

# Moving Forward with Inclusion in Physical Education in Ireland

This paper is based on the Irish data from a large-scale European study entitled ‘Disentangling Inclusion in Primary Physical Education European Erasmus + project’ (DIPPE). The quantitative study aimed to investigate teachers’ practices on the inclusion of children with additional needs (AN) in primary physical education (PE) and identifying supports welcomed by teachers that could enhance their practices. The Irish data is based on the analysed results from 137 respondents (n=137) to an online questionnaire. The results showed some encouraging findings. However, it is crucial that teachers are aware of the importance of questioning their practices especially the withdrawal of children from the PE lesson and concentrate on how activities and the environment may be best adapted to include them further. The Irish results added to the European ‘call’ for specific supports that led to the development of an online website underpinned with the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) to further support teachers on inclusion in PE.

*Keywords: inclusion, UDL, additional needs, Physical Education, primary schools*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Physical Education and Inclusion

Physical literacy is defined as “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding that enables a person to value and participate in physical activity throughout life” (Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland Consensus Statement, 2022, p.1). Each young person is on a unique physical literacy life-long journey. Planned, progressive, inclusive learning experiences have been highlighted as features of quality Physical Education (PE) contributing to the development of and interaction between the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional skills needed to lead a physically active life (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2015a). Motor skill development features as one key component of PE in the Irish Primary Physical Education

Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999). Recent research from Ireland and beyond has reported concerns at children's motor skill development (Duncan, Foweather, Bardid, et al., 2022) which has implications for the PE lesson.

To assist each child's important physical literacy journey including their social, emotional, cognitive and motor development, in the school setting and in PE, each child should be valued and supported in an integrated school setting as individuals, with a commitment from teachers. Children should not alone be integrated into the school setting, the PE curriculum, the PE space and activities, but *feel* included (Haegele et al., 2021). The inclusive education agenda has been endorsed internationally (UNESCO, 1994) with legislation in place in all European countries designed to promote and advocate for inclusion (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). The International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport demonstrates the aspirations for inclusive PE (UNESCO, 2015b) and the fundamental right of the child to PE. Some schoolchildren with learning needs require support, which is additional to the provision that is generally provided to their peers to help them benefit from school education. The support may be cognitive, physical, sensory, communicative and/or behavioural. In this paper, these children are referred to as children with additional needs (AN). Inclusion is "understood as a sense of belonging, which includes feeling respected, valued for who you are, feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment from others" (UNESCO 2015a, p.8).

### **How is inclusion manifested by the teacher in the Physical Education lesson?**

There is evidence indicating that teachers, despite trying to include all children in PE lessons, struggle (Fitzgerald, 2012; Haegele and Hodge, 2016; Haegele, Kirk, Steven, Holland and Zhu, 2021). Haegele (2019) strongly signals a misidentification of the terms 'inclusion' and 'integration' that can lead to negative experiences for children. The knowledge and the competence of the teacher is a critical factor in including children with AN in any successful PE programme no matter how positive teachers' attitudes are towards inclusive practice (Block and Obrusnikova, 2007; Crawford et al., 2012). Holland, Haegele, Zhu and Bobzien (2022) reported the opposing feelings of children with AN in the PE lesson in reaction to specific inclusive strategies by teachers.

Although the inclusion of children with AN in PE has been the focus of discussion internationally (Crawford, O' Reilly and Flanagan., 2012; Haegele and Sutherland, 2015) within the broader context of human rights discourse, systematic research evidence on the recent extent to which children with AN are included in PE lessons in primary schools in Ireland is scarce.

## **Aim of the study**

Attempting to get a snapshot of what is taking place in PE lessons in Irish primary schools and teachers' needs, this study explores the practices of Irish primary teachers- the gatekeepers to children's feelings of inclusion- and identifies the further supports these teachers require. The paper focuses on the findings of a survey undertaken across European countries as part of an Erasmus+ project, 'Disentangling Inclusion in Primary Physical Education' (DIPPE). The paper's author and the seven project partners were teacher educators of PE at universities across Europe. The survey was undertaken during the initial stages of the Erasmus + project to (i) map the situation about including children in primary PE with a focus on children with AN, and (ii) identify the guidelines and resources that teachers of PE in primary schools would welcome to support them in including children with AN in their lessons.

Planning for inclusion must be seen as an evolving process, involving carefully reviewing the existing provision so that structures for successful inclusion and improvements to current practice can be made, supporting teachers and creating learning environments that respond to the needs of all learners (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). Activities in PE can be presented in different ways from no modifications, minor or major, separate activities, transitioning to all working together to parallel activities. This is known as the inclusion spectrum (Black and Williamson, 2011). Numerous strategies may be employed in PE lessons such as the application of an adaptation model or memory tool which outlines variables of a task for modification. Examples include the TREE model (Teaching Style; Rules; Equipment; Environment) (Australian Sports Commission Disability Education Program, n.d.) and the STEP model (Space, Time, Entity, and Process) (Black and Williamson, 2011). The inclusion spectrum and the aspects of the two memory tools provided the framework for the questionnaire design and development for this study. These strategies were promoted by the project partners in their work with student teachers. A subsequent narrative literature review (Gallagher, Clardy, O'Malley, Heck, Scheuer, 2021), as the second phase of the DIPPE project, evolved to the application of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to underpin the development of the DIPPE resource website, an outcome of the project to be discussed later in the paper.

The aim of this paper is to go beyond the results of the Irish data, to show how the results were acted upon to support teachers to be more competent and confident including children with AN in PE lessons and to assist them on their physical literacy journey helping to lead to lifelong physical activity. It summarises the development of the online website in response to teachers' needs to allow children

to move forward in inclusion in Physical Education. The paper highlights the availability of the new resource to disseminate to stakeholders.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This quantitative study employed data collected as part of the DIPPE Erasmus+ project. A questionnaire was designed and delivered online via Qualtrics xm. Primary teachers who teach PE in either mainstream or special primary schools in Ireland were invited to provide their responses to the questionnaire, which was piloted in February 2019 with 26 respondents (3 from each partner country). As a result of the pilot three sections to the questionnaire were added rather than two, some rating scales were adjusted as well as the order of questions. The insertion of a ‘submit’ button as a click function was included. The final questionnaire was administered in April 2019. The Irish Primary Physical Education Association (IPPEA), a voluntary organisation and an associate partner in the Erasmus+ project, emailed the questionnaire to their membership and promoted the survey on their social media platforms. Additionally, information about the project was posted on the IPPEA website. The IPPEA executive committee comprising generalist teachers and two university lecturers in PE were asked to circulate the questionnaire within their network of teachers. Those who received the questionnaire were asked, on the accompanying letter, to circulate the questionnaire with teachers in their schools and beyond. The letter described the purpose of the project and the questionnaire as well as the confidentiality, anonymity, and data storage protocols. It provided an operational definition of inclusion with an educational focus: inclusive education is a process of “addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners” (NCSE, 2011, p. 13). Ethics approval by the Research Ethics Committee of Dublin City University, where the author of this paper was affiliated, was granted for the secondary analysis of the DIPPE European study data. The questionnaire consisted primarily of 17 close-ended questions with an anticipated completion time of 15 minutes. It had three sections (i) professional experience, (ii) professional practice underpinned by questions related to the adaptation models TREE and STEP and (iii) the development of the online toolkit.

The completion rate of the questionnaire and the total number of responses were used as the criteria for respondents’ inclusion in the analysis. Only respondents with at least 80% completion rate were included in the analysis. The statistical analysis of data included descriptive statistics and a series of bivariate tests (Mann-Whitney U tests, Kruskal-Wallis tests, and Spearman correlations) to examine the relationships between teachers’ background characteristics and the reported levels of engagement of children with AN in PE lessons and teacher competence

in including children with AN in PE lessons. SPSS 25 was used to perform the analysis. In Ireland, which constitutes the focus of this paper, there were 137 respondents in total (n=137).

## RESULTS

The results will now be reported under three headings somewhat reflecting the main structure of the questionnaire (i) Teachers and their practices, (ii) Supports and Physical Education teaching strategies and (iii) Further supports required.

### Teachers and their practices

Background information for teachers of the PE lesson in Ireland reported that there were 137 respondents in total (79% females, 1% preferred not to identify as either gender). Most respondents had up to 20 years of experience in either general or PE teaching. The extent of use of a Sport Coach/Dance teacher/Specialist Physical Education teacher in teaching PE was reported by 44% of respondents, with 4% reporting that PE lessons are taught exclusively by specialist PE teachers in their schools.

More than 80% of teachers in Ireland reported that they had up to five children with AN in their PE lessons. Table 1 shows the most frequently experienced AN in PE lessons, social (41.6%) and emotional (38%). Table 2 highlights that most teachers in Ireland (81.6%) reported that children with AN are either frequently (45.7%) or always (35.9%) included or engaged in their PE lessons.

**Table 1: Type of identified AN experienced within the current class**

	%
physical	32.8
motor	33.6
obesity	10.9
social	41.6
emotional	38.0
chronic disease (e.g. diabetes, asthma)	15.3
gender/mixed (boys and girls are taught together in PE lessons)	17.5
language	22.6
general learning	35.8
multiple	21.2
other	5.1

Table 2 reveals that 15.4% of children with AN are withdrawn from PE lessons to receive additional support in other subjects (e.g., mathematics). It also shows the percentage of teachers who indicated that specific support is provided to children with AN within the PE lessons in Ireland (20.7%). Of these children 55.4% receive additional PE lessons or motor skills lessons.

**Table 2: Engagement levels of children with AN in PE lessons**

	%
Never included and engaged	0.0
Rarely included and engaged	1.1
Sometimes included and engaged	17.4
Frequently included and engaged	45.7
Always included and engaged	35.9
Withdrawal of children with AN from PE lessons for additional support in other subjects (e.g., mathematics)	15.4
Additional PE /motor skills lessons for children with AN	55.4
Specific support in PE lessons for children with AN	20.7
Withdrawal of children with AN from PE lessons for specific support in PE	5.4

While there was a relatively high percentage of teachers in Ireland rating their competence to include children with AN in PE lessons as either good or very good (67.9%), a considerable proportion of teachers rated their competence as fair or poor. Additional analyses on the Irish data were conducted to investigate the extent to which teacher competence and their students' engagement levels were associated with individual and/or contextual factors (e.g., years of experience). None of the statistical tests that were conducted yielded statistically significant results ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that teacher competence and their students' engagement levels were independent of individual and contextual factors.

### **Supports and Physical Education Teaching Strategies**

The most popular type of support in PE reported among teachers in Ireland was the additional support provided by a special needs assistant (13.1%). While the majority (83.1%) were satisfied with this support, it is not clear if this involved withdrawing the child from whole class PE lessons. A particularly compelling finding was that 86.6% of teachers in Ireland ranked their satisfaction levels highly, with other teachers in the school. Additionally, teachers were satisfied with the support of their PE subject association (80.8%).

Table 3 shows that the two most popular teaching strategies to promote inclusion in PE lessons among teachers involved the modification of teaching styles (73.7 %) and the modification of the rules of the game or activity (68.6%). The use of the ‘buddy system’ strategy ranked third with 58.4% and modifications to equipment (51.1%) followed next.

**Table 3: Teaching strategies to promote inclusion in PE lessons.**

	%
Modifying teaching styles	73.7
Modifying the rules of the game/activity	68.6
Buddy system i.e., peer help for the child with AN	58.4
Modifications to equipment	51.1
Station teaching i.e., children rotate in groups from one activity to the next	51.1
Whole-class teaching	42.3
Modifications to space	33.6
Small groups of children working together according to ability (Parallel activity)	29.2
Task Cards e.g., images and task description, image only	29.2
Separate activities planned for an individual or group with AN (Separate activity)	11.7
Reverse integration where participants with and without AN participate in a disability activity/sport (Disability sport activity)	9.5
Zone areas exclusive to children with AN and their peer buddy	5.8
Other	4.4
Parental advocacy	2.2
None	0.7

### **Further Supports Required**

The questionnaire allowed teachers to identify up to five aspects of AN that they would welcome guidance on as well as the supports respectfully, that might be beneficial for their planning for inclusion in PE lessons. Table 4 highlights the five most popular aspects of AN on which teachers would welcome guidance: Childrens’ motor needs (67.2%) followed by physical needs (58.4%), adapting activities (48.9%) and social needs (48.9%). Table 5 indicates that the five most popular supports teachers considered beneficial for inclusion in their PE lessons:

video clips of children with AN working within PE classes (73%). Video practical case scenarios of teachers who are supporting children with AN to reach their PE goals describing their work accounted for 70.8% of respondents.

**Table 4: Aspects of AN teachers would welcome guidance on as part of an online PE inclusive practice toolkit**

	%
motor	67.2
physical	58.4
adapting activities	48.9
social	48.9
emotional	45.3

*Only the five most popular aspects are presented in the table.*

**Table 5: Beneficial supports for planning for inclusion within PE lessons as part of an online PE inclusive practice toolkit.**

	%
Video clips of children with AN working within PE classes	73.0
Video practical case scenarios of teachers who are supporting children with AN to reach their PE goals describing their work	70.8
Templates of visual resources e.g., visual cue cards related to activities in PE	62.8
Links to relevant organisations that offer online resources	49.6
Guidance on adapting activities	30.7

*Only the five most popular aspects are presented in the table.*

## **DISCUSSION**

The results depict a complex web of practices taking place in Irish primary school PE lessons that can impact the children’s feelings of inclusion and their learning in PE. Some of the key results are discussed below to prompt reflection by teachers and other stakeholders.

### **Questioning Practices in the Physical Education Lesson**

Despite the results of the number of children reported with AN in a PE lesson with the most frequently experienced AN being social and emotional challenges, the dominance of use of a Sport Coach/Dance teacher/Specialist Physical Education teacher in teaching PE in their programme by 44% of the respondents are timely



and insightful. This dilution of who is teaching PE is worrying given this study finding and of other recent Irish studies. Mangione, Parker and O’Sullivan (2021) reported a “well-established external provision network in the school... not supporting PE as intended by the Irish educational system” (pp.1). They reported that in some cases other than managerial issues, the school was handing over PE decisions such as teaching classes and activities to others rather than to the class teacher and the lack of linking to the PE programme learning outcomes. Ní Chróinín and O’Brien (2019) found that the content of the conversations about the learning needs and feelings of certain children in the class between the generalist classroom teachers and external providers were limited and maybe only at the start of a block of work. Randall (2022) has highlighted similar situations in England.

The use of external personnel in subjects such as music, drama and PE is recommended as a ‘support’ to the classroom teacher, who, it is intended, retains overall responsibility for teaching and learning (Government of Ireland, 1999). Ní Chróinín and O’Brien (2019) reported the current realities of the relationship with external personnel in PE which falls short of the notion of a partnership model, where learning benefits can accrue from collaboration between classroom teachers and external providers (Whipp, et al., 2011). The importance of the stability of relations that children with AN require in learning cannot be overlooked. The generalist classroom teacher is the gatekeeper (Ní Chróinín and O’Brien, 2019). Haegele et al., (2021) describes the power of the PE teacher granting or restricting access to the space itself, the activities of the space, and even potential modifications needed.

The results from this study showed that teachers welcomed the support of the additional support assistant although it is not clear if this involved withdrawing the child. Satisfaction levels with support from other teachers ranked very highly. Engagement with the PE subject association appears to be a rich source of information for teachers. These results highlight the support of other people and the IPPEA subject association in the teachers’ work on inclusion in PE. It also poses challenges related to the external personnel provision. The level of collaboration between the class teacher, the external personnel, the additional support assistant and other teaching colleagues are key to ensure that *all* children have positive feelings in quality PE experiences.

### **Reconsideration of Inclusive Strategies**

The results show that that some Irish primary teachers rely on the withdrawal strategies when teaching PE. This may cause concern in relation to best practice (Winter and O’Raw, 2010, Liebermann, Grenier, Brian and Arndt, 2021). The

motivation for this practice needs to be reviewed and support provided. Holland, Haegele, Zhu and Bobzien (2022) reported both the positive experiences of children in PE with an additional support assistant in class and the negative experience if a child is withdrawn and isolated even for PE. This practice should be reconsidered and certainly discussed with the child with AN.

Positive attitudes of teachers towards inclusive practice must be accompanied by teacher competence and knowledge (Block and Obrusnikova, 2007; Crawford et al., 2012). This study noted quite a high rate of competency self-reported by teachers to include children with AN in PE lessons. Building on the previous finding related to withdrawal, Haegele et al., (2021) reported that in fact some children may prefer withdrawal for PE if the teacher insufficiently accommodates their learning needs. The data showed that it is crucial that all who deliver PE lessons, are prompted to reflect on questioning some of their inclusive teaching strategies related to the withdrawal of children from the PE lesson. Holland, Haegele, Zhu and Bobzien (2022) and Haegele et al., (2021) recommended that the teacher should examine the unique needs of every child and talk to the child regularly and not just at the beginning of the school year to discuss their preferences to make them feel included. One teaching strategy may have a positive response on one child in one activity but a different response for another activity (Holland et al., 2022). Furthermore, Marron, Murphy and O' Keeffe (2013) recommended that student teachers should talk to the child with AN on-school placement observation days when preparing and planning their work for school placement and talk to them during the school placement itself to adjust plans and activities if required.

### **The Development of Supports**

The results shed light on the specific supports that Irish primary teachers would welcome to include *all* children in the PE lesson (a) video clips of children with AN working in PE classes and (b) video-based supports including practical case scenarios of teachers describing their work in supporting children with AN. It could be argued that teachers need to see quality PE experiences for all children. In response to the study results, the website resource [www.dippe.lu](http://www.dippe.lu), Disentangling Inclusion in Primary Physical Education was developed and launched in 2021. The content of the website was informed by the expertise of the Erasmus + project partners and the narrative review of literature, an output of the DIPPE project. The website highlights practices, strategies, and resources (including those already available online videos) to further support teachers in the process of inclusion to include *all* children in primary PE lessons. The DIPPE website resource acknowledged the importance of talking to the learners, with ongoing listening opportunities afforded to them throughout the entire school year.

The suggested DIPPE website supports are framed in the spirit of UDL acknowledging the inclusion process linkage between the curriculum and pedagogy, the child, and the environment to help teachers, external providers and other stakeholders, in meeting the needs of each child to help the child towards joyful and meaningful inclusive PE learning experiences. The UDL framework can create a curricula and learning environments that are designed to achieve success for all learners with a diverse range of abilities (Winter and O’Raw, 2010; Lieberman, Grenier, Brian and Arndt, 2021). The teacher needs to be flexible to an ever-changing environment and responsive to the outcomes of the feelings from frequent conversations of children. van Munster, Lieberman and Grenier (2019) recommend differentiated instruction and UDL as significant resources to accommodate children with AN in PE. Brennan (2019), in an Irish educational context refers to differentiation through choice.

The UDL framework (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014) has “become a popular mechanism to try to promote inclusion in classrooms” (Kennedy and Yun, 2019, p.31). This educational framework supported by Lieberman, Grenier, Brian and Arndt in PE (2021) underline the importance of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2018) as core principles in the practice of teachers. The three principles of UDL are: Multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation and multiple means of action and expression. Multiple means of engagement are about offering options that engages and excites the children to keep their attention for example offering choice in a safe and enjoyable learning PE environment. Multiple means of representation relate to the presentation and instruction of PE content in a variety of ways for example using audio or visual information. Multiple means of action and expression relates to varying the ways in which children are encouraged to respond and show their learning of PE skills and knowledge, for example verbally, using demonstration or sketching images.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of the study should be acknowledged and considered in the interpretation of the results. The questions were closed-ended. Information collected from the respondents was based on self-report and, thus, is prone to bias. The IPPEA circulated the study questionnaire to their members who were in turn asked to circulate it among their colleagues. Perhaps many of the study participants may have been members of the PE teachers’ association who would have had a particular interest in the value of quality in PE lessons. Some voices of less committed teachers in PE may have been excluded. Caution is advised in interpreting the data as representative of all primary PE teachers in Ireland.

## CONCLUSIONS

This quantitative study aimed to investigate primary teachers' practices related to inclusion of children with AN in primary PE in Ireland and identify supports that could enhance teachers' practices. The results showed some encouraging findings. Going forward, it is crucial that teachers are aware of the importance of questioning their inclusive teaching practices especially the withdrawal of children from the PE lesson and concentrate on how activities may be best adapted to include these children further.

The results of the study, the DIPPE narrative review of literature and the expertise of the project partners all shaped and informed the development of the DIPPE website to help teachers. In-service providers should be made aware of the website to promote it on their platforms. Reacting to the call for teachers for video support, and despite the cost implications and ethical considerations of recording children to produce video material which can be sensitive (challenges that were insurmountable by the DIPPE project), such demands should be listened to by Irish policy makers and stakeholders. This paper provides an opportunity to disseminate the research results of the Irish data from a large-scale study from the DIPPE Erasmus + project to draw attention of readers to a new website underpinned by UDL that can support teachers as they strive to make PE lessons more inclusive for children with AN.

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