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OPINIONS OF TEACHERS ABOUT USING ALTERNATIVE
METHODS IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT

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Abstract

Within the Romanian education system, through the initiatives taken at the central and local levels, various educational alternatives have been introduced since the 1990s, such as Waldorf, Montessori, Jena Plan, Freinet or Step-by-Step methods. The social and cultural evolution has also brought changes in the existing educational approaches, providing solutions to teachers, parents and children in organizing and conducting the training activity. The aim of this paper is to highlight the teachers' opinions about the implementation of alternative pedagogy in physical education lessons in the mainstream education. To obtain valuable information on this topic, the research method used was an online survey questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The participants in this study are 212 teachers from the pre-university level, who teach different school subjects with more or less knowledge about the alternative methods. The results highlight new perspectives and also limitations regarding the use of alternative methods in physical education lessons: the level of knowledge about the alternative pedagogies, the teachers' availability to participate in training programs or some possible challenges in implementing alternative methods. The conclusion of our study reveals new directions in approaching physical education lessons and provides teachers with information on how to use various alternative methods.

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1. Introduction

Within a few generations, the education system has transformed its structure in order to meet the demands of a constantly changing society. Nowadays, we seek various forms of organizing an instructive-educational activity that is the most appropriate for modern education. The student no longer has to adapt to the school system, but instead the system has to adapt to students and create conditions for the development of their possibilities.

Changes occurred in the whole society, on the one hand, and the necessary changes in the Romanian education system have led to new perspectives, offering different educational alternatives to children, parents and teachers. Within the Romanian education system, through initiatives taken at the central and local levels, various educational alternatives have been introduced since the 1990s, such as Waldorf, Montessori, Jena Plan, Freinet or Step by Step.

Regarding physical education lessons, in the past years, we noticed a decrease in the level of bio-motor potential of the school population, simultaneously with the loss of interest in practicing physical exercise (Stănescu, Ciolcă, & Stoicescu, 2016). Also, there are more and more situations when students obtain medical exemptions from physical exercise (for cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological, osteoarticular illnesses or deficiencies of the spine), along with an increase in absenteeism from the physical education classes (Stănescu & Stoicescu, 2016).

Considering all the above and given the limited number of previous research studies regarding the opinions of the teachers on the use of alternative methods in Romanian schools in general and in the physical education lessons in particular, we intend to open new approach perspectives on the didactic process in physical education.

2. Problem Statement

[In recent years, there has been a growing interest among specialists in the field in identifying new concepts applicable to physical education lessons and different from the traditional approaches. The traditional approach can be understood as a practical sequence, which includes the explanation of a certain ability, followed by multiple attempts performed by students in isolated conditions, according to a template, concluded with a bilateral game (Hopper, Butler, & Storey, 2009). In contrast to traditional physical education lessons, the student-centred learning strategies offer viable solutions to deliver the specific contents in accordance with the needs of the children's affective and cognitive development (Moy, Renshaw, Davids, & Brymer, 2015).

Starting from the concept of promoting an intrinsic motivation to learn, alternative schools provide students with an important sphere of freedom (Sliwka, 2008):

- Montessori School encourages students to move freely during classroom activities;
- Waldorf, Jena Plan, Freinet or other alternative school units encourage active learning in activities wholly or partly conducted by students.

The responses obtained during a survey on the teachers' perception of how Montessori education influences the children's ability to learn and develop highlight the differences between family and teacher goals (Epstein, 2015).

For the integration of the students with special educational needs, the use of alternative pedagogies is an effective solution through the favourable educational environment they provide (Danner & Fowler, 2015).

The analysis of the literature on the use of grades in the evaluation of the students' skills highlights that they have a positive effect only if other alternatives are not available (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). The descriptive feedback used instead of grades or scores favours better academic performance (Black & Wiliam, 2003).

Teachers cannot teach content they do not know. Therefore, there are studies highlighting the fact that the teachers engaged in activities involving the use of alternative methods aimed to improve the students' motor potential have participated in specific training programs (Lloyd & Modlin, 2012). This approach was also the first one used in the Obesity Prevention program "I am moving, I am learning", an activity carried out in Head Start schools, the Step-by-Step precursor.

From the perspective of the learning process, alternative schools have succeeded – to a certain extent – to become a model for mass education. This situation is substantiated by the high number of teaching strategies and assessment methods developed in the framework of alternative pedagogies and applied in public schools around the world (Sliwka, 2008).

3. Research Questions

Given all the above, the following research questions have been identified:

RQ1. What is the level of knowledge of alternative methods for teachers?

RQ2. What are the benefits of using alternative methods in physical education lessons?

RQ3. What is the willingness level of teachers to take part in training specific to alternative pedagogies?

RQ4. What are the difficulties that may arise in the implementation of alternative methods in physical education lessons?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to highlight the teachers' opinions about the implementation of the alternative pedagogy in physical education lessons in mainstream education.

5. Research Methods

Teachers were asked to fill up a short online survey questionnaire in order to obtain information about their opinion on what it means to implement alternative methods in the physical education lesson. The online survey questionnaire was administered via Google Forms and distributed to teachers through different work group emails and social media channels. The data obtained were used to make a comparative analysis between the opinions of physical education teachers and those with other specialisations on the implementation of the alternative methods in physical education lessons.

The teacher's opinion assessment tool contained 10 questions:

Q1. In addition to traditional education, what educational alternatives do you know? Q2. Is there such a program in your institution? Q3. Which educational program would you like to work with? Q4. Are you familiar with the way in which lessons are carried out in such alternative educational programs? Q5. What is your opinion on not giving grades/scores during the school year, which is specific to Waldorf, Montessori and Step-by-Step pedagogy? Q6. To what extent do you consider that the use of alternative pedagogies is a real support for the easier integration of children with special educational needs? Q7. To what extent would you agree to participate in training specific to alternative pedagogies? Q8. To what extent do you consider that the use of the principles and particularities of alternative pedagogies in physical education and sports lessons would encourage the attractiveness of the didactic process? Q9. What challenges do you think that may arise when implementing alternative methods in physical education lessons? Q10. To what extent do you think that improvements to the learning process may occur if the process is student-centred and individualised?

The participants in this study are 212 teachers from the pre-university level, who teach different school subjects with more or less knowledge on the alternative methods. Of the 212 respondents, 84 are physical education teachers, 41 are primary school teachers, and the others have different specialisations.

As far as their professional experience is concerned, 26 teachers have more than 30 years in education, 80 teachers have between 10 and 20 years, and 53 teachers have between 1-5 and 5-10 years in the field. In terms of gender distribution, the research included 123 women and 89 men.

6. Findings

Starting from the intention to identify the teachers' views on the possibility of implementing alternative methods in physical education lessons, we present the results of our research.

According to the responses, 73.11% of the interviewed teachers are acquainted with the Step-by-Step alternatives, 60.38% are familiar with the Waldorf pedagogy and only half of them have heard of the Montessori alternatives (Figure 01). The other two educational alternatives are lesser known. In fact, of the 212 teachers, only 19 mentioned the existence of alternative pedagogies in their school: 14 with Step-by-Step program, 4 with Waldorf and 1 with Montessori (Q2).

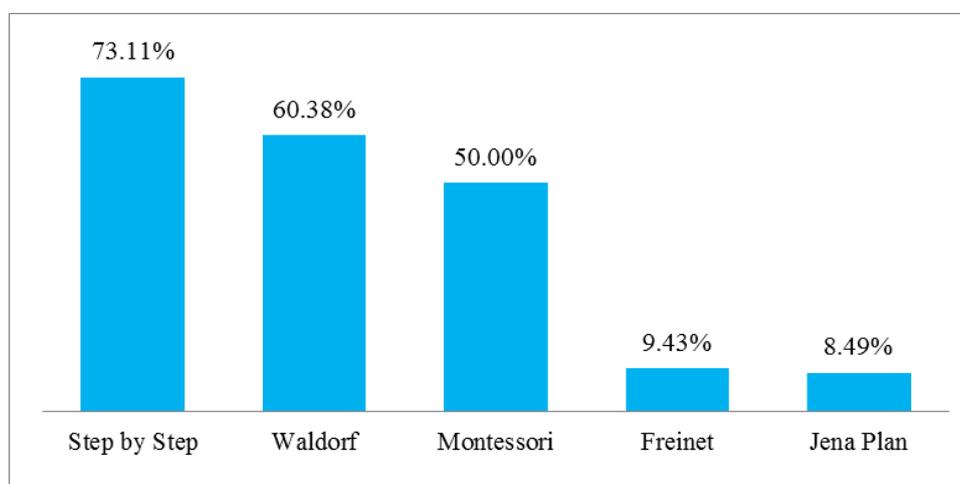


Figure 01. Q1. What other alternative pedagogies do teachers know?

For the third question of the questionnaire, we analysed in parallel the options of the physical education teachers and those of the teachers with other specialisations regarding the possibility of choosing an educational program they would like to work with. We have noted that physical education teachers prefer the Step-by-Step method in relation to other educational alternatives (27.56%), which is at the same level as the traditional education option. Teachers with other specialisations also prefer the Step-by-Step method (32.04%). This method recorded a higher percentage than the option for the traditional method (Figure 02). The order of the other options is the same for all teachers: Montessori pedagogy, Waldorf pedagogy, Jena Plan and Freinet pedagogy. Although the Waldorf alternative is better known than Montessori, teachers indicated a higher percentage for the latter as an option for a future activity.

The responses to question 4 highlight that only 38.21% of teachers know how to carry out educational alternative lessons. The other teachers have only general information about the alternative pedagogies.

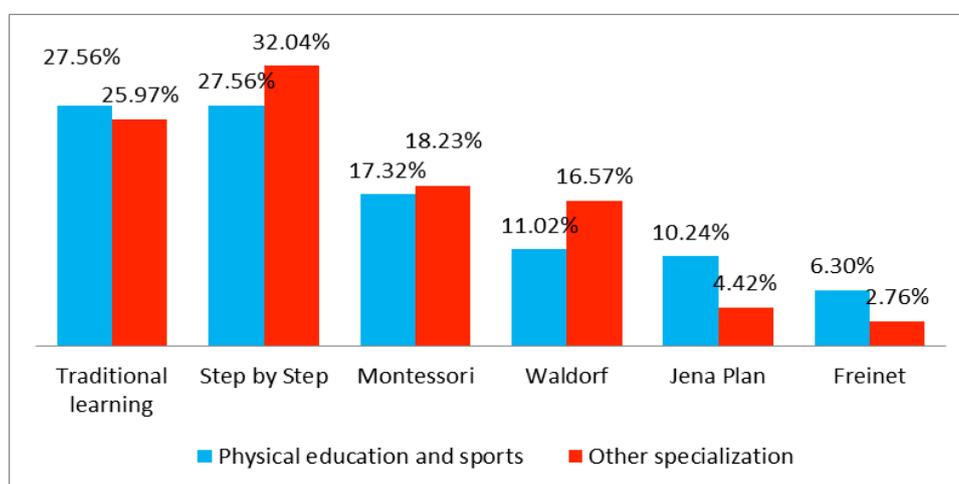


Figure 02. Q3. Educational program preferences

The opinions of the respondents on not giving grades highlight the fact that physical education teachers are less in agreement with this characteristic of alternative pedagogies than teachers from other specialisations. Even so, there is a percentage higher than 53% of those who have opted for „agree” and „strongly agree”, thus indicating that they would use this practice (Figure 03). In fact, avoiding grades or setting performance targets favours cooperation rather than competition, an idea reinforced by establishing a climate of mutual respect for the needs of each student.

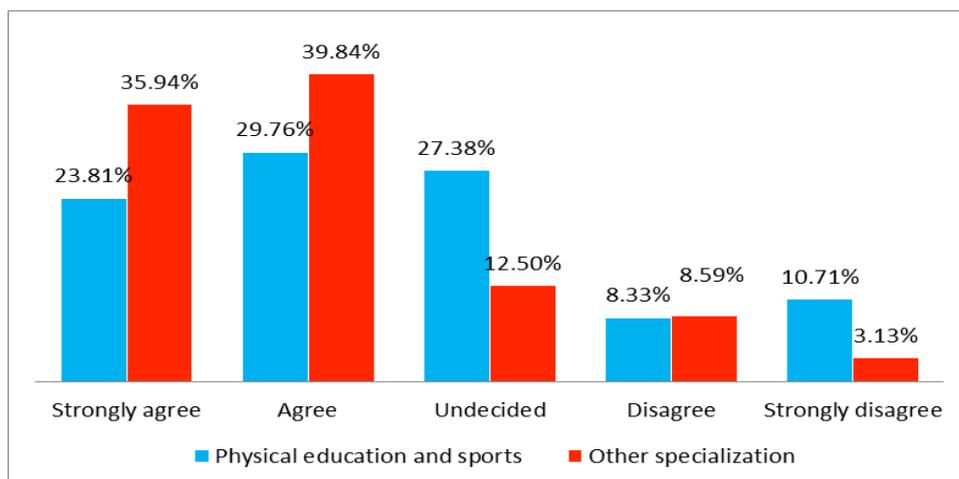


Figure 03. Q5. Teachers' opinion about not giving grades

Questions 6, 8 and 10 have high percentages for the levels "to a large extent" and "to a moderate extent", which suggests that, in the teachers' opinion, the use of alternative methods in physical education lessons can facilitate both the integration of students with special educational needs and increase the attractiveness of the lesson while improving the learning process (Table 01 - Q6, Q8, Q10). The above-mentioned results were recorded for both physical education teachers and those with other specialisations.

The teachers' openness to gain knowledge about new teaching strategies is highlighted by their willingness to participate in training courses. Thus, 42.86% and 35.71% of physical education teachers responded that they were willing to attend training courses "to a large extent" and "to a moderate extent", respectively (Table 01 - Q7). The percentages are similar to the responses of teachers specialised in other areas. Therefore, in order to increase the teachers' receptivity to the use of alternative pedagogies in physical education lessons, training courses are needed. Their effectiveness derives from the opportunity to personally observe and experiment with the alternative methods as learners.

Table 01. Teachers' opinions on using alternative pedagogies and participating in specific training

Question	Q6. Using alternative pedagogies to facilitate integration		Q7. Participation in specific training courses		Q8. Increasing attractiveness	Q10. Improvements to the learning process	
	Physical education teacher	Other specialisation	Physical education teacher	Other specialisation	Physical education teacher	Physical education teacher	Other specialisation
To a large extent	28.57%	39.06%	35.71%	39.06%	27.38%	34.52%	40.63%
To a moderate extent	51.19%	40.63%	42.86%	41.41%	44.05%	51.19%	45.31%
To some extent	11.90%	13.28%	13.10%	14.06%	16.67%	11.90%	10.94%
To little extent	4.76%	4.69%	3.57%	3.91%	8.33%	1.19%	0.78%
Not at all	3.57%	2.34%	4.76%	1.56%	3.57%	1.19%	2.34%

Regarding the difficulties that may arise in the implementation of the alternative methods in physical education lessons, the lack of material resources ranked first, with 77.36% of respondents identifying it as the main challenge (Figure 04). Another obstacle identified by half of the teachers is the lack of partnership between family and school, the latter failing to meet the expectations of the parents in terms of goals, skills and results.

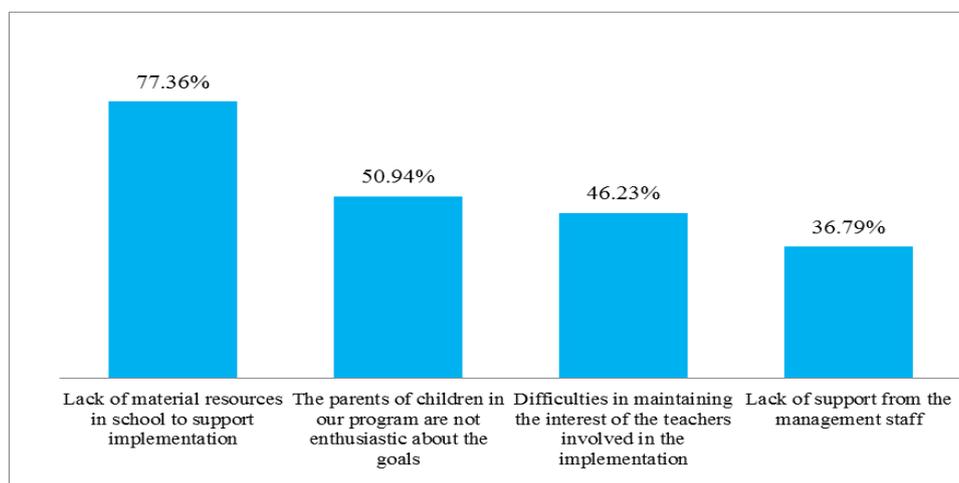


Figure 04. Q9. Implementation difficulties

7. Conclusion

The results highlight that teachers are looking with confidence and enthusiasm at the possibility of using alternative methods in physical education lessons, based on their potential to increase the attractiveness of the lesson, improve the didactic process and the prospect of integration into the school group.

This research has identified that teachers have general notions about different alternative pedagogies, but the percentage of those who are acquainted with how the lessons are carried out is slightly above the 1/3 ratio. At the same time, their readiness to recover the information deficit through participation in training courses with specific themes related to alternative pedagogies was observed.

The paper has also identified a number of difficulties in implementing alternative programs in physical education lessons, such as material resources available to teachers and the parents' dissatisfaction with the results of the activities.

Consequently, this research highlights both the teachers' views and the possible challenges in the implementation of the alternative methods in lessons. In fact, our study is an important step in opening new opportunities, because using alternative pedagogies in the physical education lesson is in agreement with the development of the psychomotor, cognitive and social-affective dimensions of the students.

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