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INCLUSIVE PHYSICAL EDUCATION: BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS TOWARDS THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract: This study investigated the beliefs and attitudes of Physical Education teachers towards people with disabilities, considering the variability in previous experiences and specific training in the area of inclusion. The sample consisted of 101 teachers (52 women and 49 men), aged between 22 and 66 ($M=40.17$; $SD=10.99$). The Portuguese version of the “Attitudes Toward Disabled People Scale” (Verdugo et al., 1995) was used, consisting of 37 items divided into five dimensions. The data was collected through an online questionnaire and analyzed using IBM SPSS 29.0 software. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, *Spearman’s* correlation and multivariate analysis (GLM), with $p \leq 0.05$ as the significance level. The results show that specific training and previous experience with students with disabilities are positively associated with more favorable attitudes towards inclusion. In addition, factors such as teachers’ age and gender can influence their beliefs and attitudes. This study provides some contributions to the training of Physical Education teachers, coaches and other technicians in the field of Adapted Physical and Sports Activity. **Keywords:** physical education; beliefs; attitudes; inclusion; teachers; disability, adapted sport

INTRODUCTION

It is now known that people with disabilities represent around 15% of the world’s population, amounting to more than one billion worldwide (Fontes, 2016). This number has been growing, mainly due to the increased longevity of the population and greater social awareness of the conditions of people with disabilities. These people face a wide range of challenges, which vary according to the type and degree of disability. Among the main ones are difficulties in accepting body image, getting around, accessing education and, above all, full inclusion in various social and school contexts. Social exclusion and inadequate

physical spaces, especially in educational environments, continue to be significant barriers.

The practice of physical activity has been widely recognized for its benefits for physical, mental and social health, and is essential for improving the quality of life of the population in general, while for people with disabilities it has proved to be a fundamental tool for full inclusion (Crawford et al., 2008). In the educational context, Physical Education occupies a prominent place in fostering social integration and active integration among students, facilitating rehabilitation and empowerment.

rehabilitation and empowerment. Participation in adapted physical activities allows students with disabilities to feel more valued and included, promoting a more inclusive school environment (Januário, 2021).

To achieve effective inclusion, it is essential to understand how teachers perceive the structural and pedagogical barriers that limit the participation of students with disabilities. This includes assessing the extent to which the Physical Education curriculum is adjusted to the needs of these students and identifying strategies to overcome prejudices still rooted in the school environment. Ongoing teacher training and the provision of specific resources are fundamental in this process, ensuring that pedagogical practices promote equal opportunities and reinforce the benefits of adapted sport.

Changing beliefs and attitudes, with the consequent operationalization of friendly behaviour towards difference, which leads to real inclusion and the consequent personal and social development of young students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities, in full cohabitation in the classroom, implies that training in the initial certification courses for sports professionals in general (particularly Physical Education teachers and Sports Coaches) and the consequent lifelong

monitoring, accompanying the need for continuous training, should not be neglected. On the other hand, it seems clear that we will only have more inclusion and acceptance of disabled students among their non-disabled peers if contact with disability is regular and non-stigmatized. Several studies have shown that this prior contact with the disabled person is a determining factor in developing empathy, compassion and acceptance of others (Ferreira et al., 2019, 2020; Januário & Ferreira, 2022). Cooperative teaching strategies and working in pairs make a decisive contribution to understanding the disabled student and their limitations and potential, reflecting in the accountability of both and all.

Education is fundamental and plays a key role in the visibility of these people in society and contributes to the increase in sports practice in individuals with disabilities. Teachers emerge as central figures in this process, promoting inclusion in schools and breaking down stigmas and prejudices (Lara & Pinto, 2016). As well as mediating interactions between students, teachers have the power to shape students' perceptions.

to shape students' perceptions of differences. Studying teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards students with disabilities in Physical Education classes is essential to understanding the processes that facilitate or hinder inclusion.

Beliefs are defined as personal convictions about a particular object, concept or situation, while attitudes represent broader and more dynamic orientations towards these same objects (Ajzen & Cote, 2008; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In the context of disability, teachers' beliefs and attitudes have a direct influence on inclusive behavior, since they shape pedagogical practices, interactions with students and perceptions of each individual's potential. Teachers' beliefs about the abilities of students with disabilities can profoundly influence the

type of support that is offered in the classroom and the quality of interaction between students with and without disabilities. In this way, understanding these dimensions becomes fundamental to promoting changes that foster a more inclusive environment in the school community and, more specifically, in Physical Education classes, thus reiterating the importance of adapted sport as a fundamental tool for full inclusion.

The literature indicates that although the majority of teachers show positive attitudes towards inclusion, some resistance persists that challenges inclusive principles (Ferreira et al., 2020). Several factors have been associated with teachers' attitudes, such as gender, length of service, specific training and knowledge of adapted sport, and previous contact with people with disabilities. These elements can influence both the predisposition and effectiveness of teachers in creating an inclusive environment (using adapted physical activity and sports), reinforcing the need for ongoing training and awareness-raising strategies. In addition, factors such as institutional support and the availability of adapted resources also play an important role in the effectiveness of these strategies, acting as barriers or facilitators to sports practice for people/athletes with disabilities.

Promoting inclusion in Physical Education classes is not limited to adapting activities, but also involves changing attitudes and making educators aware of the importance of equal opportunities for all students. Anclusion goes beyond the physical presence of students with disabilities, and encompasses full and active participation in all dimensions of school life (UNESCO, 2009). True inclusion involves a continuous process of reflection and adaptation on the part of teachers, who must be trained to recognize and value diversity, not only in terms of physical abilities, but also with regard to the individual and cultural characteristics of each student. In this sense, teachers

must be trained not only to adapt curriculum content, but also to develop social and emotional skills that favor integration and interaction between students with and without disabilities (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007).

In addition, creating an inclusive environment requires an empathetic and critical approach from teachers, who must promote solidarity and combat the stigmas that persist in many schools and sports contexts (Sherrill, 2004). Ongoing training and institutional support, combined with a change of mentality in teaching practices, are crucial to transforming Physical Education into a truly inclusive space, as well as in the field of adapted physical and sporting activities (Januário, 2021). Teachers and coaches must be prepared to deal with a wide variety of situations and understand the different forms of disability, adjusting their pedagogical practices as necessary (Abellán & Januário, 2017). Training programs that integrate case studies and specific methodologies for Adapted Physical Education and adapted physical and sporting activities have proven effective in changing the attitudes of teachers and coaches.

In this sense, this study aims to contribute to understanding the beliefs and attitudes of Physical Education teachers towards disability, highlighting factors that influence their practices and identifying paths for interventions that promote effective inclusion. In the long term, these efforts will contribute to the creation of a fairer and more equal society, in which the inclusion of all individuals is not only a necessity, but also a reality experienced in everyday school life, recognizing and taking advantage of Adapted Sport as a fundamental tool.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 101 Physical Education teachers (52 women and 49 men), aged between 22 and 66 ($M=40.17$; $SD=10.99$) took part in this study. The selection of participants was based on strict criteria, ensuring a representative and diverse sample in terms of experience and training. The inclusion criterion was based on active professional practice and willingness to take part in the study. Among the participants, some had already had previous contact with people with disabilities, while others had not. In addition, the sample included teachers from different levels of education, which allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of beliefs and attitudes in different educational contexts. Variability in terms of specific training in the area of inclusion and Adapted Physical Education was also taken into account, in order to allow for a diverse sample. Equal distribution between men and women was also an important factor to ensure that the analysis reflected different gender perspectives.

INSTRUMENTS

The Portuguese version of the “Attitudes towards disabled people scale” by Verdugo, Aris and Jenario (1995) was used. This scale includes 37 items organized into five dimensions: Valuing Ability and Limitations (VCL), Recognition/Denial of Rights (RND), Personal Implications (IP), Generic Classification (CG) and Task Assumption (AT). The items are evaluated on a six-point *Likert* scale, ranging from “Totally disagree” (1) to “Totally agree” (6).

PROCEDURES

The data was collected anonymously and confidentially, with the informed consent of the participants. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Human Motricity. Responses were obtained via an online questionnaire, ensuring accessibility to participants from different geographical locations.

DATA ANALYSIS

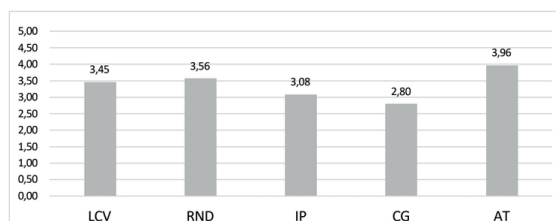
The data was analyzed using the IBM SPSS version 29.0 statistical program. Initially, a descriptive analysis of the variables was carried out, including frequency, mean, standard deviation and minimum and maximum values. This initial stage allowed us to understand the distribution of responses and the general characterization of the sample. Subsequently, a *Spearman* correlation was conducted to explore the relationships between the dimensions assessed and a multivariate analysis of variance (GLM). All statistical analyses considered a significance level of $p \leq 0.05$. The analyses were conducted with the aim of identifying patterns of attitudes among the teachers and how these attitudes might vary based on different factors, such as previous experience with people with disabilities, specific training, age and gender.

RESULTS

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The results showed that, in general, teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities were considered favorable. It was observed that the most valued attitudes were associated with the LCV dimension, which obtained an average of 3.96, reflecting a more positive and inclusive attitude on the part of the teachers. In contrast, the GC dimension obtained the lowest average, with only 2.80, indicating that

teachers showed less support and development of strategies regarding the generic classification of interactions with students with disabilities. Graph 1 shows the average values for the different dimensions.



Graph 1 Average values for the dimensions

Several studies coincide with these results, showing that teachers generally have positive attitudes towards disability (Doulkeridou et al., 2011; Emmers et al., 2020; San Martin et al., 2021). On the other hand, other studies have shown exactly the opposite, reporting that teachers have negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities (Hersman & Hodge, 2010; Rekaa et al., 2018).

GENDER

Analyzing the results by gender, it was observed that, in general, male teachers had slightly more positive attitudes compared to female teachers, although overall these differences were not statistically significant. The difference between genders was only statistically significant in the PI dimension ($F(1.99) = 4.301$, $p = 0.042$, $n^2p = 0.066$), with men having a higher mean value. This difference suggests that men may feel more comfortable promoting positive personal interactions with students with disabilities than women, as evidenced by the results. These results are contrary to some previous research showing that female teachers, in general, tend to have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities (Alasim & Paul, 2018; Alhumaid et al., 2022; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022). However, there are also studies which show

that men have more positive attitudes (Al-quraini, 2012; Obrusnikova, 2008), or which have found no significant differences between the genders (Januário & Ferreira, 2022).

AGE

Analysis of the data in relation to teachers' age revealed a statistically significant association with all the dimensions except TA. The correlation was moderate for the GC dimension and weak for the others. In general terms, the older the teachers, the more positive their attitudes were towards the inclusion of students with disabilities, which may be a reflection of greater experience in classroom management and greater maturity and experience in pedagogical approaches.

Table 2 shows the correlations between teachers' age and the different dimensions studied.

AGE	VCL_MED	RND_MED	IP_MED	CG_MED	AT_MED
Correlation Coefficient	.273**	.247*	.344**	.452**	-.123
Sig. (2 ends)	.006	.013	<.001	<.001	.219

Table 1 Age-Dimensions correlation

Table 2 illustrates these correlations in detail, showing the association between age and all the dimensions except AT. The correlation values indicate that the relationship between age and the LCV, NLR and PI dimensions is weak, while the GC dimension showed a moderate correlation. The results suggest that, overall, older teachers tend to have more inclusive beliefs and attitudes.

These results corroborate some of the studies previously carried out, which indicate that older, more experienced teachers have more positive attitudes (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Beyazoğlu & Özbek, 2024). On the other hand, Alhumaid's (2022) study reports that older teachers have been shown to have less positive attitudes and more resistance to

pedagogical changes. Avramidis & Norwich (2002) state that younger teachers have been shown to have more positive attitudes.

PREVIOUS CONTACT WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Previous contact with people with disabilities proved to be an important variable in shaping teachers' attitudes. Those who had already had some kind of contact with people with disabilities had more positive attitudes, with higher averages in the RND, IP and CG dimensions. The difference was statistically significant for the RND ($F(1.99)= 4.024, p= 0.049$), IP ($F(1.99)= 5.103, p=$

0.027) and CG ($F(1.99)= 4.064, p= 0.048$), indicating that previous contact favors improvement in the way teachers perceive and interact with students with disabilities.

	Previous contact with people with disabilities	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
VCL AVERAGE	NO	3.16	0.23	2.90	3.60
	YES	3.48	0.77	2.30	5.90
AVERAGE RND	NO	3.10	0.22	2.64	3.27
	YES	3.61	0.89	2.45	6.00
AVERAGE IP	NO	2.62	0.27	2.43	3.29
	YES	3.12	1.27	1.71	6.00
CG AVERAGE	NO	2.52	1.22	1.00	5.40
	YES	2.82	1.05	1.00	5.00
AVERAGE AT	NO	3.97	0.96	2.75	5.50
	YES	3.96	0.77	2.00	5.50

Table 2 Mean values for the variable previous contact with people with disabilities

The literature corroborates these results, suggesting that direct contact with people with disabilities is an important factor in changing teachers' attitudes (Abellán et al., 2016; Alnahdi, 2021; Alnahdi et al., 2020). Practical experience also seems to be fundamental in creating greater empathy and understanding

of the needs of these students (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Ferreira et al., 2020; Januário & Ferreira, 2022; Obrusnikova, 2008; Teixeira, 2019). On the other hand, some studies show that teachers who have had previous contact do not always have positive attitudes (Alasim & Paul, 2018; Alhumaid et al., 2022). In addition, Tripp & Rizzo (2006) state in their article that prior contact may not influence attitudes in any way, either positively or negatively.

SPECIFIC TRAINING

The variable “specific training” proved to be one of the main factors for more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities. Teachers who had specific training showed significantly higher mean scores in several dimensions of the questionnaire, such as CLV, NLR and PI. The difference was especially notable in the dimensions of CLV ($F(1.99)= 6.759, p= 0.012$), NLR ($F(1.99)= 6.147, p= 0.04$) and PI

($F(1.99)= 7.268, p=0.009$), showing that specialized training in inclusion and Adapted Physical Education contributes to a more inclusive perception among teachers. This data reinforces the importance of continuing training programs and as suggested by Block (2007) so that teachers feel more prepared and confident in dealing with diversity in the classroom.

Comparing teachers with and without specific training (table 4), it can be seen that teachers with specific training tend to have more inclusive beliefs and attitudes, particularly with regard to recognizing the abilities and needs of students with disabilities, their rights and the personal implications involved in including these students.

	Specific training	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
M E D I A VCL	NO	3.2158	0.38	2.40	4.50
	YES	3.7636	0.95	2.30	5.90
M E D I A RND	NO	3.2568	0.46	2.55	5.82
	YES	3.9545	1.08	2.45	6.00
MEDIA IP	NO	2.6692	0.66	1.71	6.00
	YES	3.6071	1.55	1.71	6.00
CG MEDIA	NO	2.5895	0.97	1.00	5.40
	YES	3.0682	1.13	1.00	4.80
MEDIA AT	NO	3.9342	0.85	2.00	5.50
	YES	4.0000	0.71	2.75	5.50

Table 3 Average values for the specific training variable

These results are consistent with those of previous research, such as those by Hutzler (2019; 2005), Ferreira (2019) and Avramidis & Norwich (2002), which state that specific training is a crucial factor in changing teachers’ attitudes and improving inclusive pedagogical practices. The literature also suggests that increased knowledge about the needs of students with disabilities, acquired through specific training, facilitates the creation of a more inclusive environment in Physical Education classes (Januário & Ferreira, 2022).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of this study indicate that factors such as previous contact with people with disabilities and specific training in inclusive environments have a positive impact on teachers’ attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Although gender and age also influence these attitudes, specific training and previous contact stand out as the most significant elements in the development of inclusive teaching practices. It is important to note that, although specific training plays a crucial role, the practical implementation of the knowledge acquired during training is equally funda-

mental to transforming attitudes and practices in the classroom. These results reveal that specific training programs, along with a continuous assessment of teachers' and coaches' needs, should be expanded to ensure that they are better prepared to deal with diversity in their classes and training, promoting a more inclusive physical education and sport. In addition, collaboration with other professionals, such as special education colleagues, psychologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, can be an effective strategy to enrich pedagogical practice and ensure the effective inclusion of students with disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS

The independent variables analyzed in this study were shown to differentiate Physical Education teachers' attitudes towards disability, especially in the dimensions of CLV, NDR and PI. The data indicates that specific training in inclusion and previous contact with people with disabilities are essential factors in improving teachers' attitudes, favoring greater receptiveness and commitment to promoting inclusion in their classes. These results corroborate previous studies which indicate that teacher preparation and awareness have a direct impact on the effectiveness of inclusive practices in school contexts.

Furthermore, we suggest that the development of an inclusive approach depends not only on specific training, but also on an ongoing commitment to developing positive and empathetic attitudes. Although significant progress has been made in understanding the factors that contribute to teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in PE lessons, we believe that there are still important gaps to be studied. There is a need to further explore the relationship between continuous training and the transformation of attitudes into concrete actions in pedagogical practice. A critical aspect

that emerges is the need for more in-depth research into the long-term impact of ongoing training programs for teachers, since often the effects of initial training can be temporary or subject to weakening over time if there is no re-evaluation of these practices.

In addition, it is necessary to consider the role of specific contextual factors that can influence teachers' attitudes, such as school infrastructure, support from other professionals (psychologists, social workers) and the culture of the educational institution. The interaction between these factors and teachers' attitudes can provide a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the inclusion process. These elements have the potential to facilitate or hinder the effective implementation of inclusive policies, requiring a more integrated approach.

Another relevant aspect is the consideration of individual differences between teachers, such as their length of service, previous training, and direct experience with students with disabilities. These factors should be taken into account when designing professional development programs, focusing on the specific needs of each educator. The research also points to the importance of robust institutional support, which includes the creation of a support network for teachers, with adequate resources and clear policies that guarantee the continuity of inclusive practices. In addition, collaboration between teachers from different disciplines can create a more inclusive environment and better integrate the needs of students with disabilities.

Finally, it is essential that future research seeks to explore in more depth how teachers' attitudes can be transformed into concrete behaviors in the classroom, and how these changes can be sustained over time. Continuous monitoring and reflection on these inclusive practices should be part of an educational culture that values diversity. With this

in-depth understanding, it will be possible to ensure that Physical Education and physical and sporting activities effectively become a space for inclusion and full participation for

all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

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