

**TITLE THE ITINERANT TEACHER, OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE
FOR THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN
PHYSICAL EDUCATION LESSONS IN MASTER SCHOOLS**

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Abstract The implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools is conditioned by a series of factors. These factors, political, legislative, institutional, social, cultural, pedagogical, psychological, economic, must be well correlated and coordinated for inclusion to be effective and sustainable. The purpose of the paper was to explore the opportunity created in achieving a balanced and inclusive educational environment through the presence of the itinerant teacher in physical education and sports classes in mainstream schools. In the paper, we started from the hypothesis that the presence of the itinerant teacher in mainstream schools facilitates collaboration between teachers, students, parents and other specialists, effectively supporting the creation of an inclusive educational environment. The proposed objectives are to analyze the challenges and opportunities associated with the presence or lack of support or the itinerant teacher, in physical education and sports classes, in the development of an inclusive educational environment; investigating the collaboration between itinerant teachers and students with special needs, classroom teachers, parents and other specialists in supporting the school and social inclusion process; proposing recommendations for optimizing the itinerant teacher's intervention in the inclusion process of students with special educational needs; analyzing the perceptions and attitudes of classmates and parents on the integration of students with special needs in mainstream schools.

Introduction: Inclusion is achieved through individualized changes in the educational process carried out in educational units. [9, p. 9-10]. School inclusion represents the first step towards social inclusion and involves a flexible educational framework through which all students, regardless of their individual learning characteristics and level of development, benefit from a non-discriminatory education. [2,13,3]. The success of inclusion is the result of the collaboration of all

decision-making factors: political, legislative, institutional, social, cultural, pedagogical, psychological. The inclusive school is the accessible institution that offers quality in the mission of responding to the individual needs of all students, including students with SEN, transforming them into students with the skills and knowledge necessary in the inclusion process. [12, p.115]. Human resources play an important role in school inclusion. The main categories of human resources involved are: school managers, teachers, support or itinerant teacher, special education specialists and therapists, auxiliary teaching staff, administrative and technical staff, family, community. In the context of school inclusion, the success of this process depends largely on the skills (initial and continuous training), attitudes (cooperation between teachers, specialists, family) and direct involvement (motivation and support, recognition of merit, access to material resources, reduction of bureaucracy) of the people who work with these students. In Romania, the National Education Law 1/2011, updated on August 13, 2018, is the normative act that legislates inclusive education and which stipulates that in mainstream schools, students identified with SEN are provided with educational support through support and itinerant teachers. [5,6]. Therefore, the legislative framework in our country guarantees a fair educational process for students with special educational needs included in mainstream schools by offering them specialized educational support services. [7, Cap. III, Art. 5,6,7]. Support services broaden the scope of those who participate in creating a quality educational environment, the responsibility is no longer limited to students, parents and family but becomes a priority for the entire society. [1, p.5-6]. The interest in increasing the educational act offered to students with SEN has intensified recently, "Order of the Minister of Labor, Family and Social Protection and of the President of the National Institute of Statistics no. 1.832/856/2011, Published on 18.07.2024" [10], stipulates the introduction of the occupation of itinerant and support teacher.

However, in Romania, few normal schools benefit from these inclusion facilitators. This lack of support or itinerant teachers transforms the opportunity for quality support through the presence of these specialists into a challenge assigned and directed primarily to students with SEN, classroom teachers whose training is not exactly specialized, and family. The support or itinerant teacher holds a teaching norm within the School Center for Inclusive Education. He must be qualified in special psychopedagogy, pedagogy or psychology. The teaching norm is 16 hours per week for eight students with mild or moderate disabilities or for four students with severe, profound or associated disabilities integrated into mainstream education. [8, cap. V, art.19, letter i] and can carry out his activity in a maximum of three school units regardless of the school cycle.

The support or itinerant teacher provides specialized support to students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, thus ensuring optimal conditions for their participation in the educational process. He/She specializes in educational

and recreational activities necessary for children with SEN. [7]. He/She must also have specific skills in the field of inclusion, demonstrate empathy, have strong motivation, be persevering, tenacious, consistent in the development and application of adapted programs, have a developed spirit of observation and excellent communication skills [11]. The presence of the itinerant teacher in inclusive schools offers opportunities that benefit primarily students with special educational needs, their families, classroom teachers, all stakeholders, and society. They recognize, support, and promote school inclusion, offer specific counseling on inclusion to classroom teachers, the school management team, and the auxiliary and technical teaching staff in the school involved in this process. They establish partnerships and collaborative activities with the classroom teacher, contributing through their specialized knowledge to the creation of a productive and efficient inclusive environment. The time allocated to the teaching norm of the support or itinerant teacher is not limited only to direct participation in the classroom, but also through participation in activities with students with special needs carried out in parallel with class hours in multifunctional rooms specially designed for such activities, or in activities with these students after class hours.

Material-method: This study started from the hypothesis: the support or itinerant teacher is a true facilitator of school inclusion through the adapted support offered to students with special educational needs in physical education and sports lessons in mainstream schools. His professional training helps him in choosing, adapting and implementing the most effective teaching strategies, in developing and personalizing all action resources, in achieving an open and effective collaboration especially with students with special needs, with classroom teachers, with the family. The purpose of the paper is: the opportunity created in achieving a balanced and inclusive educational environment through the presence of the itinerant teacher in physical education and sports lessons in mainstream schools. The proposed objectives are: analyzing the challenges and opportunities associated with the presence or absence of the itinerant teacher in physical education lessons and in the development of an inclusive educational environment; investigating the collaboration between itinerant teachers and students with special needs, classroom teachers, parents and other specialists in supporting the school and social inclusion process; proposing recommendations for optimizing the itinerant teacher's intervention in the inclusion process of students with special educational needs; analyzing the perceptions and attitudes of classmates and parents on the integration of students with special needs in mainstream schools. The research methods used in the study were: the bibliographical study method, the interview method, the questionnaire method, the data processing and interpretation method, the graphical representation method, the document analysis.

The purpose of the questionnaire aimed to identify, analyze the opinions and experiences of physical education and sports teachers in mainstream schools

regarding the role, through the presence/opportunity or absence/challenge, of the support or itinerant teacher in physical education lessons as a facilitator of school inclusion. In the research, we used the open questionnaire that offered freedom to the subjects on the answers given (4, Epuran, M. 1992, p. 273). Obiectivele specifice propuse: evaluarea competențele profesorului de sprijin sau itinerant în procesul de adaptare curriculară și a strategiilor didactice folosite; identificarea sprijinului acordat profesorilor de la clasă; cunoașterea nivelului de colaborare cu cadrele didactice de bază și familie; identificarea dificultăților/provocărilor întâlnite de profesorii de la clasă în lipsa unei pregătiri de specialitate necesară în incluziunea elevilor cu CES, adunarea și analiza sugestiilor oferite de cadrele didactice de bază cu privier la îmbunătățirea activității profesorului de sprijin sau itinerant în realizarea unui mediu educational mai incluziv. After the results were processed, a global perception of the obtained data was facilitated through graphical representation. The graphical method represents the expression of the statistically-mathematically processed data.[14] The questionnaire was applied between September and December 2024, to a number of one hundred physical education and sports teachers from Suceava County who are employed in mass pre-university education. The objectives of the questionnaire were met thanks to the answers received from the respondents.

Results: The first question seeks an objective answer on the number of core teachers involved in the school inclusion process compared to the number of support or itinerant teachers involved in this process, relative to the sample involved in the study.

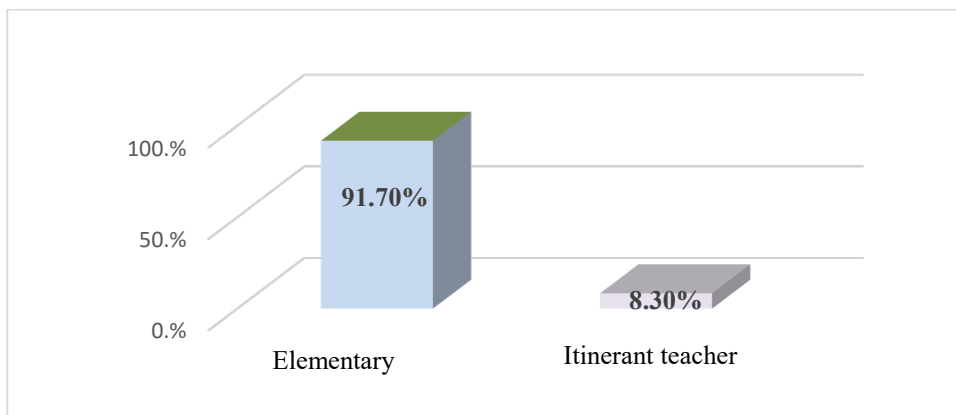


Fig.1 The status of the teacher in the educational system

In (Fig. 1) it is highlighted that the majority of the responding teachers, 91.70%, are basic teachers. This mainly reflects the perspectives and experiences of these teachers, who, unfortunately, without specialized studies, assume a direct role in the implementation of school inclusion. Among the respondents, only 8.30% are support or itinerant teachers. This percentage represents precisely the specialized category involved in supporting students with special educational needs, but their limited

number, unfortunately, reflects the undesirable reality of the inclusive education system in Romania.

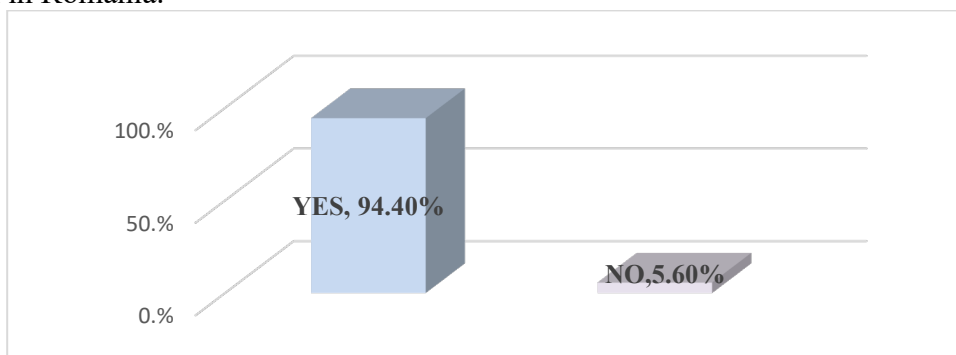


Fig. 2 Involvement of teachers in teaching activities with students with special educational needs

In Figure 2, the statistics of the responses show that 94.40% of physical education and sports teachers work with students with SEN, which suggests that in their teaching activity, the majority of them, 91.70%, face the challenges caused by the lack of a support or itinerant teacher, that their support is needed so that the inclusion process does not become a challenge. Among the respondents, only 5.60% do not work with students with SEN. They either work in schools where there are no students with SEN, or these students are not identified or refuse to be classified as students with special needs.

The third question aims to identify the importance and contribution of this specialist in the educational inclusion process of students with special educational needs. The data collected can contribute to improving the integration strategies used by this support or itinerant professor, strengthening his position as a specialist.

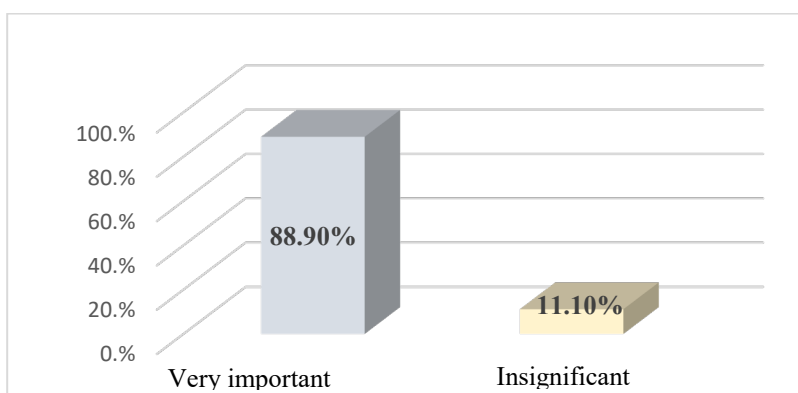


Fig.3 Evaluation of the role of support or itinerant teachers in school inclusion

Of the one hundred respondents, 88.90% consider that the role of the support or itinerant teacher is very important, the support provided by them becomes an opportunity: in creating an inclusive and equitable environment, in collaborating

with students, physical education teachers in the classroom, with parents or with any other factor involved in this process. While only 11.10% of respondents consider that the role of this specialist is insignificant.

This question helps to understand how the support or itinerant teacher ensures the inclusive educational success of students with SEN through specialized contributions, by developing effective educational support strategies.

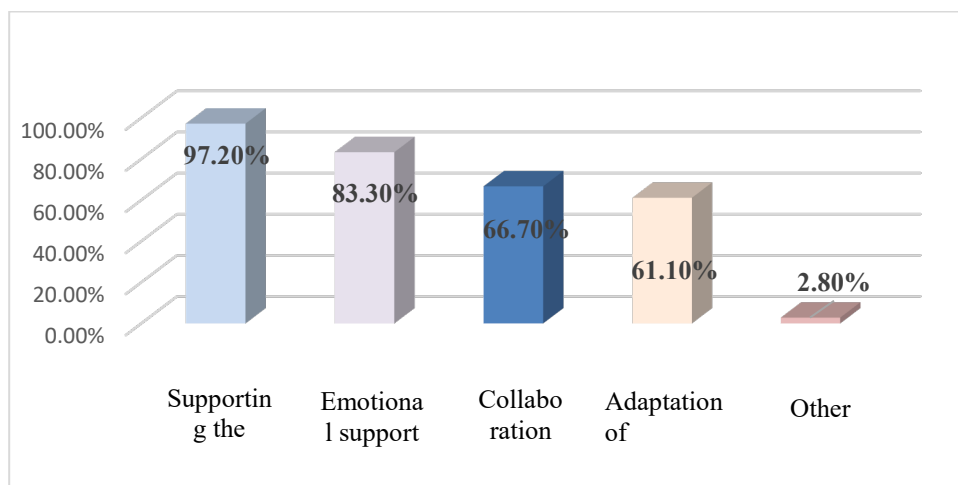


Fig.4 Highlighting the main responsibilities and contributions associated with the role of support or itinerant teacher in supporting the inclusion process

97.20% of respondents believe that supporting the student in the learning process is the main task of the support or itinerant teacher, which would result in advancing the learning process of students with special needs by facilitating academic acquisitions, would provide solutions to the difficult problems faced by this student, would significantly contribute to the school success and inclusion of these students in the school environment. Among the respondents, 83.30% considered that emotional support for students with SEN is very important because in this way these students will cope with the difficulties and obstacles encountered, develop their resilience in relation to the challenges encountered, and facilitate their active participation in the school and social process. Collaboration with the family was considered by 66.70% of respondents to be one of the important skills that this specialist must have, working with the family can significantly contribute to the development of effective action strategies adapted to the needs of students. Used both at school and at home, the inclusion process becomes easier and faster. 61.10% consider that the ability to adapt teaching materials is also important, thus the educational act becomes easier, more attractive and more effective in the inclusion process. Only 2.80% of respondents admit that in addition to the skills mentioned, there are other skills that are necessary for a support or itinerant teacher in the educational inclusion process.

Question 5 aims to assess the level of communication and collaboration between students with SEN, physical education and sports teachers, and family.

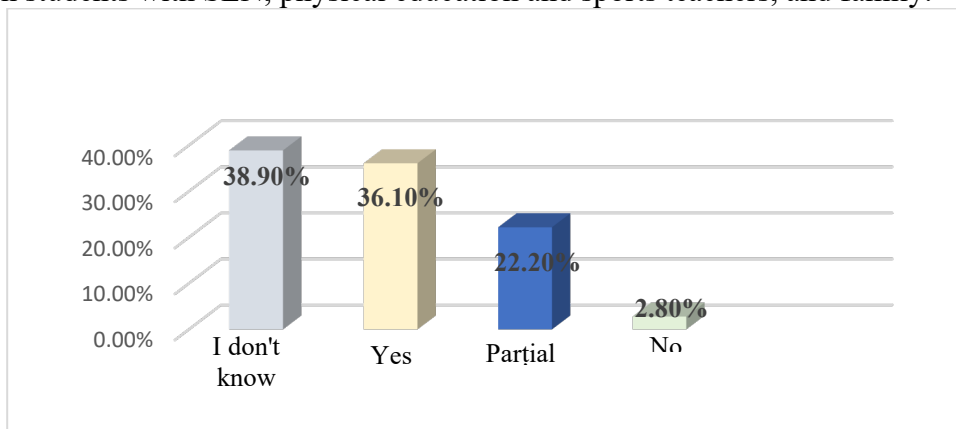


Fig. 5 Level of collaboration between the support or itinerant teacher, students with SEN, physical education and sports teachers and family

To this question, among the study participants, 38.90% answered that they do not know because the schools they belong to do not benefit from a support or itinerant teacher, 36.10% believe that effective communication has developed between this specialist and the classroom teachers, which is considered a welcome opportunity in supporting the inclusion process, 22.20% of the respondents claim that this specialist communicates insufficiently with the students, physical education and sports teachers, and the family, which slows down and becomes a challenge for the inclusion of students with SEN in the mainstream education system. 2.8% of the teachers who responded believe that there is no communication between the support or itinerant teacher, the integration process is left solely to the classroom teachers, the result of school inclusion being more than deficient and challenging.

Question 6 aims to identify the most essential skills needed by the support or itinerant teacher to contribute effectively to the educational inclusion process.

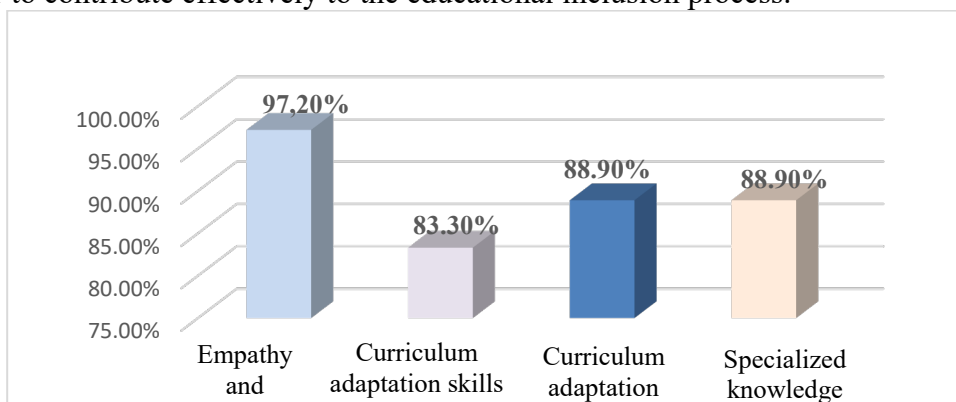


Fig. 6 Highlighting the skills of the support or itinerant teacher needed in school inclusion

Of the respondents to the study, 97.20% answered that empathy and patience are the most important skills that a support or itinerant teacher must have. Understanding special needs and the desire to adapt action strategies, creating an integrative environment according to the needs of the student provides a comfortable learning base for students with SEN. 83.30% claim that the ability to adapt the curriculum is important. The integration process is achievable when acting in relation to the individual needs of students. Effective communication is the skill that 88.90% of respondents consider to be important. Developing communication produces positive effects on the educational success of these students by taking over and transmitting information from the specialist to the classroom teacher or to the family. Specialized knowledge is considered by 88.90% to be skills that concretely support the inclusion process. The benefits come precisely due to the accumulation of specialized knowledge, information that supports and streamlines the entire inclusive process. Question 7 aims to highlight the essential role that the itinerant teacher has through the teaching activity carried out in physical education and sports lessons on the academic performance obtained in this subject by students with SEN included in mainstream schools.

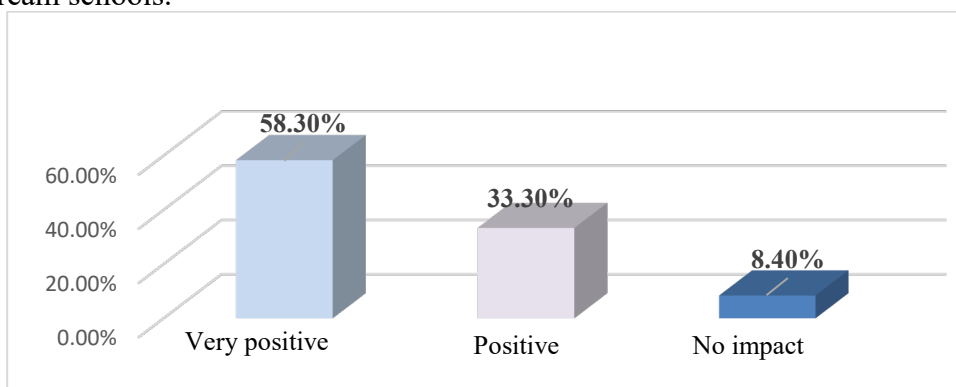


Fig. 7 Evaluation of the impact of the itinerant teacher's teaching activity on the school performance of students with SEN

To this question, 58.30% of respondents answered that the impact on the performance obtained as a result of the activity of the support or itinerant teacher is very good. The direct assistance provided to students with SEN, the adaptation of the methods and means used and adapted in the teaching activity, in accordance with the needs of these students, the coherent and efficient collaboration adapted, the early identification of difficulties and prompt intervention, the academic, emotional, behavioral support have a very positive effect on the school performance of students with SEN. 33.30% of respondents claim that the effect of the activity of the support or itinerant teacher is good in relation to the school performance obtained by students with special needs, while 8.40% consider that the teaching activity of the support or itinerant teacher is weak, lacking content and efficiency. Question 8 aims to highlight the fact that in the absence of the itinerant or support teacher, physical education and

sports teachers face multiple challenges in the school inclusion process of students with SEN. Without this specialist, quality education cannot be ensured nor can successful educational inclusion be achieved.

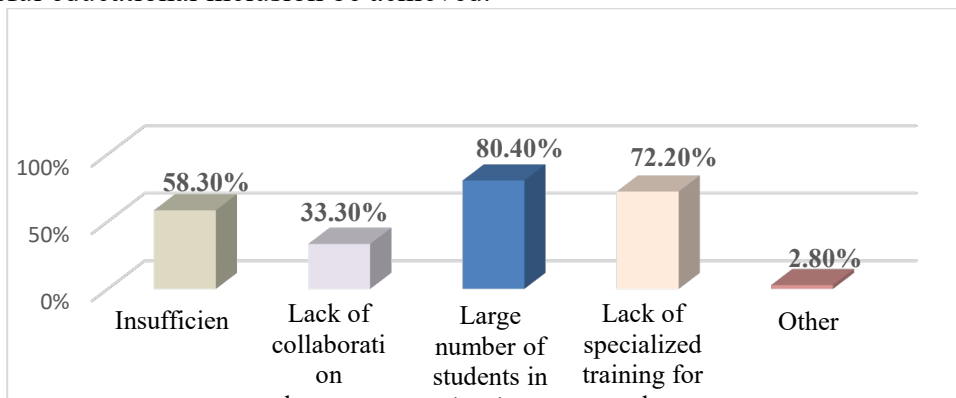


Fig. 8 Identification of challenges encountered in physical education and sports lessons in the absence of a support or itinerant teacher

Among the respondents, 58.30% consider that insufficient resources represent a challenge and prevent the achievement of effective inclusion in good conditions. The lack of adapted curriculum materials, adapted methods and means of action, specialized technology, teaching materials, adequate infrastructure constitute real challenges and barriers in achieving school inclusion of children with disabilities. Also, 33.30% of the respondents claim that poor collaboration between teachers-students-parents leads to a decrease in the efficiency of the inclusion process. Large student populations are another challenge supported by 30.40% of respondents, which slows down and complicates the inclusion of students with SEN. 72.20% of study participants confirm that the lack of specialized training of basic teaching staff produces imbalances in achieving the inclusion of students with special needs. Of those who participated in the study, 2.80% also identified other challenges that have become barriers to achieving effective school inclusion. Question 9 sought responses that would certify that educational inclusion and the success of students with SEN in the school environment can be achieved through proposals for concrete measures that directly contribute to achieving this goal. Physical education and sports teachers in the classroom, in the absence of a support or itinerant teacher, can implement strategies for support and school inclusion.

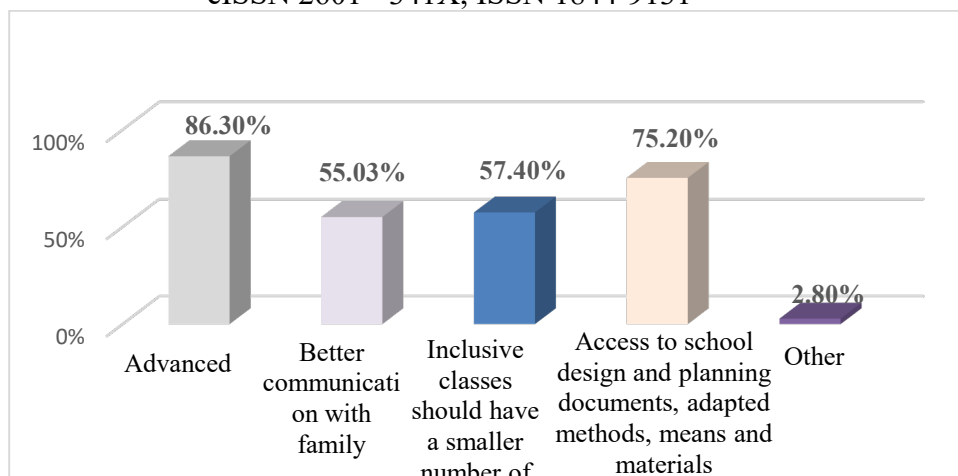


Fig. 9 Highlighting the strategies applied by physical education and sports teachers to improve their work in the absence of the support teacher and the classroom

Most respondents, 86.30%, believe that participation in training courses would significantly increase the quality of physical education teachers' teaching activities and implicitly the inclusion process would be faster and more qualitative. 55.03% of those surveyed proposed to develop the level of communication with the family, which would make the physical education teacher's activity more efficient. 57.40% say that a smaller number of students in inclusive classes would be another strategy to make the classroom activity of the basic teacher more efficient. 75.20% claim that access to school design and planning documents, materials, means and adapted methods can raise the qualitative level of the classroom teacher's activity. Only 2.80% of respondents found other strategies to increase the quality of the classroom activities of physical education and sports teachers.

Discussions: The article [15] examines the integration of students with disabilities into the Education for All initiative and the Sustainable Development Goals, through a case study from Ethiopia, where inclusive education is developing amid rapid school expansion. The research, conducted in rural and urban schools in Tigray province, reveals support for inclusion from teachers and administrators, but insufficient teacher training and a lack of educational resources remain major challenges. The study [16] highlights the need for additional training for teachers in supporting students with disabilities, despite current efforts at inclusion. Research limitations include the small sample size and self-reporting of participants' perceptions. It is recommended to improve physical education teacher education (PETE) programs by diversifying instructional methods and increasing training in Adapted Physical Education (APE), which involves adapting sports and exercise activities to be accessible to students with disabilities. Future research could include additional interviews and comparisons between different types of training.

Continuous evaluation of PETE programs is essential to ensure equitable inclusion in physical education.

Conclusions: The support or itinerant teacher is indispensable in promoting the inclusion of students with special educational needs in physical education lessons. The opportunities offered by the presence of the itinerant teacher in physical education and sports activities are essential for the well-being and development of students with special needs, thus consolidating an accessible and inclusive school for all students. The support provided to students by physical education teachers in the classroom and to the students' families facilitates: adapting curricular and extracurricular physical education activities to the individual needs of students; creating an inclusive environment where all students, regardless of the abilities they possess, actively participate; developing relationship, interaction and social skills with classmates; the collaboration of physical education teachers with specialists in the field ensuring a correct and efficient approach, consistent with the needs of the student with SEN, necessary for school educational inclusion.

The challenges encountered are related to the lack and impossibility of using adequate materials, adapted to support personalized activities; the need to participate in continuing education courses for physical education teachers to better understand the particularities of students with SEN and to increase the quality of the specialized educational process for these students; the simultaneous management of the activity of students with SEN according to their needs and those of the other students in the class.

The impact of the presence of the support or itinerant teacher in physical activities on students with special educational needs is positive and improves the physical condition of students with special needs, increases their self-esteem and increases the efficiency of school educational inclusion.

Ensuring adequate training for physical education and sports teachers, but also for the support or itinerant teacher; developing adapted support programs that include additional individualized equipment and resources; improving collaboration and communication between all stakeholders to create opportunities for creating personalized solutions.

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