



FROM MOVEMENT TO INCLUSION: THE ROLE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Elli Barlaⁱ

Kindergarten Teacher,
10th Kindergarten School of Kalamata,
M.Ed, Theatre Educator,
Greece

Abstract:

Physical education in early childhood education extends beyond the development of motor skills, serving as a key vehicle for promoting inclusion and social integration. Through its experiential, open, and multisensory nature, it provides children with opportunities for expression, interaction, and learning that transcend traditional instructional approaches (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Inclusion, as defined in international frameworks (UNESCO, 1994; Booth & Ainscow, 2011), is not limited to mere adaptations of the educational system but entails profound pedagogical and value-based shifts that recognize diversity as a source of enrichment. Within this context, physical education acts as a bridge between children with diverse abilities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds, fostering social cohesion, empathy, and mutual understanding (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). The integration of multicultural elements—such as traditional dances and games—further supports intercultural education and challenges stereotypes (Florian, 2008). Effective implementation of inclusive practices requires institutional support, adequate resources, and ongoing professional development for early childhood educators (Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007). Teachers are called upon to design flexible and differentiated activities (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2009), to promote values of cooperation and respect, and to act as agents of cultural change (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). In conclusion, physical education in preschool settings can act as a catalyst for educational and social transformation, laying the groundwork for equality, acceptance, and coexistence. Through this approach, schools can fulfil the mission of providing holistic, equitable, and inclusive education, empowering children to become active, democratic citizens of the future.

Keywords: physical education, inclusion, early childhood education, intercultural education

ⁱ Correspondence: email barlaelli@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Physical Education (PE) in early childhood education constitutes a vital pillar of holistic development, as it enhances children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Kapsaski, 2000). Particularly in kindergarten, where learning is intertwined with play and movement, PE serves as a natural arena for expression and collaboration.

The concept of *inclusion* has become a core principle of contemporary education, moving beyond the narrow notion of mere coexistence in the classroom to focus on ensuring the active participation of all children, regardless of origin, religion, or socio-economic background (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). In early childhood, the foundation for positive attitudes toward diversity is established (Florian, 2008).

The need to explore PE as a tool for fostering inclusive education in kindergarten is therefore critical. This article seeks to analyze the theoretical framework linking PE to inclusion, highlight its benefits and practical challenges, examine international and Greek research and practices, and propose directions for creating an open and inclusive school environment. PE in kindergarten is not merely a subject; it is a means of empowerment and a vehicle for cultivating an inclusive climate.

The initial engagement with motor skills—such as balance, coordination, jumping, and running—is embedded in the national preschool curriculum (DEPPS & APS for Kindergarten, 2003; Mavrogiogios, 2005). Through movement, children develop not only physical abilities but also key skills for cognitive and social participation. The framework of *physical literacy*, a holistic concept that combines skills, confidence, and motivation for movement, emerges as a crucial foundation for lifelong engagement in physical activities and positive attitudes toward health. When nurtured from an early age, it is associated with higher levels of physical activity and social well-being (Weir *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, systematic evaluative studies in preschool care settings show that PE-based interventions increase children's overall physical activity levels (Lum *et al.*, 2022). Such interventions include teacher training, the creation of supportive environments, and the design of opportunities for motor expression.

2. Inclusion and Preschool Physical Education in Greece

Historically, Physical Education (PE) has been integrated into the Greek curricula, both in the early programs (1896, 1962, 1980) and in more recent ones (1989, 2003), which are grounded in developmental and psychological principles (Konstantinou *et al.*, 2007). However, the actual implementation of inclusion presents challenges, often due to insufficient teacher training, entrenched stereotypes, or limited resources. Studies on the Greek context highlight that kindergarten teachers often hold conflicting or restrictive views regarding inclusion and the participation of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in activities (Fyssa, Vlachou & Avramidis, 2014).

There are also practical applications of inclusive teaching styles, such as those described by Chatzipanteli, Konstantinidou, and Fotiadis (2022), where in Greece a

modified *Inclusion Teaching Style* is used to fully integrate individuals with dyslexia into PE.

The UNESCO Charter for Physical Education, Physical Activity, and Sport recognizes the right to PE as fundamental and emphasizes inclusion, equality, and the elimination of discrimination through physical activity (UNESCO, 2015). Similarly, systematic reviews indicate that the participation of children with limitations in *adapted PE* improves physical health, psychosocial development, and autonomy (Wikipedia: Adapted Physical Education). Such interventions directly contribute to fostering a sense of belonging and social interaction.

Inclusion constitutes one of the core pillars of modern educational policy, promoting the equitable participation of all children in the educational process. In contrast to *integration*, which focuses on simply placing the “different” student into an existing system, inclusion aims to reshape the school environment so that it responds to all learners’ differences and needs.

One of the most significant milestones in the field of inclusive education is the Salamanca Statement, adopted in June 1994. The Statement emphasizes that “*every child has a fundamental right to education*” and that educational systems should be designed not for homogenization, but for the acceptance of diversity. Regular schools with an inclusive philosophy are recognized as the most appropriate setting to combat discrimination and promote a society that embraces diversity.

In preschool education, early childhood carries particular weight in shaping attitudes, values, and behaviors toward diversity. The quality and nature of initial learning experiences either foster acceptance of diversity or undermine it. This aligns with research in early childhood pedagogy, which stresses the need for reflective, flexible teaching practices that support differentiated learning.

To create an inclusive kindergarten, the following are required: adoption of flexible and differentiated pedagogical practices; continuous reflection by educators on stereotypes and expectations; institutional support to strengthen sensitivity to diversity; and the application of differentiated instruction.

Physical Education (PE), by its very nature, offers a dynamic, multisensory, and experiential learning environment. Unlike other cognitive domains that primarily favor verbal or written expression, PE allows for the participation of all, as it is movement-based. Through bodily expression, children are freed from restrictions and share common experiences regardless of their cognitive, linguistic, or physical differences. The literature highlights that PE—especially Adapted Physical Education—promotes social acceptance, reduces stereotypes, and fosters empathy among children. Such interventions enhance self-image, reduce anxiety, and strengthen relationships through experiences of cooperation and success. Assessment in inclusive PE does not focus on the “correct execution” of a movement but on individual progress, effort, and collaboration, reinforcing each child’s sense of belonging and dismantling competitive models and exclusion.

The educator must possess sensitivity and competence in applying practices that encourage participation by all, as well as a reflective stance toward stereotypes and limiting expectations, thus helping cultivate values such as respect, solidarity, and acceptance of diversity.

PE in kindergarten offers an early opportunity to integrate inclusion at a practical, experiential level, contributing to the development of a school culture that not only accepts diversity but recognizes it as a valuable contribution to the educational community ([UNESCO, 1994]; Booth & Ainscow, 2011). An interesting dimension of PE is its role as a bridge between children with different experiences, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Through cooperative activities, social bonds are strengthened, social skills are developed, and mutual understanding is fostered—especially for children facing motor, language, or emotional challenges. In this context, bodily expression becomes a valuable form of communication beyond words (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). Moreover, specially designed PE programs, such as the European ESPEC curriculum, have shown improvements in preschoolers' social skills in Greece, Cyprus, and Italy. When applied with an inclusive approach, PE promotes empathy, mutual help, and acceptance; children learn through participation—not only theoretically—the value of cooperation and supporting “the other,” thus reinforcing the culture of the school community. Such experiences provide an important framework for nurturing socially aware and democratic citizens ([UNESCO, 1994]; Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Children who experience success and acceptance through PE enhance their self-esteem and psychosocial resilience—critical skills for future school and social integration (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000).

A multicultural approach to PE, through dances, games, rhythms, and movement patterns drawn from diverse cultural traditions, can be creatively integrated into the curriculum, strengthening intercultural education. This encounter through movement fosters fruitful dialogue, cultural exchange, and the dismantling of prejudices. Educators who embrace this approach do not simply respond to diversity—they transform it into a creative source of educational and social enrichment (Florian, 2008).

Promoting inclusion through PE in kindergarten is neither an automatic nor fragmented process—it requires coordinated and multi-level planning that integrates institutional, pedagogical, and material-resource dimensions. Institutional support includes clear guidelines, appropriate curricula, and the provision of sufficient resources, ensuring that educators have access to suitable materials and equipment adapted to all children's needs (Black-Hawkins, Florian, & Rouse, 2007; UNESCO, 2015). In parallel, continuous professional development is essential for building knowledge, skills, and attitudes that facilitate differentiated and flexible PE activities. Specific teaching strategies—such as using modified games, varying the pace and intensity of activity, and employing visual and kinesthetic cues—can boost participation for all children (Lieberman, 2017).

Interdisciplinary collaboration with special educators, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists contributes to designing interventions that

holistically address children's needs, while also fostering dialogue and the exchange of good practices among professionals (Friend & Cook, 2016).

Of particular importance is evaluating inclusive practices not only in terms of pedagogical effectiveness but also from the children's own experience. Gathering data from direct observation, children's narratives, and analysis of their participation provides valuable material for reflection and improving design. This approach aligns with the pedagogy of the reflective educator, who continuously adapts their practices based on the needs and dynamics of each class (Nutbrown & Clough, 2006).

3. The Role of the Preschool Teacher

The role of the preschool teacher is crucial for the success of inclusive physical education. The educator is called upon to create an environment that actively supports diversity, encourages the participation of all children, and presents individual differences as a natural and positive element of the learning community (Florian & Rouse, 2009). The teacher's attitudes and beliefs regarding diversity directly influence outcomes: if differences are perceived as obstacles, the participation of certain children may be limited; conversely, a stance of positive acceptance and adaptability fosters conditions of mutual respect and empowerment (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008).

Within the context of preschool physical education, the teacher is expected to design flexible, differentiated, and multi-level activities that allow each child to participate according to their abilities and experience success through personal progress (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2009). The emphasis shifts from mere "goal achievement" to recognizing effort, improvement, and individual learning paths, aligning with the principles of inclusive education.

Moreover, the preschool teacher acts as a model of an inclusive attitude, promoting values such as respect for diversity, cooperation, and solidarity through their own behavior (UNESCO, 1994). Through appropriate interventions and the development of supportive relationships within the classroom, the teacher encourages interaction among children, highlights the abilities of all, and fosters a climate of empathy and mutual support. Continuous professional development in differentiation and inclusive teaching is a key prerequisite for the success of these practices (Black-Hawkins, Florian, & Rouse, 2007). Enhancing knowledge and skills not only improves the quality of instruction but also increases teacher confidence, empowering them to undertake creative initiatives.

Ultimately, the preschool teacher plays a dual role: on one hand, they organize and coordinate the learning environment, ensuring that participation is both possible and meaningful for all; on the other hand, they act as an agent of cultural change, strengthening the perception that the school belongs to everyone and that every child has the right to participate equally in the joy of learning.

4. Conclusions

Physical education in early childhood education is not merely a space for developing motor skills; it can serve as a fundamental vehicle for promoting inclusion, social integration, and intercultural understanding. As highlighted through the theoretical approach, the nature of physical education provides an open, experiential, and multisensory framework that allows children to express themselves, interact, and learn in ways that transcend traditional forms of teaching (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Within this context, bodily movement becomes a language of communication and social connection, enhancing active participation even for children who struggle with verbal or academic forms of communication.

The concept of inclusion, far from being a simple “adaptation” of the educational system, entails deeper pedagogical and value-based shifts. It requires schools that embrace diversity as a source of enrichment rather than as an obstacle (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), promoting collective responsibility for the progress of all children. Early education represents a critical stage for cultivating such attitudes, as early experiences of social learning can shape long-term perceptions of equality and collaboration.

The preschool teacher, as a central agent of this culture, is called upon to assume an expanded role: combining pedagogical sensitivity, creativity, and scientific evidence to design educational environments where all children feel safe, capable, and accepted (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Vickerman & Coates, 2009). This requires not only technical skills for adapting activities but also a deep professional commitment to the principles of social justice and democratic education. The integration of inclusive practices in physical education is not merely a matter of technical training; it is primarily a matter of attitudes and values (UNESCO, 1994). Through flexible activities, positive reinforcement, and systematic reflective practice, the preschool teacher can ensure that every child has meaningful access to learning and development opportunities.

From this perspective, physical education in preschool can serve as a catalyst for educational and social change, laying the foundations for equality, respect, and coexistence. These foundations extend beyond school life, shaping children’s future social interactions as active, responsible, and solidaristic citizens.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

I am a M.Ed. kindergarten teacher in 10th kindergarten school of Kalamata, Greece. I am a theatre educator and my research interests are inclusion in education.

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