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Abbreviations

PAS: Physical Activity and Sport; SEN:
Special Educational Needs

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Opinion

Can Physical Education Improve Attitudes towards Disability?

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Abstract

Nowadays, there is still some discrimination against people with disabilities, which tends to manifest itself subtly within “politically correct” parameters. These manifestations have a negative charge that can provoke feelings of rejection and fear, thus blocking the process of social inclusion of this group, which began several decades ago. Among several constraints, the literature indicates the negative attitudes of people without disabilities towards their peers with disabilities as one of the main barriers, and therefore, they consider positive attitudes as a criterion for success in the inclusion process. In the school context, the physical education discipline has been presented as an excellent tool for the development of positive attitudes towards disability due to its experiential and playful nature, potentially cooperative, which leads to deep personal interactions. In this context, structured contact between groups is seen as the basis that sustains these changes. It is in this way that in this opinion text, we focus on the results of research based on the theory of contact applied through the discipline of physical education and the development of positive attitudes. We conclude that, despite the large number of variables involved in the research presented, the results are indeed encouraging.

Introduction

According to the World Report on disability, prepared by the World Health Organization and the world bank, people with disabilities represent an estimated population of more than one billion people in the world [1]. However, despite this high number, disability continues to be the target of discrimination based on a simple stigmatization process: The person has some characteristic that distinguishes him from what is considered “normal”, and based on this attribute, a set of negative bias particularities [2]. This connotation prevents other positive aspects of the individual from being identified, which hinders their integration into social relationships, contributing to a discriminatory framework [3]. In this way, the person with a disability is transformed into an incapable being without rights, liable to be socially excluded and prevented from fully participating in the community [4]. It is true that this negative conception of disability has varied throughout history and between different cultures, but it has generally been characterized by discriminatory attitudes and acts, which in many cases have resulted in aggression and violence, and which regrettably persist to present day [5]. According to Del Águila [6], currently this discrimination against disability is not expressed consciously, but is based on a series of previous prejudices inherited from ancient times and which have become a cultural substrate that makes them unconscious. Thus, subtly goes beyond the norms that prohibit prejudiced and discriminatory expressions, seen as a “socially acceptable” way of expressing prejudice without being connoted in this way [7].

In this sense, despite not being explicitly manifested, subtle prejudices have a negative charge that can provoke emotions of rejection, contempt and fear; warning of a contradiction between the speech of the person and his practice. However, according to Bisol [8] seem to envision some changes in this regard, although the full well-being and performance of the rights of people with disabilities remain far from being a reality, prevailing a devalued image of the person with a disability [9]. Among the various obstacles to effecting this social transformation, today's literature points to the negative attitudes of people without disabilities as one of the main barriers to the practical-and not just theoretical-inclusion of people with disabilities [10-16]. In this respect, we understand attitude from a multidimensional perspective as a “long-lasting organization of beliefs and cognitions in general, endowed with an affective charge for or against a defined social object, which predisposes to an action consistent with the cognitions and affects related to this object” [17].

Faced with this scenario of exclusion, a question of interest arises: how to contribute to the process of social inclusion of people with disabilities, considering that the literature points to negative attitudes towards this group as one of the main obstacles? A possible answer is found in the specific bibliography, which shows promising effects on the development of positive attitudes towards disability when using Physical Activity and Sport (PAS) as a means for social inclusion [18-25]. Indeed, the investigation refers to the fact that interventions through the practice of PAS in inclusive environments must have an effective design that allows cooperation and help between groups of people with and without disabilities [16,26,27]. In this sense, some of the most effective strategies for reducing prejudice and promoting positive attitudes have been “direct contact” between groups and specific “information” about the collective which is expected to improve perception [28-30]. Therefore, when in a situation of cooperative sports practice there is direct contact between people with and without disabilities, benefits are achieved for both groups that can encourage a positive change in attitudes [18,19,22,25,31,32]. Likewise, when we provide information about disability, Adapted Sport and its practice, people involved in PAS programs show a more positive attitude towards the inclusion of people with disabilities [26,33-35].

In addition to direct contact and information, Pérez-Tejero et al. [27] state that in the PAS area, there are other strategies used to develop positive attitudes, such as persuasion and vicarious experience. Although, Rello et al. [26] include simulation and discussion groups as equally effective strategies, there seems to be a consensus that direct contact and information-with emphasis on the former-continue to be the strategies that produce the greatest effect on the positive development of attitudes [18,30,36-38]. Part of these strategies is based on the contact theory, proposed by the American psychologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s, which explains that stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination against a specific group can be reduced through direct contact with that collective group [39]. In a simplified way, the prejudice directed towards this minority can be reduced when the contact is structured based on four premises:



- i. Sharing equal status;
- ii. The community must institutionally and legislatively support the change;
- iii. Individuals should seek common goals; and
- iv. The joint work must be deep, genuine and intimate.

Therefore, the theory proposes that the direct contact favors the mutual experiences of knowledge of its elements, discovering the similarities and improving the perception between members of the groups. As a result, the perception of these affinities would generate an attraction between them that would encourage the groups to approach, and the opposite effect would lead to a breakdown in communication and the possibility of increasing hostility [40-42]. Based on this theory, it would be appropriate to state that any intervention that intends to develop positive attitudes towards a certain group through contact requires an adequate and intentional structuring of its components. This is because, in most cases, people interact with their peers with disabilities only when encouraged to do so [43]. In addition, we must take into account that casual contact is not only not effective [3,36,41,44,45], but it can still be harmful, functioning as an element that can reinforce the pre-existing negative attitude [46,47]. But what happens when this contact is accelerated by legislative changes? Does society keep pace with the inclusive vision of governments-currently the "social paradigm of inclusion" is the most widespread [48]? At this point, we must agree with Radlińska et al. [49], in which, in fact, social changes occur more slowly than legislative changes.

In this regard, since the appearance of the idea of an inclusive education in our daily lives (recommended by the World Declaration on Education for All-Thailand, 1990; and by the Salamanca Declaration-Spain, 1994), most students with some type of Special Educational Needs (SEN), derived from a disability, were progressively coaxed in regular centers with peers without disabilities, and therefore, accelerating coexistence between groups [29]. This situation has challenged educational systems to create learning environments that can adapt to the new expectations of social development in the 21st century-also pointed out by Delords [50]. However, despite the curricular and methodological changes necessary to effect school inclusion, research in this field has been stating that the change in attitudes of students without disabilities towards their peers with disabilities is a sine qua non factor for success in this area [12,27,35,41,51,52]. In this way, the current educational focus goes beyond the limits of integration, introducing programs that contribute to the development of positive attitudes towards this group. Therefore, inclusion is no longer the placement of students with SEN together with students without SEN, but the preparation of both for coexistence in diversity [30]. As indicated by Ocete et al. [38] the fact of recognizing attitude as one of the necessary success criteria for inclusive education has led many authors to focus their research on this aspect. It is in this context that Physical Education has been presented as a first-rate school subject for promoting inclusion and the development of positive attitudes towards disability [24,29,53-55], due to its experiential and playful, potentially cooperative character, which leads to deep personal interactions which generate conflicts and opportunities for their resolution [56,57].

In fact, research has shown encouraging results that state that a structured contact between students with and without SEN in physical education classes promotes the development of positive attitudes in the former towards the inclusion of the latter [18,22,23,34,58-60]. According to McKay [61], studies on inclusion in the physical education scenario have highlighted the instrumental role that students without SEN play in the experiences of peers with SEN, since peer rejection can limit opportunities for social learning and impair academic performance. Accordingly, Leitão & Da Silva [29] highlight the importance of the support and collaborative work of colleagues without SEN for the academic success of students with SEN, and by extension of inclusive education. In this way, we believe that it is necessary to establish specific methodologies that provide tools to help develop positive attitudes towards disability in students without SEN, while helping to create a truly inclusive environment [53,62]. In this context, many of the studies carried out on inclusion in schools have focused on teachers' attitudes towards students with SEN [63-65]; however, the line of research focused on students' attitudes towards their peers in physical education classes is increasingly frequent [18,23,24,38,66-68]. According to Garcia et al. [69]; Rello & Puerta [30] and Abrantes [70]; among others, regardless of whether they are centered on teachers or students, the theory with the greatest projection that has supported this type of research has been the theory of contact [39].

However, Rello et al. [16] state that the number of intervention studies in the school population has been relatively scarce, despite the recognition of PAS as potential developers of positive attitudes towards disability [25,29,37,38,62]. Some examples of research carried out through physical education classes with the aim of positively

influencing attitudes towards disability from interventions blurred in Contact Theory are Rello et al. [16]; Abellán et al. [18]; Krahé & Altwasser [33]; Ocete et al. [54] and others. In fact, many of the investigations carried out in physical education refer to cross-sectional analyzes in order to examine the attitudes of students towards their peers with SEN [23,62,67,71]. These non-interventional surveys normally emphasize the importance of this discipline in the development of attitudes towards disability, using variables such as "previous contact with relatives or friends with disabilities"; "previous contact with classmates with disabilities in physical education classes"; "respondent's gender"; "educational level"; "colleague's type of disability"; etc. Paradoxically, some researches indicated that students who had had previous contact with relatives or friends with disabilities, or even direct contact experience in physical education classes with peers with SEN, did not have a better attitude when compared to colleagues who did not have this contact [20,23,71]. In this sense, we emphasize that mere contact between people with and without disabilities-or students with and without SEN-alone is not enough to promote positive attitudes [45]. Therefore, we believe that the structure of the contact, as well as the quantitative and qualitative aspects of it, is decisive for the success of a positive change in attitudes and the abandonment of prejudices and stereotypes in relation to disability.

Regarding this structuring of contact, without detriment to what happened during interaction in the school environment; the Physical Education class provides an adequate formal means for the implementation of countless forms and possibilities of action. In her favor, this discipline presupposes equality of status among colleagues, which constitutes one of the favorable base conditions of contact theory [72]. However, we can question whether the current misinformation about the disability of the various members of the school educational community-sometimes based on the medical model of incapacity and limitation-allows us to understand diversity from the perspective of equity and not in terms of charity. In response, we emphasize that awareness and information about diversity must be stimulated and sustained by an inclusive and intentional school culture, that is, through conscious institutional support, which constitutes another of the favorable conditions of Gordon Allport's theory. Regarding the other two conditions for the success of proposals based on contact (cooperative work and intimate and deep experience that leads to better knowledge), we refer to the need for intentional pedagogical work that fosters an inclusive climate of sharing and collaboration, where experience success without necessarily going through the competition. Thus we realize that, a priori, the context of physical education allows the construction of reciprocally significant interactions, both at a cognitive, affective and motor level, where students can get to know each other better, having the opportunity to share feelings, a fact that is unlikely to happen in casual and sporadic contacts [29,45].

In this regard, we would like to underline that the main value of physical education, as a tool for inclusion, is based on obtaining social results and should be evaluated by the result based on the quantity and quality of networks of relationships that originate, the possibilities of participation and inclusion that allow, as well as the social skills that settle in the community [73]. According to the quantitative aspects, the studies by Rello et al. [16] and Reina et al. [74] indicated that prolonged contact between students with and without SEN has a more positive and lasting effect over time than shorter interventions. In fact, proposals with a longer duration [16,20,25,54] showed a greater effect on attitude than shorter studies [18,21,33]. As Leitão, Da Silva [29] state, without ignoring the importance of the duration of the contact, efforts should also be made in the qualitative factors (interdependence of objectives, methodology, selected content, etc.) that govern this contact. As an example, the introduction of thematic units of an inclusive nature in physical education classes through recreational activities and adapted sports (e.g. Football for people with visual impairments, Goalball, Paralympic Boccia, Paravolleyball, Adapted Athletics, etc.), seem to positively influence the promotion of attitudes towards disability [18,20,21,31,54,74,75].

Following this idea, we believe that the use of conventional sports modalities in the conventional molds-allow for the redundancy-stipulated in most of the current curricula of the physical education discipline, do not contribute to the inclusion of students with disabilities. In this sense, we advise its reformulation and new contents should be proposed (based on the inclusion of recreational activities and adapted sports modalities) that enrich Physical Education classes and foster diversity (similar reflections can be found in [21,26,31,35,62] and others). For this to happen, both institutional support and the training of teachers who must administer these contents are necessary; because, as we have already warned, the mere creation of contact situations at school between students with and without SEN-in other words "the integration of students with SEN in the classroom"-is not a sufficient condition for producing a positive change in the attitudes of students without disabilities towards their peers [68]. On the contrary, when both elements are presented in structured



contact environments-inclusive content and trained and motivated teachers for its implementation-the conditions are created for the development of positive attitudes by students without SEN towards disability. In relation to the evolution of attitude throughout the levels of education, Krahe & Altwasser [33] suggest that the change in attitudes responds to a developmental process initiated in childhood and that evolves positively until the beginning of adolescence-a moment in which it presents a slight decline-which improves at the end of life and grows throughout life (also suggested by Alves [51]). It is in this sense that research that aims at the positive growth of attitudes towards disability has carried out its interventions fundamentally with samples of students aged 10-13 years [16,20,21] and 14-16 years old [18,33,54,74].

In addition, Leitão & Da Silva [29] indicate that the type of disability seems to influence attitudes, with students having a more positive disposition towards the inclusion of colleagues with physical, motor and sensory disabilities than for colleagues with intellectual disabilities [45]. However, the presented intervention studies have not analyzed this association specifically, focusing their interests on the positive development of attitudes based on deficiencies of a physical-motor nature [21,32], visual [16,74], intellectual [18] or several simultaneously [20,54]. A possible explanation for this limitation may be related to the fact that all these studies use the simulation technique, which constitutes a difficulty in carrying out specific research on intellectual disability. In this sense, the use of this technique in playful and sporting activities based on the simulation of physical-motor and sensory impairment seems to have a greater experiential effect on participants. Regarding the student's gender, the results seem to conclude that girls have more positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities than boys [16,20,74]. These results coincide with those found in Rodríguez, et al. [62]; Parada [68]; Van Biesen et al. [76] and others; being pointed out as explanatory hypotheses the greater empathy of women in relation to men [16]; or different socialization experiences, and culturally girls have been educated to be more attentive, affectionate and tolerant [51]. Still, in the educational context, this relationship seems to be maintained from primary to higher education [24], and there still seem to be no differences between different countries [51,77]. However, this positive relationship was found in qualitative and quantitative studies even before carrying out any intervention [78].

Final Considerations

Although the contact theory proposed by Allport [39] was belatedly applied to research centered on changing attitudes towards disability, from the 1970s onwards, research conducted in this field proliferated. Many of these studies have used PAS as an ideal means to change positive attitudes towards disability, obtaining promising results [19-22,25,32,61]. In fact, we find contact with people with disabilities as one of the variables that lead to success both in school programs-through the discipline of physical education-and through PAS [16,24,25,59,67,71,79,80]. In this way, studies continue to be carried out that demonstrate that these areas, when programmed under a paradigm of social inclusion, can be an extraordinary means to improve the attitudes of people without disabilities towards people with disabilities [14,16,18,35,54,63,79,81]. It is in this sense that physical education curricula must not forget their role as facilitators of building social skills and egalitarian spaces that generate values and promote human development from a holistic view of the being. Therefore, and in line with the bibliography, we recognize physical education as a potentially facilitating tool for the effective process of inclusion of students with SEN [19,22,24,26,35,82-85].

We can conclude that despite inclusion still being seen as an obstacle to be overcome, physical education can contribute greatly to forming more inclusive citizens, and by extension, making society more inclusive [86]. In this regard, we agree with Rodrigues & Lima-Rodrigues [87] in the existence of three strong arguments, which can contribute to the contact between groups and the change of attitudes:

- i. They have more flexible programs since both the physical education curricular subject and school sports and recreational activities are more receptive to differentiated and diversified programs;
- ii. They contain a strong playful component and social interaction, which helps in the formation and development of a sense of belonging, solidarity and cooperation, fundamental for the generation of an inclusive environment;
- iii. The activities developed can significantly mobilize the cognitive, social and affective area, in addition to motor development and performance.

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