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## INCLUSION IN SCHOOL: PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS WITH IMPAIRMENTS



## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Using data from sociological research conducted among teachers of Polish schools in 2023, the authors investigated the attitudes of teachers towards students with impairments (SWI) participating in the program School Sports Club (SKS).

**Material and methods:** The analyses were based on research conducted in 2023 by the Department of Social Sciences at the Institute of Sport-National Research Institute (IS-PIB) among students and teachers of Polish schools. The presented results are part of a sociological study that included a total of 5,330 respondents, comprising 2,294 PE teachers and 3,036 students, and reflect the opinions of teachers towards students with impairments.

**Results:** The results indicated that most teachers do not have direct contact with SWI, which affects their opinions and lack of readiness to work with such students. Only 15% of teachers have experience working with impaired students, and 66% express openness to such cooperation, but often with certain conditions. It was found that teachers with longer work experience and higher qualifications are not more open to working with SWI. Teachers need appropriate training and continuous professional development to effectively include SWI in sports activities.

**Conclusions:** It seems necessary to pay attention to the interdisciplinary nature of education so that PE teachers have a broader view of their students' needs. Practitioners with broad perspectives on conducting physical activity classes were more likely to use individualized criteria and facilitate integration than those who demonstrated narrow perspectives, such as strictly adhering to the curriculum and expected normative performance.

**KEYWORDS:** *ableism, students with impairments, school, PE teachers, disability, sociology of youth*

## INTRODUCTION

In Poland, 53% of students with a disability attend school, with 518,000 (31%) studying in special centers and 1,138,000 (69%) in mainstream schools (GUS, 2023a). This means that the majority of students with impairments (SWI) study in mainstream schools (36%) (GUS, 2023b), thus having the same right to participate in all activities, including sports. This article aims to draw attention to the pressing issue of the risk of exclusion, especially regarding the opportunities offered by the school for beneficiaries of the School Sports Club (SKS) program, which potentially brings many benefits,

from health to mental, for its participants. These positive outcomes bypass disabled students. Inclusion is at the forefront of global educational reforms, and issues related to engaging disabled people in sports activities pose a challenge in the modern world (Block et al., 2010; Reina et al., 2019). It turns out that teachers worldwide face the inclusion of SWI in mainstream classes – hence the justified need to support them by providing adapted physical education (PE) lessons at school. However, PE teachers often do not feel sufficiently prepared or confident to participate in the inclusion process. Although a significant number of studies on this topic have been identified, researchers have emphasized the need for additional research to shed more light on the factors influencing the formation of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and their inclusive practices (Hutzler et al., 2019). The school, its infrastructure, teaching staff, classmates, and their parents are not prepared for the inclusion of physically and mentally excluded young Poles. Ableism can act to exclude and marginalize people with impairments or promote language and practices that ignore or devalue disability (Lynch et al., 2023). Therefore, it is extremely important that teachers responsible for increasing the accessibility of PE lessons and creating opportunities for contact with sports during extracurricular activities practice various methods of including SWI in the context of conducted activities. An appropriate approach to class participants develops a strong sense of community and meaningful relationships while destabilizing invisible but pervasive ableist discourses. To overcome skepticism towards implementing inclusive sports activities in schools, we need to better understand the mechanisms that will favor inclusion and identify and plan access to appropriate educational and developmental opportunities for PE teachers.

## METHODS

The presented analyses are based on the latest research by the Department of Social Sciences at the Institute of Sport-National Research Institute (IS-PIB), conducted among teachers of Polish schools in 2023. The study was conducted from the beginning of November to the end of December 2023. A survey link was sent to teachers participating in the SKS program. The Survio program,

which was used to conduct the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) survey, registered 3,803 visits. The completion rate was 60%. One and a half thousand surveys were not completed, and thus their results were not included in the report. We obtained responses from 2,294 SKS PE teachers. The online questionnaire was previously piloted among 44 PE teachers.

## **CHAPTER ONE: PARTICIPANTS**

The entire sample consisted of 2,294 PE teachers. Among Polish teachers, men outnumber women 61% to 39%. 81.5% of the respondents represent primary schools, and 18.5% represent secondary schools. Most of the respondents live in villages and small towns, which is also a nationwide trend. 35% of the respondents work in villages, 20% in towns up to 20,000 inhabitants, 17% in small cities from 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, 10% in cities from 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, 11.5% in large cities from 100,000 to 500,000 inhabitants, and 6% in cities over 500,000 inhabitants. By grouping the residence categories, we get the following ordinal scale: villages 35%, small towns 20%, cities from 20,000 to 100,000 27%, and the largest cities 17.5%. This regrouping provided us with a better opportunity for comparisons. Another leading variable is the age of the respondents. Most of them are people with long work experience, extensive coaching experience, and work with children and youth. As many as 81% of the respondents are teachers with 16 to 40 years of experience.

## **CHAPTER TWO: SKS PE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENTS WITH IMPAIRMENTS**

Our goal is to compare the opinions of PE teachers who would willingly cooperate with SWI with those who exclude such cooperation. We assumed that following a cognitive path through hypotheses and their empirical verification would bring us closer to answering questions about the situation of people with impairments in Polish schools to some extent.

**Hypothesis 1:** ‘Most PE teachers have no contact with people with impairments,’ was confirmed.

To the direct question ‘Do SWI participate in sports activities?’ as many as 85% of Polish teachers answered negatively. Only 15% of teachers have contact with such individuals. Thus, we see the first correlation. People with impairments are invisible. The question was directed to PE teachers, and thus indirectly referred to the participation of SWI in PE lessons.

Justification: The introduction presented statistics on people with impairments. Their presence in Polish schools is not visible. It is possible that some forms of ableism exist in schools.

**Hypothesis 2:** ‘Most Polish teachers have difficulty being open to SWI in their classes.’

Justification: Many factors can influence teachers’ closed attitudes towards SWI, such as ableism, barriers they encounter daily in their work, infrastructure, programmatic, sociological, and psychological problems. This hypothesis was confirmed, but the issue is more complex. Firstly, although less than half of the respondents stated that they would willingly teach SWI (47.8%), it is nevertheless almost every second PE teacher in Poland who declares openness and does not set any initial conditions for such cooperation. Secondly, among the remaining 51%, there are those who either accept such cooperation under certain conditions (the vast majority) or completely exclude it (a significant minority). If we set up unconditionally approving responses and conditionally approving ones, the hypothesis is disproven, as most respondents do not exclude working with SWI (66.3%). Thus, 19.2% of teachers evasively stated that they would not accept such individuals because no such person has approached them, while 9% do not exclude this but would only accept them if the classes were exclusively for SWI. Next, there are teachers who do not feel capable of meeting this challenge (9%), others reject this possibility without giving a reason (5.5%), 4.5% complain about infrastructure problems that hinder it, 2.5% point to systemic issues, some PE teachers claim that the presence of people with impairments would make able-bodied students feel uncomfortable or that their parents would not agree to such a situation (1.8%), and 0.7% are for accepting SWI into the sports section but only under the condition of specifying the type of impairments. In other words, the situation

looks like one-third of PE teachers for various reasons reject the possibility of conducting training for the disabled (33.7%). Experience working with SWI leaves no illusions. The more often a PE teacher works with SWI, the more willing they are to continue working with them ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $r = 0.261$ ), and conversely, the lack of contact with such individuals leads to greater resistance and reluctance to train them. It is interesting in this context to reject the possibility of training people with impairments due to the lack of their applications for sports activities. One can only assume that individuals affected by some forms of disability are discouraged daily from enrolling in any sports activities, including PE lessons, because they are strangers and unknown students. They are likely excluded at the outset by realizing that there is no space for their sports development in Polish schools. Thus, they are invisible.

**Hypothesis 3:** consisting of two assertions (a) and (b), posited that if PE teachers greatly 3a.1) feel satisfaction with the professional development opportunities provided by participating in the SKS program, 3a.2) have a sense of mission in implementing the sports program, 3a.3) are satisfied with their remuneration, and 3a.4) feel satisfaction from conducting training, then they are more likely than others to engage in the development of sports activities involving SWI. Conversely, if PE teachers greatly 3b.1) do not feel satisfaction with the professional development opportunities provided by participating in the SKS program, 3b.2) do not have a sense of mission in implementing the sports program, 3b.3) are not satisfied with their remuneration, and 3b.4) do not feel satisfaction from conducting training, then they are more closed to working with SWI. We included these four points in the cluster analysis, and the assertions turned out to be correct, as we obtained two radically different aggregates, precisely delineated between H3a and H3b.

Justification for H3a and H3b: Appreciated PE teachers who enjoy their work, treating it as a mission and task, have the strength and desire to confront new challenges. Conversely, it is difficult to plan development and increase engagement in work where one feels frustration and a lack of prospects for self-development.

**Table 1.** Cluster analysis for (1) dissatisfied PE teachers, and (2) satisfied PE teachers. Two clusters. 15 iterations.

<i>Final Cluster Centers</i>					<i>Cluster 1</i>	<i>Cluster 2</i>
Participation in the program as a source of satisfaction					-.89043	.53202
Commitment to the program's mission					-.88826	.53073
Satisfaction with remuneration					-.65936	.39397
Satisfaction with individual professional development within the program					-.87850	.52490
<i>Analysis of Variance</i>	<i>Mean square</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Error mean square</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Participation in the program as a source of satisfaction	1086.731	1	.526	2294	2064.871	<.01
Commitment to the program's mission	1081.442	1	.529	2294	2045.849	<.01
Satisfaction with remuneration	595.905	1	.740	2294	804.795	<.01
Satisfaction with individual professional development within the program	1057.809	1	.539	2294	1962.852	<.01
<i>Number of observations in each cluster</i>	N					
<i>Cluster 1</i>	858					
<i>Cluster 2</i>	1436					
Total	2294					
Missing data	0					

In Table 2, we can see a slight advantage in openness towards SWI among PE teachers grouped in the cluster with higher job satisfaction and development compared to dissatisfied teachers.

**Table 2.** Attitudes of PE teachers towards students with impairments (Cluster 1 and Cluster 2): where Cluster 1 represents dissatisfied PE teachers, and Cluster 2 represents satisfied PE teachers.

Attitudes of PE teachers towards students with impairments		N	%
Cluster 1	Openness to students with impairments	528	61.5
	Lack of openness to students with impairments	330	38.5
	Total	858	100.0
Cluster 2	Openness to students with impairments	992	69.1
	Lack of openness to students with impairments	444	30.9
	Total	1436	100.0

**Hypothesis 4:** ‘The more frequently PE teachers raise issues in the implementation of the SKS program (systemic, formal, programmatic), the less likely they are to accept SWI.’

**Justification:** It seems that if there are no barriers, difficulties, and obstacles, then it is possible to add new elements to the overall development plan, including working with SWI. This hypothesis was not confirmed. The cluster analysis did not differentiate between PE teachers who did not raise objections to the program’s operation and those who did. The level of lack of openness to SWI was similar (33%).

## CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSION

Despite the growing interest of the community in including people with impairments in regular sports activities (Moran et al., 2014; Ainscow et al., 2008; Morley et al., 2005) and the fact that the inclusion of SWI in the general school system has a history of about 40 years (Sherrill, 1998), advocates of inclusion consider it an essential practice supporting the active participation of all students, including those with impairments, in the school culture. Inclusion policy is based on the fundamental right to equitable education tailored to the needs of students. It enables students to enhance their personal and social status while promoting diverse environments and skills (Ainscow et al., 2008).



The results of this study bring several surprising and simultaneously worrying conclusions – there is solid evidence that in Polish schools, the participation of SWI in sports activities organized by PE teachers within extracurricular forms of physical activity is minimal. The problem is much deeper, because only 15% of the surveyed PE teachers recognize the aspect of impairments in their school. Inclusion in education is a process that aims for the full participation of all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Ainscow, 2005). In the context of PE, inclusion means that every student has the opportunity to participate in activities tailored to their individual needs. Block emphasized that inclusive PE not only promotes physical health but also develops social skills, strengthens self-esteem, and socially integrates students with disabilities (Block, 2007). However, our study concludes that most PE teachers do not have contact with people with impairments. Therefore, the PE teacher does not consider what might encourage such students to participate in sports activities, nor does he or she analyze the wide range of easy-to-implement, cost-effective adaptations. Unrealistic needs seem to shape the problems and solutions; there is no need for a helpful list of resources and practical guidelines on key issues such as safety, behavior problems, group games, and social acceptance. These individuals are not noticed. Preparing PE teachers to work with SWI requires appropriate education and continuous professional development. Many PE teacher training programs at the university level include courses on working with students with disabilities (Hutzler et al., 2019; Hodge et al., 2004; Morley et al., 2005). Sherrill suggested that these courses should include both theoretical foundations and practical experiences, such as school internships in inclusive facilities (Sherrill, 2004). The low activity of the surveyed group of PE teachers in the area of enhancing their competencies indicates that in Poland, this aspect of professional preparation is not utilized in a way that would overcome barriers and resistance to including SWI in school sports activities. Our research indicated that when PE teachers consider engaging in lifelong learning (it is not impressive, as only 40% of respondents recognize the need for professional self-development), there is not even a momentary need to strengthen competencies that would allow them to welcome SWI with greater openness and reduced fear in sports activities. Only 12 PE teachers would like to develop their ability to work with SWI (and these are PE teachers from special schools for impairment).

It seems necessary to pay attention to the interdisciplinary nature of education so that PE teachers have a broader view of their students' needs. Practitioners with broad perspectives on conducting physical activity classes were more likely to use individualized criteria and facilitate integration than those who demonstrated narrow perspectives, such as strictly adhering to the curriculum and expected normative performance. Therefore, it appears that teachers' psychosocial characteristics may influence their attitudes (Meier et al., 2017). The results of our research correspond with previous findings by the abovementioned researchers. It has been found that despite many years of experience related to including disabled individuals in schools, there is significant skepticism among novice teachers towards them. 53% of young teachers declared openness to the participation of SWI in classes (for the entire sample, it was 66%), and 47% rejected such participation (33.7% for the entire sample). We can see that further research is needed to understand the processes of work and professional development during real inclusive practices, which are now common for most disabled children worldwide.

In another study conducted in England, the authors found that PE teachers faced various additional challenges and were particularly exposed to safety and control issues related to including students with special educational needs or disabilities in their classes (Morley et al., 2005). The hypothesis that teachers' longer work experience and, therefore, greater experience would result in greater openness to people with impairments was not confirmed. It can be concluded that not every experience fosters openness to disability. One can work as a PE teacher for a long time, but the fear that something might go wrong, of not managing if SWI are accepted in the section, still remains among those who have to make such decisions. Therefore, the classes are intended only for able-bodied children. PE teachers are only slightly open to the experience of combining or conducting classes for children with impairments. Program leaders, parents, and the participants themselves all fear failure. Leaders fear responsibility and lack of knowledge, parents worry that their children will experience failure, and children with disabilities fear that they will not be able to meet the requirements (Moran et al., 2010). The SKS was created as an opportunity for children to have fun, compete, and improve overall physical fitness. Unfortunately, many children with impairments do

not have the same access to professionals due to teachers' preparation and willingness to take on such a task. There are many barriers that can prevent children with impairments from participating in youth sports programs or significantly impact their level of successful participation.

The present study identified key barriers, focuses our attention on the source of the problem, and helps better understand the situation in Polish schools to provide opportunities for children with impairments to engage in sports. Summarizing the identified relationships, according to the opinions of PE teachers who reject the possibility of working with SWI, it leads them to the belief that such children do not exist in their schools, and if they do, they do not sign up for sport activities. It is clear that PE teachers need the opportunity to experience the full continuum of educational needs if they are to respond effectively to the individual needs of all students (Vickerman et al., 2009). Therefore, it is worth considering preventive actions in this area to ensure that government programs function as intended, i.e., that disabled children have the same right to participate in SKS program activities as other students. Educational solutions for the real (not theoretical) inclusion of children with impairments in activities need to be considered. Based on the obtained research results, we conclude that PE teachers do not seem to be prepared to conduct sport classes for disabled children. However, the purpose of the SKS program is more than just supporting the vitality of healthy people; it is also an opportunity for a genuine and effective proposition for SWI to participate in sports activities, provided the instructors are appropriately prepared. As our study demonstrated, 85% of PE teachers do not conduct SKS activities with disabled children, and most of them do not see a problem with potentially conducting such activities, albeit under certain conditions. PE teachers and sports coaches often lack the appropriate training and resources to effectively work with people with impairments. This leads to a lack of equipment modifications or activity adaptations, resulting in the exclusion of disabled students from physical activities (Blinde et al., 1998; Goodwin et al., 2000). The experiences characteristic of PE teachers include competitive events and personal successes and failures in performing specific tasks. Successes build a higher sense of self-efficacy, while failures can lower it. Disabled individuals also engage in sports and achieve impressive results,

so with appropriate sensitivity and consideration of all arguments, it might be possible to create a rational and empathetic program for their inclusion in activities, without segregation and predetermined exclusion. Impairments function as an invisible regulator that indirectly positions disabled individuals as 'outsiders' who cannot achieve the same level as their able-bodied peers. This perspective indicates a deficit understanding of impairments, where the focus is on what SWI cannot do compared to their peers, instead of concentrating on the possibilities of students. In educational institutions, physical culture, and PE contexts, ableist assumptions and deficit ideologies are harmful to SWI. They are seen as incapable of achieving the same set of standards and norms as other students and are even blamed for it. Simultaneously, structural barriers that did not take into consideration the potential of students' disabilities in design and implementation are ignored (Lynch et al., 2021).

If there were additionally systemic support for such a PE teacher in the form of the presence of a supporting educator, a higher salary bonus, training, and support from sports sector educators such as coach developers, and consultations with other coaches, then PE teachers' openness, not only in this case, would likely increase. There are PE teachers who have no problems with assembling a group of students willing to engage in sports, as shown in Table 3. These are likely the individuals who would be the first to welcome SWI into their activities. Those who have PE teachers around them who could not receive support in the program because the number of participants was insufficient to form a sports section have significantly fewer chances. These individuals do not seek out willing participants to form a group. This is not surprising, as most PE teachers had competency deficits in understanding the aspect of impairments and very little experience in the area of integration.

**Table 3.** *Assembling students into training groups.*

Situation when assembling a training group	N	%
No problems in assembling the group	1324	57.7
Fewer than 10 students were willing to form a group	147	6.4
More than 25 students declared their willingness to participate in SKS activities	823	35.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>2294</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## CONCLUSIONS

The presented results show how PE teachers engage in work for students with impairments (SWI). This knowledge can help them develop a higher level of self-efficacy to actually include SWI in their classes. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) has been adopted worldwide. It states that, in addition to placing SWI in mainstream schools, inclusive education should also enable these students to participate in activities and access pedagogical support to facilitate the full development of their potential. In a broader and more general sense, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognized that disabled children have equal rights in the community with able-bodied individuals. Specifically referring to physical activity and education, Article 30.5.d of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007) defines the role of member states that have signed the convention 'to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation, leisure, and sports activities, including those in the school system'. As our results show, at the level of PE lessons and government programs, there are discrepancies between theory, law, and practice. The results provide solid evidence on how PE teachers should be prepared for this challenging task, which involves changing their existing habits, stepping out of their comfort zone, and believing that impairment does not necessarily mean an inability to achieve sports results, and that structural barriers are often smaller than those existing in our minds as fears or beliefs that some bodies are more valued.

To effectively prepare PE teachers to work with SWI, a holistic approach is necessary, including formal and informal education, continuous professional development, and the provision of appropriate resources and support. Only in this way is it possible to create a truly inclusive educational environment that promotes a healthy lifestyle and social integration of all students. PE teachers must be equipped with the right tools and support to effectively conduct inclusive PE classes. Similar conclusions were reached by Lieberman and colleagues, who studied children with visual impairments in PE classes. They found that the most widespread barriers were professional preparation and available equipment. Additionally, they concluded that teachers' backgrounds did not matter; barriers to preparing for PE classes with disabled individuals were common. Many respondents stated that they did not know what to do with such students, and if they could manage, the next barrier they faced was the lack of equipment that could be used during such activities. The lack of access to practitioners who can familiarize them with various forms of sports activity adaptation does not bring us closer to effective solutions (Lieberman et al., 2002). It is also necessary to increase public awareness of the importance of inclusion and promote positive attitudes among all members of the school community. Moreover, PE teachers who had coaching qualifications certified by Polish Sports Associations more often declared a willingness to work with SWI. Therefore, it can be assumed that in these organizations, PE teachers can find what has so far prevented them from engaging disabled individuals in sports. PE teachers open to such experiences are very valuable in the context of inclusion in schools. Besides their qualifications to be PE teachers, they have additional qualifications in sports, which in turn help them understand the issue and change their attitudes from closed to open towards SWI, allowing for a more optimistic view of the future related to recognizing and actively including them in sports activities at school.

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