the team he/she is in". It seems that choosing an overweight pupil determines defeat right from the start and, even though "she's OK, why should I be the only one to choose her?! I want to be in a good team too!"

b) Lack of sportive abilities in the case of overweight pupils

The fact that overweight pupils are generally exempted from P.E. and do not practice any physical

activity, the other pupils judge this as "he/she does not do sports anyway" and "has no idea of how to run". "The teacher too say he/she is stuffing himself/herself", "You can see how fat he/she is through his/her clothes". At this age, cruelty and meanness manifest themselves in such forms: "Her parents cannot buy her a tracksuit because it cannot fit her!" And having an overweight opponent is a cause of amusement because "she cannot win, she's obese", "He/she has no place on the field" and "As an adversary? He/she is very good because he/she stays put", "Ha, ha, he/she is the size of the goalpost"; the concern that the team might lose because of an overweight member is also a cause of amusement: "Why should I lose?", "We'll show him a sandwich and make him run after it". This leads to the conclusion that arguing against an overweight pupil brings victory almost instantly.

c) The overweight pupils' inactivity and lack of interaction with others

Generally, overweight pupils are the subject of reproachful remarks addressing their lack of activity and involvement in the group's activities, while their lack of courage in aiding the group and having an

initiative as concerns bonding with the others is often noticed: “He/she keeps on complaining”, “he only sits and expects us to go to him”.

Overweight brings with itself a lack of self-confidence and thus contributes to separation of these pupils from the group.

d) Avoidance of the interaction with overweight pupils out of the other pupils' fear of being associated with the former

Even the attempts of socialising with the overweight pupils from the class stirs the fear of being identified and paired with them, because at a teen age body image is very important and it can be hardly overlooked; only with the help of education can one fight against stigmatisation. “Where should I go with him, because everybody will laugh at me?” or “Where should we go? She keeps on eating and does little else”. “Why doesn't he/she go out with his/her fatsos?” One can notice right from the beginning that socialisation within the classroom is difficult, as those who are overweight are stigmatised in the view of the pupils without weight problems; the former should only socialise amongst themselves and form their separate group. Changing opinions, forbidding stigmatisation, acknowledging an erroneous way of thinking must all be operated at the level of the teenager through education.

Conclusions

By using the *interview* method, we have tried to detect the way in which overweight pupils are perceived by the rest of the group. It has been noticed that the formal group is one whose members know each other relatively well; however, there are difficulties in accepting overweight pupils. A series of problems that appear within a group as regards body weight could be identified with the help of the interview. Registering outside the normal weight standards brings with itself stigmatisation. During

the P.E. class, overweight pupil feel this stigmatisation through their lack of involvement in the activities, the fact that they are not chosen to be part of the teams and the fact that they are avoided because they are overweight and do not have any sportive abilities. It can be noticed that the differences in body weight stirs the fear of the pupils with normal weight of being identified with the overweight pupils and for this reason they avoid interacting with them during the P.E. class. Respecting differences and avoiding discrimination of various kinds constitute a process in which the P.E. teacher, together with the other participants in the educational process, has a decisive role. The didactic strategies used and conceived by the teacher must take into account all the elements previously mentioned during the physical education and sports lesson.

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