

Promoting Change through Action Research

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“Bringing a different world into existence – Action Research as a trigger for innovations” was the overarching theme and vision of the international CARN Conference 2011 in Vienna. The chapters in this book are drawn mainly from conference contributions. The authors share practical knowledge which has arisen from their work, and reflect on development processes in schools, in teacher education and professional development, social work, social pedagogy, health care and community development. This book offers what some critics believe has been missing in recent action research literature, namely first person accounts of action researchers who endeavour to change working conditions and social relations in their environment through the conduct of action research. This book is also distinguished by assembling contributions from people who are linking action research to a broad diversity of differing contexts, and who are exploring topics or issues across various applications of action research.

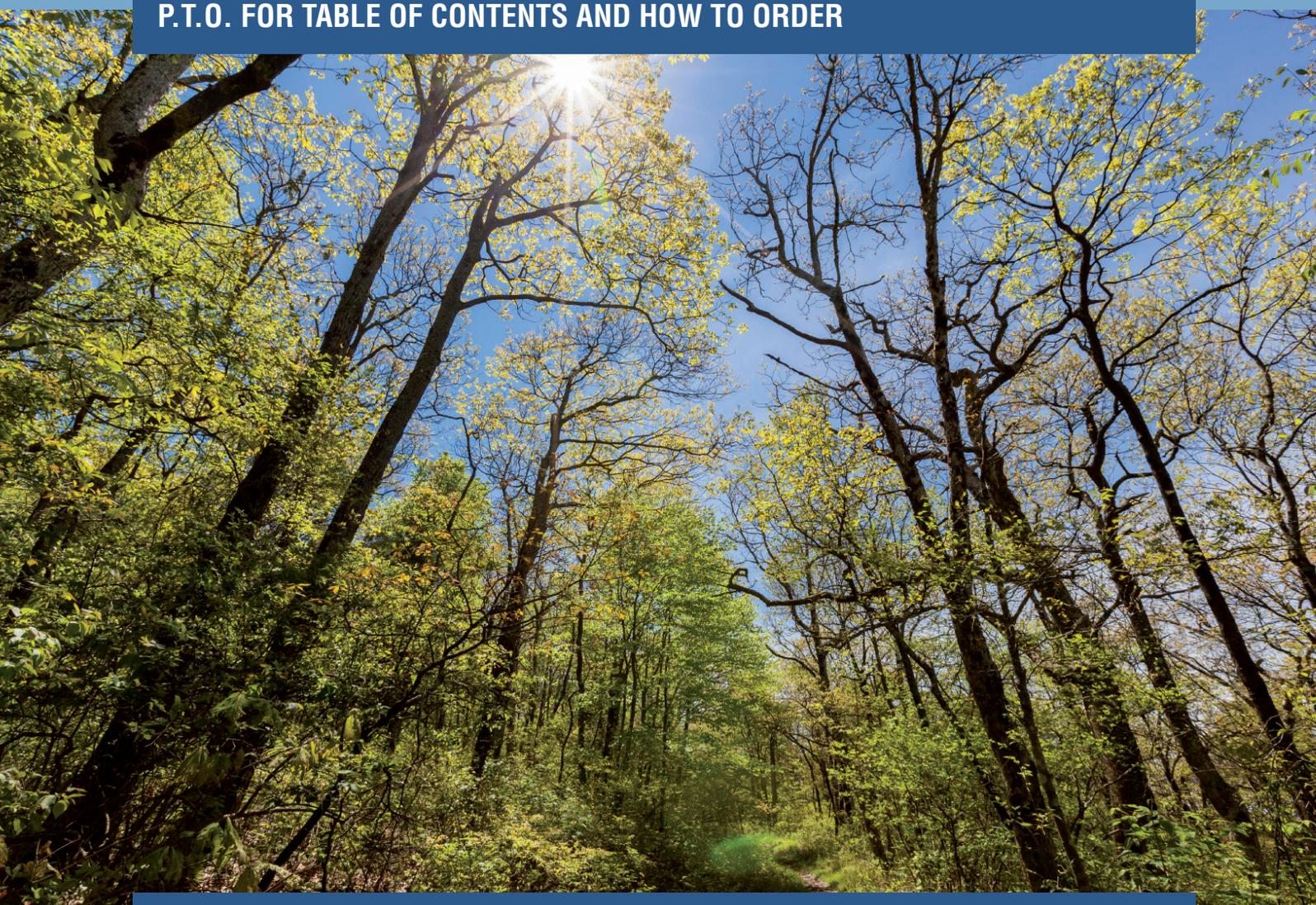
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INCLUSIVE SPORTS IN STYRIAN SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

Based on several case studies (Sereinigg & Tippl, 2006; Weiß, 2008; Hirschberger, 2006; Leick, 2009) the general term “inclusive sports“ was created by the authors. “Inclusive sports” means common sports for people with and without special needs. This term is used especially by PE teachers in Styrian schools, in the area of school sports and by the school administration. In a research project of the University College of Teacher Education Styria (2007-2009) further case studies were collected and the implementation of the term “inclusive sports” was discussed and reflected.

These case studies and the following discussion about inclusive sports at meeting with teachers, head teachers, school authorities and leaders of Special Olympics were the initial point of innovation in several schools concerning school sports and PE teaching as well.

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE PROJECT “INCLUSIVE SPORTS IN SCHOOLS

My experience as the author of a case study on inclusive sports in schools (Sereinigg & Tippl, 2006), as the project leader of the research project “Inclusive sports“ and as a PE teacher of 35 years led me to outline the motives for dealing with inclusive sports and the approaches to the subject, as well as to look back at 10 years of theoretical and practical experience with the issue.

Below both the theoretical and some practical aspects of the project as well as some conceptual ideas will be discussed.

Practical level

As a PE teacher and coach, the different admission tests that students have to pass to participate in PE classes and selection in general have always been challenging issues. On the one hand it was assumed that athletically trained ten-year-olds without special needs would form a homogenous sports group, which could be introduced to competitive sports after four years of seven to eight weekly PE lessons. At the same time less developed children weren't allowed to participate, assuming that heterogeneous groups are much more work and, as a school inspector for sports put it at a conference on the subject, that “handicapped children would handicap the high achieving pupils in PE lessons“(Sereinigg & Tippl, 2006, 10ff).

Based on my longstanding experience as the organiser of sports events for people with special needs and as a volunteer for Special Olympics, I have come to a different understanding of the issue that has been guiding my work.

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Heterogeneous groups are indeed more of a challenge when it comes to preparation and planning. They are, however, also more satisfying for all participants, since a higher degree of social learning and more inputs that lead to a better performance are possible. The participation in competitions as a means to boost performance should be open not only to selected sports groups but also to children and adolescents with special needs.

Critical incidents. Comparing the above-mentioned conditions based in selection and elitism in school sports in specialist schools to my own subjective and action-based theories about school sports which focus on the inclusiveness of sports, especially in relation to sports with and for people with special needs lead me to implement inclusive sports in practice and to address this issue in papers and case studies.

Concept level

The UNESCO Salamanca Statement 1994 states that all children with special needs should participate in all school activities without separation, including school sports activities. This affirms the commitment to inclusive sports even though sports per se are inclusive and possible for everyone.

This discrepancy that arises in the classroom every day where “the individual and social realities are made up of conflicts of interest” (Altrichter & Posch, 2007), and where practical actions are laden with dilemmas leads to a strong commitment to make these tensions and contradictions visible and to eliminate them, at least for the duration of class, and improve the situation at hand. This principle emerges from all case studies. According to the authors of the studies, it not only led them to deal with the practical development of inclusive sport models but also to reflect on the issue. It has to be noted that all case studies were conducted on a voluntary basis, without remuneration and without acknowledgement from either the employer or the public.

Start-up of a research project

The idea to start a research project on inclusive sports, following the principles of action research according to Altrichter and Posch (2007), was born during a sports event in Graz in 2005. More than a thousand students and teachers from integrated classes came together and ten colleagues from five different schools agreed to collaborate on the project. They also agreed to reflect on their actions, further develop their practical theories and put them into writing.

The fundamental aim of all participating teacher teams was to improve the situation of children and adolescents with special needs in PE classes, based on their experience as PE and special needs teachers and to use sports as a means for better social integration.

This aim that was both explicitly and implicitly stated in all case studies was even more remarkable considering the fact that right from the start all teachers and teacher teams held this opinion independently from each other.

Accompanying research project for the development and expansion of inclusive sports in schools in Styria

The project was submitted in 2008. Teacher teams of two teachers each from five different schools throughout Styria were participating as project assistants.

The project's aim was to show in case studies, reports and documentations how inclusive sports can be implemented in PE classes and in school sports competitions, which hindering and conducive aspects would occur during the implementation, if the relevant activities had any effects on students, teachers and parents and if so, what these effects were.

Particularities of the cyclical process of action and reflection

Since working with the teacher teams was only possible on a one-on-one basis due to financial reasons, individual discussions amongst colleagues were also limited to their own team or the project leader. Nevertheless, when reflecting in small groups on one's own guiding principles it became apparent that work can also develop successfully in small groups and that it is feasible to develop and expand models of inclusive sports that can even be used with very heterogeneous sports groups on a competitive level (cf. Sereinigg & Tippl, 2006, 50ff.; Hirschberger, 2006).

It came as a surprise to all participants that there was a set of rules for training and competition was provided by Special Olympics (www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports) (Norins, Harada & Brecklinghaus, 2007).

Different perspectives on inclusive settings in sports didn't stem from within the research community but were brought in from the outside. It was officials, parents and colleagues, who could imagine performance-oriented PE classes only in homogenous groups, who provided different perspectives. Those perspectives were very helpful when introduced in the reflection groups since they fulfilled the function of an "advocatus diaboli".

ABSTRACTS AND RESULTS OF CASE STUDIES

Case study 1: "Golf and integration"

The starting point of this paper is the idea of introducing the sport of golf into the daily school routine at a secondary school in Graz for all students showing an interest in golf. Some colleagues were looking to provide so-called 'unathletic' students or students with special needs with an equal opportunity to participate in school-organised sporting activities on both training and competition levels.

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Research questions. Does playing golf have a positive impact on the emotional well-being of children and adolescents?

Do children and adolescents who play golf show increased motivation and higher social competence when compared with children and adolescents who do not play golf?

Data collection. Data corresponding to the above questions was collected through questionnaires completed by 51 students (10 with and 41 without special needs) and compared in a before-and-after analysis.

The ten students with special needs were equally able to answer the questionnaire as three of them had a physical disability and the others had learning difficulties but were able to read.

The experiences of ten teachers were documented and summarised in two discussion groups.

In addition to demographics, data was collected from students concerning health aspects, social aspects, aspects relating to their independence and support, mental aspects and the level of fun experienced.

Students completed this part of the questionnaire six times (three times in the morning before playing golf and again three times in the afternoon after playing golf).

The recording of the situation before, during and after answering the questionnaire showed great acceptance of the research process itself by the students as demonstrated by their approving comments.

The results were analysed and evaluated using a computer application called SPSS (Statistic Package for Social Science).

Additionally, a comparative evaluation of social capital has been conducted (Tippl, 2009 in Gehmacher, 2002)

Results of the case study.

Results of the student questionnaire. Playing golf results in a significantly improved level of wellbeing, with some aspects of golf being responsible for that as shown by a correlation hypothesis.

The results also confirm the difference hypothesis showing that students with and without special needs experience different levels of wellbeing.

A before-and-after analysis also confirms the change hypothesis. All aspects of wellbeing change to a significant degree.

This can be confirmed by a social capital evaluation in the seventh grade (class 2a), which revealed an above-average result of 54.63 percentage points (Tippl, 2009).

In addition, there is a positive change of the perceived value and the sense of self-esteem among children with special needs.

Results of the teacher questionnaire. All teachers observed a more positive perception of the classroom climate in the so-called golf classes as compared to conventional classes. Furthermore it is noticeable that children and adolescents with special needs in higher grades are more dedicated to learning if they are included in training and competitions, even if their personal achievements in playing golf are not as high. The inclusion and the training and playing together with others are the deciding factor.

Hindering and conducive aspects of the "golf and integration" project. During the implementation of the project it became obvious that the PE teachers were able to start the project, but despite the decisions made in conferences there was a lack of support, especially from non PE teachers. One reason for this was that the training required more time, which had negative effects on the other teachers' curriculum. Another reason was that the absences of students taking part in competitions became disruptive and resulted in additional work. Club members of the golf course that was used as a training site by the school also started to voice their disapproval as they were not able to immediately access all facilities during the school's training sessions.

Very helpful, however, was the generosity and willingness of banks to act as sponsors and provide funding for the equipment and membership at the golf course for all participants.

The competent actions of PE teachers and the head teacher facilitated the creation of a school environment that was conducive to the project.

Also, it was possible to reach an agreement with the management and members of the golf club through talks, which allowed the project to progress.

Case study 2: "All beginnings are hard"

Inclusive physical education in a class with focus on sports.

The starting point of the case study (Weiss, 2008) has unified physical education for students of a class with focus on sports and students with special needs, which the school administration had to implement at a school without additional funding. Being the head teacher of the class in question, the author intended to use the study to manage and document the development of the class at large.

Research questions.

- What is the impact of inclusive sports activities on students with and without special needs and on their parents and teachers, if they can jointly organise the majority of PE sessions (5-6 hours per week) in a class with focus on sports?
- Do unified sports activities have a positive influence on self-esteem?
- Is it possible to plan and organise unified training and competition opportunities for students of a class with focus on sports and students with special needs?

Data collection. The data collection was based on written and oral feedback from students. These were conducted after the students participated in unified school sports activities (Vario relay, international unified football matches and inclusive school sports week). Eight students without special needs and all four students with special needs participating answered the questionnaires. All students answering the questions took part in the above-mentioned sports events. The questions were regarding the students' experiences during the events, any changes in behaviour and attitudes towards their fellow students, lessons and the class climate in general.

Two sociograms have also been created for this class, one at the beginning and one at the end of the school year as the project came to an end.

The thirteen PE teachers were asked to make statements regarding inclusive sports in a SWOT analysis. Eight teachers completed and returned the form. The questions in this SWOT analysis were concerning the feasibility and the future prospects of inclusive sports regarding unified PE classes as well as unified sports competitions.

①STRENGTHS In your opinion so far, why would it be a good idea to include students with special needs in sports activities and competitions?	②WEAKNESSES In your opinion so far, why do you think this wouldn't be a good idea?
③OPPORTUNITIES Which possibilities do you see for inclusive sports in the future?	④THREATS What concerns do you have regarding future unified sports activities?

Parents have also been included in talks about inclusive sports and their feedback has been recorded.

Summarising analysis.

Student survey. According to the feedback from students that have participated in the unified football matches, the behaviour of integrated children and

adolescents has clearly changed for the better. Through the unified sports activities also outside of school both groups have got to know each other better and the achievements of students with special needs have been acknowledged and recognised by everyone. Cheering students on, encouraging them, helping them and showing them how to do something in the classroom as well as in sports competitions had a noticeable effect. With time approaching each other became easier for them. The closer contact amongst boys through sports activities has also had a positive influence on a social level.

All four students with special needs noticed themselves that they had improved in their sports activities. Two of the boys mentioned that the unified football match particularly had an influence on them. Both of them also specifically said, without me asking, that the relationship with other students in the PE class has improved. Since the students with special needs started to participate more and more in sports activities their motivation to learn has also increased and according to teachers they were able to succeed more in other school subjects.

Both sociograms clearly revealed certain polarisations. This means that participating together in activities and getting to know each other better not only resulted in the strengthening of already existing bonds, it also made differences more apparent. This leads to the conclusion that conflicts between students have also increased.

Teacher survey. PE teachers predominantly approved of the inclusion of students with special needs in school sports competitions as it increases the students' self-esteem, has a positive effect on their personal development and is a good example for social learning. They have also expressed their thoughts on inclusive sports not being limiting to competitive sports. Rather it is an expansion to school sports, especially for students that don't need "special needs support", but are "limited in mobility" due to a lack of physical activity for years.

Hindering and conducive aspects. It became apparent that all teachers teaching this particular class showed a willingness to participate in the project, swap lessons if needed and help with sports events, which was very conducive to the project. Also students, parents and the school administration have been very supportive. However, the inclusive sports project was met with controversy from the education authority for sport.

Also hindering to the project were colleagues that shared the opinion that students with special needs are misplaced within a competitive sports setting and should rather engage more in therapeutic exercises.

Additionally, the limited opportunities for students with special needs to participate in school sports competitions was discouraging as this resulted in an additional workload and additional expenses for the organisers of the event.

Moreover, some students felt aggrieved at the inclusion of students with special needs in international unified sports events and their behaviour and attitudes towards this put a strain on the implementation of the inclusive sports project.

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Considering these difficulties it was gratifying to witness a change of paradigm within the education authority for sport as they voiced plans to provide teachers and sports venues in order to support inclusive sports events in the future.

As so often the case with development projects, these projects can only be undertaken if apart from the SHOULD and the HAVE TO there is a strong WANT TO amongst all participants, which helps to overcome obstacles and setbacks and eventually leads to the success of the project.

DETAILED RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

Inclusion of children and adolescents with and without special needs in sports competitions

All studies show that sport is a medium that can facilitate the meeting of children and adolescents in heterogeneous groups. Through sports, children with and without special needs can explore their capabilities. Also their similarities and diversities are being addressed. Hirschberger's (2008) study shows the possibilities of common sports activities in heterogeneous sports groups using the example of golf. Players with different disabilities go through training and competition together thus having a common goal and working on their strengths and weaknesses.

Sereinigg's and Tippl's study (2006) points out that experiencing sports in PE classes creates possibilities for social integration that can hardly be achieved in literary subjects. Social integration can be achieved more effectively in artistic subjects given a helpful setting that is supported by teachers and pupils alike.

A set of rules (see appendix) adopted from the Special Olympics Unified Rules and adapted to school sports, provides the possibility to acknowledge the achievements of every athlete. Children and adolescents with special needs can thus be given the opportunity to participate in sports and competitions according to their capabilities.

Increase in self-confidence and social competency

In addition to using participant observation and other qualitative methods, the case studies also took online measurements of the social capital in the participating classes. Within one year there was an increase in the coefficient of social capital that consists of relationships on different levels, for example the micro level (family, close friends), the meso level (relationships within classes, groups or teams) and the macro level (religion, worldview), as well as bonding (relationships within a homogenous group) and bridging (relationships with people from other cultures or from outside one's own community).

The control groups partly showed an increase in the coefficient of social capital, partly there was no change or even a decrease in social capital.

In Hirschberger's study (2008) a prae-post-study also showed an increase in self-confidence and self-competency in the inclusive golf classes.

Teacher observations in Weiß's study (2008) showed that learning was perceived as more important and that students showed more interest in learning. Over the course of the school year pupils with special needs showed improved school performance as reflected in their marks in different subjects.

Constructivist perspective: Inclusive sports in schools

In Sereinigg's and Tippl's case study (2006, 40ff.) the review of the results of the project leads the authors to conclude that a constructivist approach is also helpful. The individual's reconstruction and deconstruction of their own world is crucial and guides their actions.

All people involved in the project construct their own reality of inclusive sports and, in our case, also of the practicability of inclusive sports activities. In this context the viability of inclusive and sustainable sports projects is vital. Communication and the exchange of individual perspectives create a new, intersubjective world that has two main criteria.

One important criterion in constructivism is viability. A construct like inclusive sport therefore has to be viable and feasible even if dealing with the surrounding world creates problems. Furthermore, this worldview and construct should hold well even if there are different approaches and it should bear intersubjective comparison in case a different individual provides a comparable construct with the same or similar results.

Our project showed that the construct „inclusive sports“ is viable and successful when desired, supported and fostered at the level of school sports as well as the instructional level. The further development of the project since 2007 has shown several sustainable results.

A SUMMARY OF THE POSITIVE OR UNEXPECTED EFFECTS OF INCLUSIVE SPORTS IN STYRIA- RECOGNITION AND DEVELOPING INTEREST ON DIFFERENT LEVELS

There are many positive and unexpected effects of this project of case studies written by classroom teachers on different levels, both in the school systems, teachers' training programmes, universities and school administrations as well as sports clubs for people with special needs such as *Special Olympics* on national and international levels.

Level of school administration in Styria

Since the year 2008 there has been an opportunity for head teachers to apply for “inclusive sports” PE teachers to support the regular PE teachers when teaching sports in integrated classes as well as to demonstrate good examples for inclusive sports methods and to help organize inclusive competitions. Currently there are “one and a half inclusive PE teachers” in Styria.

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Level of school and classroom PE teaching

In schools inclusive sports activities have an eye-opening effect on teachers, parents and classmates. Students with special needs can show their skills in physical activities, are involved in the unified football team or other inclusive teams of the school.

Currently about 25 schools are involved in the inclusive sports programme in Styria.

Level of teachers' training

Teachers' training programmes and workshops on inclusive sports are being offered by the Teachers' Training College of Styria and by the Basic Education Initiative of Sports and Inclusion in cooperation with Special Olympics.

International level

The goal of Special Olympics is to integrate people with special needs into our society with unified sports. Therefore there are seminars, meetings and conferences organized by Special Olympics International for inclusive sports in Europe. Worldwide congresses and meetings are organized by other sports associations like "sports for all" or "sport and inclusion".

Additional input on an international level has been provided by a European school project (Comenius 2011-2013) with participating schools from Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary and Luxembourg. The name of the project, ARATIS, stands for Awareness, Respect, Action and Tolerance by Inclusive Sports.

The ARATIS project continues as part of another Comenius project (2013-2015): Great to be happy in schools – Inclusive sports, in which schools from Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Turkey and Austria participate.

CONCLUSION

All people involved, researching teachers, parents and adolescents alike took part in initiating the project and have developed it further. They have gained experience and have drawn their personal conclusions.

There will continue to be an absence of a lobby for inclusive sports since those who would need this model for their physical and mental development are seldom able to voice their needs. Due to the shortage of resources, participation in school sports activities will continue to be aimed at selection, and inclusive sports events won't be organised.

Therefore there is no affirmative answer to the question posed by a school administrative officer if there "was a need for inclusive sports activities in school sports that would be reflected in the figures".

The fostering and organisation of sports and exercise for children and young people with special needs will continue to depend on committed and interested PE teachers, special needs teachers and parents on a local and regional level.

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APPENDIX

The appendix includes several models that have, to some extent, been used in this project. This model was adopted from Ken Black (2008) and adapted to the Austrian curriculum for physical education.

Inclusion Spectrum: structure

Open activity

Everyone doing the same activity without adaptation or modification - or in their own way without conditions. E.g.

- warm up or cool down activities
- inclusive games, i.e. everybody's contribution counts
- continuous activity: individual differences less obvious
- importance of inclusive language.

Modified activity

Everyone doing the same activity, but changes made to rules, space and equipment used in order to promote inclusion. E.g.

- Space: increase or decrease the distance to a target
- Rules: some players have more lives
- Equipment: size of ball, weight or length or racquet or bat

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- Note: changes provide challenge as well as support inclusion
- Integrity

Parallel activity

Participants are grouped according to ability – everyone participates in the same activity but at an appropriate level. E.g.

- versions of the same activity or game (e.g. standing or seated)
- a range of small-sided activities
- ability-matched zones within a larger activity

Separate activity

An individual or group do purposefully planned separate activity. E.g.

- young people prepare individually or in a group (team) for a disability sport event
- individual practise of specific skills
- Note: this should not be most of the time!
- In the school context: physio is not PE!

Disability Sport activity

‘Reverse integration’ – non-disabled people take part in disability sport. E.g.

- include aspects of activities from disability sport or adapted activity programmes in ‘mainstream’ physical education
- focus on disability sport-specific activities, e.g. boccia, goalball, or sitting volleyball

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