The Perceptions of PE Teachers and LSEs on the Inclusion of Children with Intellectual Disabilities During PE Lessons

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions among Physical Education (PE) teachers and learning support educators (LSEs) on the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities (ID). It focused, more specifically, on the perceptions of PE teachers and LSEs on the effectiveness and extent of inclusion during PE lessons. The relationship and communication between PE teachers and LSEs were also explored. In addition, a deeper understanding of the benefits and barriers of inclusion with respect to both students with ID, and mainstream students, was sought. Eight semi-structured interviews, four with PE teachers and four with LSEs, were conducted in six state schools and two church schools. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. For this qualitative study, thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the results using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage method. The following themes were identified: “School and the Education System in Malta”; “The PE Lesson”; “Benefits of Inclusion”; and “Challenges of Inclusion”. The findings highlight some of the benefits and barriers perceived by PE teachers when it comes to including children with ID during PE lessons. The main benefits were cognitive, physical, as well as social. On the other hand, barriers and challenges discovered included the type and severity of ID, the personality of the student with ID, and behavioural issues. The participants discussed their points of view and expressed their replies through several personal experiences that we seek to elucidate throughout this paper.

Keywords: Learning support educator; physical education teacher; inclusion; intellectual disabilities; typically developed

Introduction

Around 8% of the population in Malta and Gozo has a disability. There are 76,228 children aged 0 to 18 years old in the population, with about 5% of them having a disability (Callus and Farrugia 2013). Intellectual disability (ID), more specifically, is characterized by apparent deficiencies in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, which are expressed as adaptive abilities that are conceptual, social, and functional (AAIDD 2008).

According to Block and Obrusnikova (2007), there are several advantages of inclusion in PE. Students with ID can be effectively included in PE when given adequate assistance. It is generally agreed that they have little negative impact on peers without disabilities, who tend to have moderately favourable attitudes toward their peers with disabilities. The main goal of the present study was, therefore, to investigate, whether inclusion in PE indeed has benefits—according to PE teachers—on the children with ID in their classes. A qualitative approach along with semi-structured interviews was adopted to seek more depth on the views and experiences regarding the benefits and barriers that one faces when including students with ID during PE lessons.
Literature Review

Definition and Prevalence of Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disability is a condition identified by the existence of mental development that is incomplete or impaired. It is mainly characterised by the deterioration of specific functions at every stage of development which contribute to the general level of intellect. These functions include those relating to cognitive, speech, motor, and social interaction (Katz and Lazcano-Ponce 2008; Shalock 2014; World Health Organisation 2010).

According to a Central Statistics Office [CSO] (2017) study, which was conducted in 2016, 1.4% of the population, thus approximately 66,611 people, were found to have a disability. There were over 1,000 males with intellectual disabilities in the age group of 6 to 18 years, which was more than twice the number of females with intellectual disabilities in the same age group.

Characteristics of Intellectual Disabilities

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) was the first to suggest a multidimensional model of human functioning in 1992 and this theoretical framework was further refined by Luckasson (2002). The theoretical framework of human functioning has two main components: five dimensions (intellectual abilities, adaptive behaviour, health, participation, and context) and a representation of the role that supports play in human functioning. The five dimensions of intellectual disability were proposed by Wehmeyer et al. (2008). These include:

1. Intellectual abilities – Individuals vary in their ability to grasp complex concepts, adapt effectively to their situations, learn from experience, participate in different ways of reasoning, and resolve challenges by thinking and communicating.
2. Adaptive behaviour – refers to a set of cognitive, social, and practical skills that people acquire to survive in their daily lives.
3. Health – An important component of a comprehensive view of individual functioning.
4. Participation – Is defined as people’s involvement in real events in social life domains, and it is linked to an individual’s ability to participate in society. It applies to responsibilities and relationships in fields such as home life, employment, education, recreation, spirituality, and culture.
5. Context – Contextual factors include both environmental and personal variables, and they reflect an individual’s entire life history. They can influence an individual’s functioning.

According to Wehmeyer et al. (2008), human functioning is a broad concept that refers to an individual’s entire range of life events, including body structures and roles, personal activities, and involvement. Limitations in this performance are referred to as a “disability”, and they can be caused by issues with body structures and functions, as well as personal habits. All dimensions of functioning and impacting factors are critical for recognising the individual functioning of a person with intellectual disability within a broader context and the constitutive meaning underlying the term ‘intellectual disability’.

Different Types of Intellectual Disabilities

According to Turnbull et al. (1995) there are different intellectual disabilities. Some include Autism; Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)/Attention deficit disorder (ADD); Fragile X syndrome; Down syndrome; and Williams syndrome. Autism, ADHD/ADD, and Down syndrome were considered for this paper.
The American Psychiatric Association [APA] (2013) outlines that certain types of intellectual disability may occur before birth, such as Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, birth defects, and infections. Some occur when the child is born or soon after birth. Intellectual disabilities are most commonly caused by:

- Genetic conditions, which refer to when a child inherits abnormal genes from parents or when there are mutations when genes combine. Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, and phenylketonuria (PKU) are examples of genetic conditions (APA 2013).
- As stated by APA (2013), newborns may have intellectual disabilities if there are complications during labour and birth, such as the baby not getting enough oxygen.

**Inclusion in Physical Education**

Inclusive education means that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or disability may attend the same school and learn together. This involves reaching out to all students and eliminating any obstacles that could prevent them from participating and succeeding. One of the most common causes of exclusion is disability, alongside socioeconomic and psychological obstacles (UNESCO n.d.).

**The Evolution of Inclusion and the Need for Change**

During the World Conference on Special Needs Education, held in Salamanca, Spain, in June 1994, 92 governments and 25 international organisations came to an agreement on a dynamic new statement on the education of all children with intellectual disabilities, calling for inclusion to be the normal practice rather than the exception (UNESCO 2020). The conference introduced a new Framework for Action, with the guiding principle being that all children, regardless of their physical, academic, social, mental, linguistic, or other circumstances, should be accommodated in mainstream schools. According to the framework, all educational programmes should cater for children with intellectual disabilities to attend the neighbourhood school “that would be attended if the child did not have a disability” (UNESCO 2020: 9).

However, inclusion cannot be achieved exclusively by adding a paraeducator or modifying games, equipment, time, or organisation (Rizzo and Lavay 2000). Lieberman et al. (2004) state that in addition to more conventional approaches, the use of tactics and methods, based on new assumptions, and portraying a cultural environment in physical education, are necessary.

**Benefits of Inclusive Physical Education: Cognitive Effects**

According to Tripp et al. (2007), inclusion is a collaborative, student-centred process. Students with intellectual disabilities learn life skills and have the chance to develop with their peers in a dynamic environment that a relevant, high-quality physical education programme can offer.

As stated by Seymour et al. (2009), inclusive educational settings give rise to attitudinal, social, educational, and behavioural benefits. The universal need for interpersonal relationships is met through developing and maintaining close friendships, which the inclusive educational setting highly promotes. Furthermore, Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) state that friendships are important for social development, psychological adjustment, and personal well-being in virtually every aspect of life. Friendship has the power to profoundly influence an individual’s growth, behaviour patterns, and attitudes, in addition to psychosocial benefits (Smith, 2003). Psycho-social benefits include self-
validation and ego support, emotional comfort, assistance and encouragement, dependable alliance, intimate disclosure, and companionship and relaxation (Martin and Smith 2002; Weiss and Stuntz 2004).

**Benefits of Inclusive Physical Edition: Social Effects**

Realistic perceptions of students with intellectual disabilities in PE indicate that inclusion is not always successful, despite the promising results. Probably the most frustrating part of PE integration is the lack of social interaction with students without disabilities, which can restrict social learning options for students with intellectual disabilities (Place and Hodge 2001).

According to Lieberman et al. (2004), inclusion helps students to engage in challenging situations. Bunch et al. (1997) state that inclusive physical education has social benefits that include an increase in social initiations, relationships and other networks. Inclusive physical education also gives students with intellectual disabilities greater opportunities to initiate interactions (ibid).

**Benefits of Inclusive Physical Edition: Physical Effects**

Individuals with intellectual disabilities who engage in regular physical activity are at a lower risk of suffering from secondary conditions (Rimmer and Braddock 2002). Advantages of physical activity include improving motor skills and physical wellbeing, which aid people in combating issues like obesity and the health complications that this may include (Kohl III and Cook 2013).

A study by Johnson (2009), focusing on people with developmental disabilities, specifically with intellectual disabilities, discovered that engaging in physical activity and sport improves their well-being and physical fitness. Children with an intellectual disability can also have physical difficulties, resulting in lower-than-average results in typical motor skills. Regular participation in physical activity and sport will assist students with ID in developing the necessary skills (Dyer 1994; School Specialty 2017).

**Barriers to Inclusive Physical Education: Number of Students in Class**

Class sizes and teaching demands in physical education are always increasing and one must keep in mind how crucial it is to fulfil the needs of all students. Teachers also experience challenges when it comes to achieving the goal of educating students to stay active. A class full of students with different abilities makes it difficult for PE teachers to create and deliver differentiated lessons that meet the needs of all students (Brabo 2014). Large classes, whether interpreted as an administrative problem or a socio-educational issue, are unreasonable for any teacher including physical educators, and this must change (Tripp et al. 2007).

Brabo (2014) acknowledges that differentiating instructions for students with intellectual disabilities has become more difficult. Larger class sizes present several challenges to effective teaching, including the inability to provide effective feedback to all students; the difficulty of building rapport and personal connections; an increase in the need for behavioural management; and a lack of access to technology in the classroom.

Daily challenges, such as dealing with disruptive students and receiving insufficient training on how best to individualise instruction in large classes, can make it difficult for a teacher to effectively include students with intellectual disabilities in class activities (Hodge et al. 2009).
Barriers to Inclusive Physical Education: Learning Support Educations and Their Lack of Knowledge in Physical Education

Among many roles and duties, during PE lessons, the role of an LSE is:

Ensuring the maximum educational benefit and safety for individual pupils at all times by providing them with assistance during physical education, games, excursions and therapy sessions, as well as normal feeding during mid-morning and mid-day breaks and at other times as required.

(Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016: 7)

For students with more severe disabilities, LSEs (also known as teacher aides) may be required. Students who are statemented are assigned LSEs (MEDE 2000) who accompany them to various classes throughout the day (including PE), providing assistance when needed (Block and Obrusnikova 2007).

Many LSEs who work in school settings are more classroom-based aides, and their lack of PE training and knowledge has led some PE teachers to regard LSEs as more of a significant barrier than a benefit when it comes to their impact on teaching effectiveness (Green and Smith 2004).

Maher (2010) similarly states that PE teachers feel that they are not receiving enough support from the LSEs. The results of his study showed that most PE teachers were conscious of the fact that LSEs in their schools lacked PE-specific training, knowledge, and expertise.

Typically Developed Students and Inclusive Physical Education

One argument against inclusion is the fear that students with intellectual disabilities will take the attention away from, or significantly alter the programme for, children who do not have intellectual disabilities (Block and Obrusnikova 2007). Surprisingly, findings from the studies mentioned below looking at the effects of inclusion on students without disabilities, contradict this fear.

According to the research conducted by Vogler et al. (2000), rates of on-task behaviour were high for both students with and without disabilities. Positive feedback from teachers outweighed negative or corrective feedback. Vogler et al. (2000) concluded that students with intellectual disabilities participated in PE in the same way as peers without disabilities, and that their inclusion had no negative impact on the learning of students without intellectual disabilities or the PE teacher’s ability to run an efficient class.

In light of this, modifications to PE lessons can be an efficient and significant way to include students with intellectual disabilities in PE safely and successfully. One must find a balance, however, because modifications that change the nature of the game or slow it down excessively may cause issues for the students who do not have intellectual disabilities (Block and Obrusnikova 2007), leading to dissatisfaction and/or resentment towards having peers with intellectual disabilities in their PE class (Block, 2007).

The main research question explored throughout this study is: ‘What are the effects of inclusion on children with intellectual disabilities during PE lessons?’
Methodology

Research Design

To investigate the positive and negative effects of inclusion during PE lessons on children with ID, a qualitative research methodology was deemed fit as it allows researchers to interpret a particular phenomenon through an in-depth approach (Rhodes 2014). This type of methodology is used to explore and explain different motives and views. It also offers insight into a problem and can eventually help to find solutions (Wyse 2011). Jamshed (2014) argues that when the researcher or the investigator either explores new fields of study or aims to define and theorise influential topics, qualitative analysis is deemed acceptable. There are many qualitative approaches that are motivated by their textual analysis to provide a detailed and accurate understanding of certain issues. The most common tools used to achieve this in-depth data gathering are interviews and observations.

In this study, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. As stated by Brinkmann (2014), these give the participants the opportunity to go into further detail if this is deemed necessary. The advantage of this method of data collection is that the researcher can look at the research question more closely. This is because the researcher may ask questions in greater detail and may clarify or rephrase the questions, which leaves more room for flexibility (Kajornboon 2005). According to Carruthers (1990), individuals tend to be more straightforward and honest when they offer their views, especially when they show interest in the topic. This is facilitated and enhanced through the flexibility of the semi-structured interview. The data that is collected from one respondent can also be compared to that provided by another (Bogdan and Biklen 1997).

Participants

Stratified random sampling was used in this research as it allows the researcher to split the population into smaller groups (subgroups) known as strata. Such individuals are chosen and selected according to a specific criterion (Daniel 2012). As stated by Acharya et al. (2013), the advantages of stratified random sampling are that it guarantees that all groups in the required population are represented. The features of each stratum can be estimated and comparisons can be made. Stratified random sampling, according to Sharma (2017), is often used to decrease the probability of bias in the recruitment of cases to be included in the study. As a result, this provides a sample that is representative of the target group being studied, assuming that limited information is available.

In order to be considered for this study, participants had to fit the following criteria:

1. PE teachers teaching in government, private, or church schools.
2. PE teachers teaching PE only.
3. Learning support educators (LSEs) working in government, private, or Church schools.
4. Having at least three or more years of teaching experience with students diagnosed with ID.
5. Participants of both genders.

Data Collection

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were utilised. Although interviews are often an efficient way of gathering open-ended data, there are also some drawbacks. One prevalent issue with interviewing is that not all respondents make great participants. Some people
find it difficult to engage in conversation or may be unwilling to share their views of sensitive or personal subjects. The objective of the semi-structured interviews in this study is to answer general key questions such as: “How do other students interact with the student with ID?”; “Do you think inclusion has a psychological effect on children with ID?”; “Do you think that there are barriers when it comes to including students with ID in PE?”; and, “Do you think that people and other students are aware of the effects of inclusion?” These general questions lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the effect inclusion has on children with ID, be it of the benefits or of the barriers.

Eight interviews took place and lasted around an hour each. Twenty-three questions were asked to PE teachers and seventeen questions to LSEs. Important points were written down after each interview, which were also recorded.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved and ethically cleared by the MCAST Research Ethics Policy and Procedure committee. Participants were given an information sheet along with a consent form prior to the interviews, ensuring that the information collected during the interview was kept confidential and used only for research purposes. The Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) approached the heads of schools so as to provide a list of PE teachers and LSEs who could be contacted as prospective participants. Prior to contacting any of them, however, the information and consent sheets, alongside the Research Authorisation Letter from MEDE, were sent to the heads of school, to be distributed to the prospective participants. This way, the participants were informed about what the research entails before granting permission to be interviewed. Four PE teachers and four LSEs fit the selection criteria. These had different levels of expertise because their years of experience differed. A formal email was sent to the participants and once confirmation was received, online interview meetings were set.

Participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving any reason. They also had the right to abstain from answering the questions being asked by the researcher if they felt uncomfortable responding. As only online interviews were conducted, participants were not physically compromised nor were they at risk of contracting Covid-19. In addition, the interviews were set at the convenience of the participants, who chose the time and date of the interviews. The time set was after school hours; therefore time was not taken away from their lessons and responsibilities. The educational system was not harmed because the data was protected and was only shown to the assessor and the tutor. Within the study, no school names were disclosed.

Data Analysis

For this qualitative study, thematic analysis was utilised. Thematic analysis is a tool for the discovery, analysis, and reporting of data subjects. It allows the researcher to categorise and evaluate the data collection in depth (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the semi-structured interviews, PE teachers and LSEs were able to share their experiences and opinions, which, thanks to thematic analysis, were then grouped and analysed according to patterns or themes. This is significant in relation to this area of research because there are different cases of intellectual disabilities, every case has its own level of severity, and every participant may have different views in relation to including such students in PE lessons. Therefore, grouping such viewpoints according to themes allowed me to better structure and analyse the findings.

This is as, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), themes capture the most relevant results in relation to the research issue. When the analyst starts to understand and recognize
context patterns and issues of potential data importance, the process begins. Indeed, analysis requires continuous movement back and forth from the whole data corpus, the coded extracts of the data analysed, and the analysis of the information (Braun and Clarke 2006).

**Results**

*The Participants*

The participants were given a pseudonym for their identity to remain anonymous. The years of experience, occupation, and modality are also listed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Occupation &amp; Modality</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Miriana</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>PE Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>PE Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>PE Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Gerrard</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>PE Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Daniela</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>LSE – One-to-One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>LSE – Shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>LSE – One-to-One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>LSE – Shared</td>
</tr>
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*Table 1: Participant codes, years of experience, occupation and modality*

*Themes and Subthemes*

After studying all eight transcripts, four themes were established: “school and the education system in Malta”; “the PE lesson”; “benefits of inclusion”; and “challenges of inclusion”. Subthemes were then drawn from every one of these themes, as indicated in Table 2.

<table>
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<th>Emergence of themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>School and the Education System in Malta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Information Given to the PE Teacher</td>
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<td>Lack of Support from School and LSEs</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Flexible or Rigid Curriculum</td>
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<td>Class Size</td>
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The PE Lesson

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<td>Student-Centred Environment</td>
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<td>Grouping Students so There is a Mixture of Ability</td>
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<td>Teachers’ Attitudes Influence the Attitudes of Students with and without ID</td>
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Benefits of Inclusive PE

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<td>Students with ID</td>
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<td>Typically Developed Students</td>
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<td>Classroom vs. PE Settings – The Behavioural Change in Relation to Lessons</td>
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Challenges of Inclusive PE

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<th>Challenges of Inclusive PE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Type and Severity of ID and Participation during PE Lessons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavioural Issues</td>
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Table 2: Themes and subthemes

Theme 1: School and the Educational System in Malta

1.1 Lack of Information Given to the PE Teachers

Without knowing who the students are, PE teachers arrange the scheme of work prior to the start of the academic year. According to a study conducted by Craus and Bugeja (2013), seventeen out of eighteen PE teachers stated that they are told who the students are just two days before school starts. PE teachers claimed they had limited time to incorporate children with ID into their preparations because of the short notice. Miriana stated that, “sometimes you are not even made aware of the important physical conditions of some pupils, let alone their intellectual disabilities.”

1.2 Lack of Support from Schools and LSEs

PE teachers and LSEs stated that the major issue is that there is no specific equipment for students with ID. This keeps PE teachers from fully including students with ID, as stated by Anna. Miriana also went into further detail and explained that it is a long process to provide a student with an LSE, and that sometimes, when the student does in fact have an LSE, they do not bother to show up for the PE lesson.

1.3 Flexible or Rigid Curriculum

The subject of physical education seems to be focused on the success of a few students rather than on the integration of all students. It also contradicts the National Curriculum Framework (MEDE, 2012), which states that:

Assessment procedures will ensure that the children’s development in this area of learning is suitably recorded and used to inform further teaching and learning strategies


When it comes to the curriculum, there are mixed opinions and views. Three PE teachers find the curriculum rigid while Miriana finds it flexible. She argued that, “as long as there are no PE exams all is good as it gives us the ability to adapt and modify according to the present situation/population.”
1.4 Class Size

A class full of students with different abilities makes it difficult for PE teachers to create and deliver differentiated lessons that meet the needs of all students. Brabo (2014) acknowledges that differentiating instructions for students with intellectual disabilities has become more difficult. Larger class sizes present several challenges to effective teaching, including the inability to provide effective feedback to all students, and the difficulty of building rapport and personal connections. PE teachers find it difficult to keep an eye on all the students during PE lessons since the classes are of twenty-five or thirty students. Anna further explained that even for a class of twenty-five students without a student with ID, “it is too much for a PE teacher, especially outside.”

Theme 2: The PE Lesson

2.1 Student-centred Environment

‘For me (it) is the student engagement first and foremost and then the syllabus.’ – Miriana. All PE teachers and LSEs try to make the environment as student-centred as possible. During PE lessons, LSEs said that they mostly support and prompt their student. LSEs also repeat instructions and act as models for the student. According to Rachel, through modelling, the student can try to truly follow by seeing what needs to be done. In order for the student to benefit from PE, the PE teacher and the LSE must share their expertise and convey their opinions. Their collaboration and cooperation are critical to the student’s effective integration (Rouse 2009).

2.2 Grouping Students so There is a Mixture in Ability

During PE lessons, Miriana and Paul split the class into teams or pairs themselves, the reason being that students would otherwise either stay in the same groups, limiting socialisation among different students, or they would always want to win so they form the strongest team and the game would not be fair. Gerrard uses a different approach as the first couple of picks are chosen by the students and then he divides the rest accordingly. Significantly, a study by Fletcher (2008) examines the effects of grouping by abilities. A positive aspect that emerged was that this may provide an efficient and effective means of individualised instruction. This creates an environment that is less intimidating for students with lower ability levels. On the other hand, a disadvantage of ability grouping is limited socialisation and interactions between students. Another drawback is that segregated students with ID may feel discouraged and demotivated (Fletcher 2008).

2.3 How Teachers’ Attitudes Influence the Attitudes of Students With and Without Intellectual Disabilities

Paul stated that, in his opinion, PE gives students opportunities to interact with one another so that they can build friendships and a sense of belongingness. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and it is the teachers’ role to help students with ID identify and develop their strengths. Miriana therefore strives to build equality from day one in a respectful and acceptable environment. Physical education teachers are aware that they may encounter students with a variety of abilities in each of their classes. Physical educators must be willing to involve their students in a wide range of activities, from non-competitive sports and leisure activities to individual goal setting and/or competitive team games and activities (Tripp et al. 2007).
Theme 3: Benefits of Inclusive Physical Education

3.1 Students with Intellectual Disabilities

LSEs had mixed opinions and perceptions when asked if they think that inclusive PE influences students with ID. These included the fact that since the PE lesson is less structured, the student is calmer and more at ease, with Daniela saying, for instance, that “The student at times feels calmer during PE especially since there is no writing.” Joseph added that the student is more cooperative, as well as freer to be loud in PE lessons. Additionally, Rachel stated that when students with ID are included in PE lessons, they are given a great burst of energy. Students with ID are more likely to develop social skills and confidence when they are included. Furthermore, they enhance their sense of self, learn appropriate behaviour from their peers, and form relationships with them (School Specialty 2017).

Their self-esteem and social skills are affected as well, as they interact with other students more. According to Joseph, “inclusion offers more modelling of good behaviours and they adapt to socialisation skills such as turn taking and walking in a line.” Students with ID therefore become more aware of what is happening around them. Miriana likewise expressed that she sees inclusion as a beneficial aspect in education. She feels that students with ID experience a sense of belongingness and improve their self-esteem and sense of healthy competition. Paul agreed with Miriana and added that through inclusive PE lessons, students with ID are being prepared for their future, where everyone is different, but everyone can contribute to society. In inclusive settings, children with mild and moderate disabilities improve their motor performance and self-concept (Beuter 1983; Block and Volger 2013).

3.2 Typically Developed Students

Gerrard stated that inclusive PE benefits mainstream students as well, as it makes them more accepting of others. Joseph expressed that this is a great opportunity for mainstream students as they have the chance to model good behaviour and improve social skills. During games and pair work in PE lessons, they can also be peer buddies to students with ID:

*It will be a win-win situation where the mainstream students helping will be enhancing their leadership skills, and the student with ID will be gaining friendship, playtime, socialising, and furthermore, independence from their LSE* – Andrew.

Mainstream students also have the chance to generate meaningful friendships. Indeed, Bunch and Valeo (2004) emphasized that inclusive PE increases the appreciation and acceptance of individual differences amongst students without ID. Respect for all people and greater academic outcomes are also gained through inclusive PE. Furthermore, inclusion gives the opportunity for mainstream students to master activities by leading others. It also prepares students for adult life in an inclusive society (Bunch and Valeo 2004).

3.3 Classroom vs. Physical Education Settings - The Behavioural Change in Relation to Lessons

Asked about whether there was a behavioural change when students with ID transition from classroom to PE settings, LSEs had mixed opinions. Daniela stated that after the lesson, the student feels more relaxed as the lesson allows him to let go of his frustration. Joseph stated that, after a PE lesson, the student is similarly calmer and so he is more focused in class. However, he also added that at times, students are more energised and need some
time to calm down to regain focus on the next lesson. Students are expected to sit still, pay attention, and be quiet in a classroom setting, hence for students with ID, the classroom setting is challenging, and may hinder their capacity to excel in school (Harlacher et al. 2006). A study conducted by Rardin (2014) likewise concluded that there are both positive and negative behavioural changes.

Theme 4: Challenges of Inclusive Physical Education

4.1 Type and Severity of Intellectual Disabilities and Participation during Physical Education Lessons

Daniela explained that since lessons are not specifically focused on the needs of students with different types and severity of ID, games may at times be difficult for them to understand. Rachel agreed with this statement, adding that some students with autism have difficulty participating, even though their peers try to include them in the games and activities.

Moreover, Andrew and Joseph stated that there may be times when students with ID do not accept certain rules that are introduced during games. Furthermore, students with ID do not fully accept that it is not always about winning, but just doing their best and having fun. Likewise, Miriana acknowledged that game instructions and rule adherence are not always something students with ID can follow easily. These findings are corroborated by Cook (2017), who found that children with ID had a hard time following directions and instructions during PE lessons. They also acted out in class and did not obey game rules. As a result, they did not participate to the maximum of their ability. According to Portis (1997), students with ID may also be hesitant to participate in particular activities and may be doubtful about their chances of winning.

4.2 Behavioural Issues

Behavioural issues are another factor that creates challenges for inclusive PE. PE teachers stated that when students with ID are having one of their bad days, they often disturb other students. In fact, Paul had an experience where a student with ADHD started running around and throwing equipment and ended up hurting himself. Daniela agreed with the above statement and added that, “when there is a lot of work given to students, the student gets frustrated.” Also significant is the fact that most students with ID struggle with motor skills and coordination. They frequently fail in sports and are rejected and excluded by their classmates, resulting in significant levels of frustration (Portis 1997). PE teachers, according to Higgins et al. (2018), may make a variety of changes to the way lessons are structured and how equipment is used in the physical education setting to increase participation and enjoyment for all students. When these simple modifications are combined, they can help to decrease behavioural issues and downtime (Higgins et al. 2018).

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to raise awareness about the benefits of inclusion on children with intellectual disabilities while also analysing the barriers. Another important aim is to change society’s view on children with intellectual disabilities. By having done this study, inclusion is encouraged by openness, acceptance, and collaboration, thus promoting diversity.

Results showed a variety of mixed perceptions and experiences on the benefits and even challenges of inclusive PE. Some PE teachers and LSEs stated that inclusive PE benefits both
students with ID and typically developed students. Students with ID experience freedom and tend to be calmer during PE lessons, as there is less structure. Their self-esteem and social skills improve as they interact more with other peers. Typically developed students gain leadership skills as they are helping and directing students with ID. Challenges of inclusive PE were also identified. The type and severity of ID makes a difference when it comes to participating and behaving well in PE lessons. PE teachers state that when they are having one of their bad days they often disturb other students. The LSEs and PE teachers always keep the students in the centre of the lesson. LSEs support and prompt their students, while also repeating instructions and demonstrations when needed. PE teachers plan their lessons based on the majority’s ability and then adapt accordingly during the lesson.

I believe that the objective to reduce stigma and inform people about these benefits was reached. Both PE teachers and LSEs learned how to make the life of students easier during PE lessons by improving communication and always putting the student first. As shown throughout the study, policymakers have an impact on how these students learn and grow as individuals during physical education. More importance should be given when it comes to class sizes and trying to move forward with a more flexible curriculum. In addition, LSEs should be given additional professional development so that they help wherever and whenever needed during the PE lesson.

Limitations

Firstly, the literature reviewed was obtained from foreign research since little to no information was found in the context of Malta. Furthermore, language is important because it is used to express and influence meaning. Some of the participants tended to switch back and forth between Maltese and English, which could have influenced their interpretation of their experience. Another limitation includes the fact that due to Covid-19, interviews had to be done online and so non-verbal cues could not be analysed.

Recommendations for Future Research

As previously mentioned, there is little to no research on inclusion and integration in the Maltese context. Hence, more local research with a larger sample size should be conducted. In conclusion, further research could be conducted in the field of intellectual disabilities and the connection to sport and physical activity.

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