



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

The report presents some results obtained from a study of the difficulties that teachers encounter when working with children of special educational needs. Opportunities are offered to overcome these difficulties by implementing volunteer activities. THE PURPOSE is to spread the positive experience of the Specialized Center for Volunteer Training. The scope of the research work is to expand from assessing the situation and identifying needs to creating and gradually implementing new approaches in the activity. THE METHODOLOGY includes analysis, pedagogical experiment, modeling. The study uses a combination of methods – analysis, pedagogical experimentation, and modelling—supplemented by interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, school leaders, and experts. The practical RESULTS: a system of physical exercises tailored to the abilities of children with a range of disabilities. CONCLUSIONS are drawn that will orient towards real actions in educational institutions to overcome difficulties in working with children of special educational needs.

Keywords: inclusive education, teachers, students with disabilities, sports activities, volunteers, positive experience

INTRODUCTION

Teachers engaged in the educational integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) are constantly faced with challenges that must be overcome. By identifying these difficulties, we can begin to explore effective strategies for addressing them.

In this context, the present report aims to introduce new approaches as part of the *Sofia University – A Marker for Innovation and Technology Transfer project (SUMMIT)*. It presents findings from a study on the obstacles teachers face when working with SEN children. To support their integration, various volunteer-led initiatives are being implemented. The goal is to promote successful experiences in overcoming integration challenges by involving volunteers and organizing additional sports activities for children and students with disabilities within educational institutions.

The scope of this research expands from identifying existing conditions and challenges

to exploring the potential of *Adapted Physical Activity* through pedagogical experiment. On the one hand, the methodology follows established principles of social empirical research. On the other, a fundamental principle in creating such a methodology is ensuring that all its elements are methodologically appropriate to the complex nature of volunteering and its diverse implications in working with children with special educational needs.

This means that the methodology must include all necessary procedures to ensure: 1) The collection of reliable information on the research subject and scope; 2) The implementation of control actions that guarantee the reliability of the data and allow for robust mathematical and statistical processing of the empirical material for subsequent analysis.

The study uses a combination of methods – analysis, pedagogical experimentation, and modelling—supplemented by interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, school leaders, and experts. The systematic implementation of these methods has helped develop a model for a *Specialized Training*

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Centre to prepare university students from various fields as volunteer mentors to lead additional sports activities for children and students with disabilities in educational settings.

IDENTIFYING ISSUES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH FOCUS GROUPS AND MEETINGS WITH EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

An analysis of both national and international studies reveals that serious and systematic work is being carried out in the field of inclusive education. Research projects (1, 2) enable the synthesis of theoretical and practical knowledge. Bulgarian educators and psychologists have also been focusing on various aspects of inclusive education (3, 4). Studies examine the professional identity of teachers working with SEN children in inclusive settings; they outline mechanisms for developing both positive and negative attitudes toward such students; they identify the main barriers and common difficulties that hinder the socialization and educational success of SEN students. These include specific challenges in teacher-parent relationships and potential solutions. Some researchers (5) explore the use of regular sports activities as a way to overcome these difficulties.

In line with the goals of this research, focus groups and meetings were held with educational professionals from various regions of the country (Sofia, Plovdiv, Lovech, Svishtov, Smolyan, etc.) to discuss issues in inclusive education. One particularly demanding and important task that emerged is the development of a positive organisational climate, which requires creating conditions for collaboration, effective communication, and mutual care among all participants in the educational process. Some school principals describe this as a long-term process requiring active engagement and sustained effort.

Teachers shared the challenges they face when interpreting problematic behavior in children and students. They noted the difficulty of upholding the principle of positive discipline, which involves approaches and strategies that ensure the child is heard and the root causes of the behaviour are understood. However, these causes are not always perceived in a positive light. It was concluded that such challenges to inclusion can be more easily and quickly overcome in the presence of a positive attitude

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and openness, which foster mutual understanding and shared responsibility.

Educators also emphasized the importance of preventing learning difficulties and identifying risks early on. These are considered crucial to effective teaching. Difficulties often arise as soon as teachers attempt to introduce measures that guarantee equal treatment for every pupil in the group or class. Efforts are underway to draft a community “Ethical Code,” to be adopted by the pedagogical council, the public council, and the school board of trustees.

To secure an appropriate physical, psychological, and social environment, educators stress the need for close cooperation with parents as well as with all other specialists who work with the child, whether they are employed by the kindergarten / school or work outside the educational setting. Although such cooperation is known to make interventions more effective and learning gains more sustainable, in practice collaboration with parents can sometimes be difficult.

Specialists (psychologists, school counselors, speech therapists, social workers, and resource teachers) provide targeted support for SEN children as part of inclusive education. However, it’s important to recognize the distinct roles of school counselors and psychologists—roles that are sometimes mistakenly treated as interchangeable, leading to practical errors.

With regard to the two tiers of support for personal development defined in the Preschool and School Education Act—general and additional—teachers report specific difficulties. Support is offered wherever the child learns: in kindergarten, school, centers for personal development support, and in some cases at home or in hospital. At times, though, the system goes to extremes and loses sight of the fact that help provided within the educational setting can only facilitate care for children with SEN and their parents—it cannot replace the highly specialized interventions that must continue whenever necessary.

During discussions of problems and the exchange of good practices, education professionals highlight the special importance of teamwork in delivering the activities that make up general support for personal development, such as: early assessment of needs and prevention of learning difficulties;

measures to prevent violence and address challenging behaviour; speech-language therapy; and moral or material incentives. They point to issues linked to attitudes and capacities—for instance, how ready specialists are to distinguish children at risk or children developing typically from those who are not. The consensus is that when educators focus on the child's strengths and positive behaviours, outcomes are far better than when attention centres on the negatives. Teachers note from experience how vital it is to identify pupils' strong sides and interests: integrating them into peer groups becomes far easier when those abilities are showcased and nurtured, both in regular lessons and in supplementary activities. A problematic area in the inclusion of SEN pupils is the high incidence of serious medical conditions that accompany their development—something that demands corresponding competence from kindergarten and school staff. Health care is, of course, ensured by guaranteeing children's access to medical services and to programmes on health education and healthy lifestyles.

Teachers also mention the possibilities for additional support for personal development, which includes case-specific work with an individual pupil. The type and form of instruction, along with the specific activities, are laid out in a support plan that also specifies the hours of resource assistance. In practice, however, numerous difficulties arise—for example, when a single class includes pupils with different disabilities. Problems appear as well when additional support is granted on the basis of an individual needs assessment conducted by the school's support team, yet the parent disagrees with either the assessment or the support measures. In such cases the Regional Centre for Support of Inclusive Education must organize a reassessment of the child's needs. Here again, teachers emphasize how urgently they require methodological guidance in inclusive education—guidance that universities could provide in line with teachers' concrete needs, since the procedures are set by the state educational standard for inclusive schooling.

Throughout these discussions, a clear understanding emerges that—despite the difficulties outlined—the legal framework in place allows the system to move steadily toward higher-quality support for SEN children. Achieving that, of course, demands sustained

effort from everyone involved in the educational process.

TRAINING VOLUNTEER MENTORS TO LEAD ADDITIONAL SPORTS ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN AND PUPILS WITH DISABILITIES

In response to the difficulties identified—and to the good practices teachers shared regarding the successful inclusion of SEN pupils among their peers—a structural-functional model has been devised for a *Specialized Centre for Volunteer Training*. At its core lies the belief that inclusion becomes easier when a child's specific strengths are recognised, highlighted, and developed not only during regular lessons but also through extracurricular pursuits. Sport is singled out as an ideal tool for breaking stereotypes and creating genuine opportunities for people with disabilities to integrate fully into society (6). The idea is that, within this centre, students from various degree programmes together with PE teachers will be trained as volunteers who will run additional sports sessions for pupils with disabilities.

During their preparation at the “SPORTDIS” Specialized Centre, these students and teachers learn how to employ *Adapted Physical Activity* so they can apply it in supplementary sports classes with disabled pupils. The practical outcome is a system of physical exercises tailored to the abilities of children with a range of disabilities.

The operational model of the centre contributes to:

- developing positive attitudes toward sports as a key factor in inclusive education for SEN children;
- acquiring knowledge and competences related to healthy lifestyles and physical activity as an integrative framework for organising extracurricular sessions and a supportive environment within the school;
- improving information channels and communication with students regarding the use of additional sports activities as a driver of inclusion and community-building in educational institutions.

Although the centre's pilot work is still in progress, the results to date are encouraging.

A partial survey of 120 teachers produced data (**Table 1**) showing that staff regard volunteering as an important activity and believe greater public awareness should be

fostered. Most respondents (87 %) view sport and healthy-living sessions as a particularly significant element in integrating SEN pupils. A large majority (72 %) support involving non-disabled partners (volunteers) in sports activities, seeing this as a way to enhance social relationships based on tolerance and to improve the quality of life for children with disabilities.

Teachers are adamant that volunteer initiatives can bolster not only the motor skills of disabled pupils but also the entire educational process. Participation by volunteers in extra activities creates opportunities to apply an individualised approach more effectively. Most respondents (68 %) confirm the value of prior training for volunteers who will work with SEN children.

Table 1. *Some results from a survey among teachers*

Teachers confirm that:	in %
Volunteering is an important activity	92
Volunteering can help support the physical activity of students with disabilities.	79
Through volunteer activities, the overall educational process of students with disabilities can be supported.	73
Sports activities are an important part of the integration of children with SEN.	87
Involving non-disabled partners (volunteers) in sports activities will help improve social relationships.	72
The participation of student volunteers ensures a more effective implementation of the individual approach in education.	74
Preliminary preparation of volunteers for working with children and students with SEN is necessary and useful.	68
They show a desire to participate in preparation for carrying out volunteer activities.	59
They are motivated to work with students with SEN when including volunteers in additional activities.	57
Measures are being taken to change attitudes in society regarding volunteering.	65

A substantial proportion of teachers (65 %) agree that measures are being taken to change public attitudes and state that their own personal involvement can also advance that change. The overall conclusion is that teachers are motivated to work with SEN pupils when volunteers are included in supplementary activities.

CONCLUSION

A targeted programme for informing and training volunteers—university students from diverse majors—to work with children who have special educational needs, using the tools of Adapted Physical Activity, offers real support to teachers in overcoming the hurdles of integrating these pupils. It puts into practice the concept that bringing non-disabled partners (volunteers) into sports activities helps improve social relationships. Through the operation of the Specialized Volunteer Training Centre, concrete steps are being taken to shift public attitudes and to promote volunteering more widely within Bulgarian society.

The research addresses a current and socially significant topic. It makes a tangible contribution by preparing student volunteers and by committing the university institutionally

to a more active, sustainable policy in inclusive education and the integration of SEN children.

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