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**PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS**

**Abstract**

Human behaviour is determined by attitude (A), intention (I), identity of role (IOR), perceived behaviour control (PBC), strength of attitude (SOA) and subjective prototype (SP) (Ajzen, 1991). This study aimed to identify if the physical education (PE) students specializing in Adapted PE (APE) scored higher on the above variables towards disabled people when compared with PE students with little or no previous experience with them. PE students (n=120) completed an adapted questionnaire that was primarily used in previous related research (Theodorakis, Bagiatis & Goudas, 1995). The data were analyzed using ANOVA. Results confirmed that the choice of students specialized in APE predetermines their I, IOR, PBC, SOA, SP, and A towards individuals with disabilities. Moreover, these variables do not affect the occasional interaction of PE students but they can predict their future attitude towards individual with disabilities.

**Key words:** intention, identity of role, perceived behavioural control, strength of attitude, subjective prototype, disability, physical education.

Today the attitude of the contemporary society towards the many persons with disabilities is mixed (Thompson, 1994; Zounhia Giannakopoulou, & Pylianos, 1988). The values of our society has cultivated a negative attitude towards persons with disabilities (Bedini, 1992), because of media stereotypes (e.g., in some films the criminals or corrupted people are often depicted with some disability; Bedini, 1991; 1995, Buscaglia, 1993). At best, persons with disabilities are ignored (Mouratidou, 1996). Therefore, society itself does not socialize positively, but “makes” sick people (Filiass, 1989). In spite of all this, over the last few years, there has been an increasing awareness leading to greater understanding of the lives and activity of individuals with disabilities, regarding it as a social obligation (Moshonas, 1997). Because the human body is a means of feelings’ integration (Mouratidou, 1992), of gaining confidence (Holguin & Sherill, 1989), of communication, expression and socialization (Theodorakou, 1996), responsibilities are raised not only for the society, but also for the educators of Adapted Physical Education (APE).

Research has shown mixed results about the feelings of PE teachers towards teaching people with disabilities. In some studies, PE teachers were not always able to provide suitable instruction for persons with disabilities (Melograno & Loovis, 1991; Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996) because the demands of their role towards the disabled are higher now compared to the past (De Pauw & Goc, 1994). In other studies, those associated with persons with disabilities either expressed negative feelings towards teaching them in ordinary classes (De Pauw & Goc, 1994; Downs & Williams, 1994), or had no strong feelings about it (Pennewell, 1982). Finally, other published work revealed that teachers involved in programmes for disabled students became positive in their attitudes towards them (Jamner, 1992; Thompson, 1992).

Consideration of the above raises several questions. What are the factors that predetermine the attitude of PE teachers towards individuals with disabilities? Is there any valid instrumentation that could be used for foreseeing the professional attitude of PE teachers towards individuals with disabilities? Are there any theories to support the development of such instrumentation? How does previous experience with persons with disabilities affect the willingness of PE students to with them?

Possible answers to the above questions are meaningful for a number of reasons. First, they could represent a valid assessment tool for university tutors responsible for selecting students to specialize in APE because this is the only specialty within the university curriculum that it dedicated to prepare the future professionals teach PE to persons with disabilities. In other words, the construction of such a tool will help university tutors make fair decisions about which students should be selected to be specialized in APE. In addition, such a tool might serve as an important aid for the PE students themselves, as it could help them realize weather they are ready to choose a career based on their desires and previous experiences. The aim of this study was, therefore, to review the literature for identifying theories on human behavior that could be used for establishing a tool able to foresee the future professional orientation of PE students towards people with disabilities.

In response to the first aim, the literature review identified the theory of planned behaviour that has been used extensively in the past to foresee people’s

actions (Ajzen, 1991). Several studies have used this theory to foresee the future behaviour of various kinds of human activity (Dzewaltowski, Noble, & Shaw, 1990; Gatch & Kendzierski, 1990; Godin & Shephard, 1986; Theodorakis, 1992). Theodorakis (1994), discussing research by Fishebein and Middlestadt, observed that the more somebody learns about the factors which define a type of behaviour, the more possibilities there are of influencing that behaviour. In order to foresee whether PE students will work professionally in the future with persons with disabilities, there is a need to identify which variables, based on the theory of planned behavior, may influence their decision.

According to the theory of planned behaviour of Ajzen's, six factors determine people's future behaviour. First, the individual's *attitude* is the most basic point determining the success of every programme that involves teaching and coaching of persons with disabilities (De Pauw, 1990) because it interacts to a great extent with intention and the exerting behaviour (Hausenblas, Carron & Mack, 1997). The numerous studies undertaken on attitude can significantly help research in the field of APE and teachers' views of the students with disabilities (Jarvis, 1989; Zachmeyer, 1987; Tripp & Sherill, 1991). Second, *strength of attitude* seems to play a vital role in human behaviour because powerful attitudes are more likely to strengthen the relationship between attitude and the demonstrated behaviour of an individual (Liska as quoted in Theodorakis, 1994). This variable expresses the orientation and endurance of attitude in time. The stronger the attitudes, the closer they collate with behaviour (Fazio & Raden as quoted in Theodorakis, Bagiatis & Kioumourtzoglou, 1996). Third, the *perceived behaviour control* is a significant variable of planned behaviour theory and expresses a person's confidence according to how easy or difficult it is to carry out a given behavior physically or verbally (Ajzen, 1991). For example, future teachers with low perception of their ability, had a negative attitude towards teaching persons with disabilities (Downs & Williams, 1994). Similarly, the more confident the students feel to associate with persons with disabilities, the more positive attitude towards them will have (Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996). It has been found that academic preparation and practice in APE and in teaching experience has influenced positively the attitude of teachers towards teaching persons with disabilities by increasing the realizing person's ability (Eichinger, Rizzo, & Sirotnik, 1991; Hamilton & Anderson, 1983; Herman, 1991; Keller & Honig, 1993; Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996). Fourth, the *identity of role* is a valuable factor in behaviour's provision (Theodorakis, 1992; 1994). Therefore, the intention of PE students to work with persons with disabilities in the future is formed directly from their identity of role (Theodorakis, Bagiatis, & Goudas, 1995). Fifth, people's *intention* determines their behaviour, and can be determined from a combination of social variables (Ajzen, 1991). For example, intention is a significant variable in the prediction of athletes' behaviour (Theodorakis, 1992). Similarly, students can develop stronger intentions of behaviour towards offering services to persons with disabilities after attending a special psychology programme (Austin, Hoge & Austin, 1990) or creative lessons (e.g., to watch a videocassette, participate in a theatrical team, etc.) that positively influence attitude (Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996; McGookey, 1992; Zahn & Kelly, 1995). Finally, the *subjective*

*prototype* is a combination of tensions and variables. It has the form of the social pressure that individuals accept, whether or not to behave in a certain way (Ajzen, 1991). The above researcher reported on the role of persons whose opinion is highly valued by an individual, and also on the opinion of these persons, according to the individual behaviour.

Collectively, from the above it seems that research is needed into the provision and understanding of the future professional orientation of PE students with disabled individuals. Therefore, in response to the second aim, this study will test the variables of the theory of planned behaviour, in a sample of PE students with high, medium or none previous experience with disabled people for assessing its real effectiveness.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A combination of convenience and criterion sampling methods (Patton, 1990), was conducted in the Department of Physical Education and Sports at Athens University in Greece. Students from this university had to fall into one of the following three categories to be included in the study: high, medium or no academic preparation for and experience with disabled people. The research sample consisted of 120 4th-year students. The students who specialized in "Adapted Physical Education" (n=24) constituted the first category because they studied in the relative elective module and had previous experience with disabled people. The students who specialized in "Swimming" and "Sports for all" (n=30) constituted the second category because they had a medium experience with disabled people, having worked as volunteers during the Special Olympics Mediterranean-European Swimming Games for athletes with developmental disabilities. Finally, the students specialized in "Basketball" and "Volleyball" (n=66) constituted the third category, as they had no previous experience with or academic preparation for interacting with disabled people.

### *Instruments*

These students were asked to complete a questionnaire created for relevant research (Theodorakis, Bagiatis & Goudas, 1995). The questionnaire consisted of one explanatory paragraph and 26 items. Attitude relevant to teaching was considered with the questions: "Not to teach to persons with disabilities is:". The answers were classified according to five pairs of opposite-adjectives: "*good-bad*", "*pleasant-unpleasant*", "*beautiful-ugly*", "*clever-stupid*" and "*attractive-unattractive*", and a seven-point scale was used. Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.s (Cronbach alpha is a coefficient of reliability that is commonly used as a measure of the internal consistency or reliability for a sample of participants).

Intention was computed from answers given to the two questions: "*I intend to teach persons with disabilities in the following years*", "*I will try to teach persons with disabilities in the following years*". The students answered every question on a seven-point scale with limited choices for the first question: "*very possible-very impossible*", for the second and the third questions: "*absolutely yes-absolutely no*". Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

Identity of role was calculated from four questions: *“To teach persons with disabilities the following years, because I consider it to be a part of myself”*, *“I consider myself as a person who must teach persons with disabilities in the following years”*, *“It is in my character to teach persons with disabilities in the following years”*, *“Generally I am the type of person who would like to teach persons with disabilities in the following years”*. The four questions were answered on a seven-point scale between the verbs *“agree-disagree”*. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.95.

Perceived behaviour control was examined with these three questions: *“In my opinion, to teach persons with disabilities in the following years, is...”* (easy-difficult). *“If I wanted, I could teach persons with disabilities in the following years”* (possible-impossible). *“How well do you believe you could control yourself to teach persons with disabilities in the following years?”* (I could control it entirely-I could not control it). The answers were given on a seven-point scale. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.62.

Strength of attitude was obtained from seven questions: *“I believe that I have the opportunity to teach persons with disabilities in the following years”* (very right-very wrong), *“How much confidence do you have to teach persons with disabilities in the following years?”* (much confidence-no confidence), *“To teach persons with disabilities in the following years is ...”* (very basic-not basic), *“How sure are you that you will teach persons with disabilities in the following years?”* (very sure-not sure), *“I have the proper qualifications to teach individuals with disabilities”* (agree-disagree), *“I have the persistence that is required to teach persons with disabilities in the following years”* (agree-disagree), *“Do you really believe that you will teach persons with disabilities in the following years?”* (not entirely-yes entirely). Answers to the above questions were given on a seven-point scale and were added to the final result. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91.

Subjective prototype was examined with the sentences: *“If I taught persons with disabilities in the following years, many people important to me would agree/disagree”*, *“Generally I like to do what people important to me want me to do”*. The result of the answers was multiplied with the result of the answer to the question: *“Generally I like to do what people I know want me to do”*. Answers to the above questions were given on a seven-point scale. The third question examined the motive of the students to be reconciled with their future professional orientation. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.81.

#### *Procedure*

The questionnaire of Theodorakis, Bagiatis & Goudas, (1995) primarily assessed general issues of PE. We adapted the questions so they would be relevant to APE. Its validity and credibility of the questionnaire was adjusted through the ‘test-retest’ procedure for students who completed the same questionnaire at the beginning and end of a period of one month. The questionnaire was then given to the students in collaboration with the module tutors of their respective specialties. The questionnaires were handed out, and collected in straight after completion. Before starting the questionnaire, there was a brief introduction, which highlighted that participation in this research was voluntary, and then explained the procedure for completing the

questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the whole process.

Statistical analysis of the data collected was carried out using the SPSS/PC+ program. Initially there was an inversion of negative answers. The sum of the answers to questions that recommended each variable was also computed. Indices of central tendency were calculated (average, standard deviation). A comparison of averages was carried out using ANOVA. The variables were measured with Pearson's correlation coefficient.

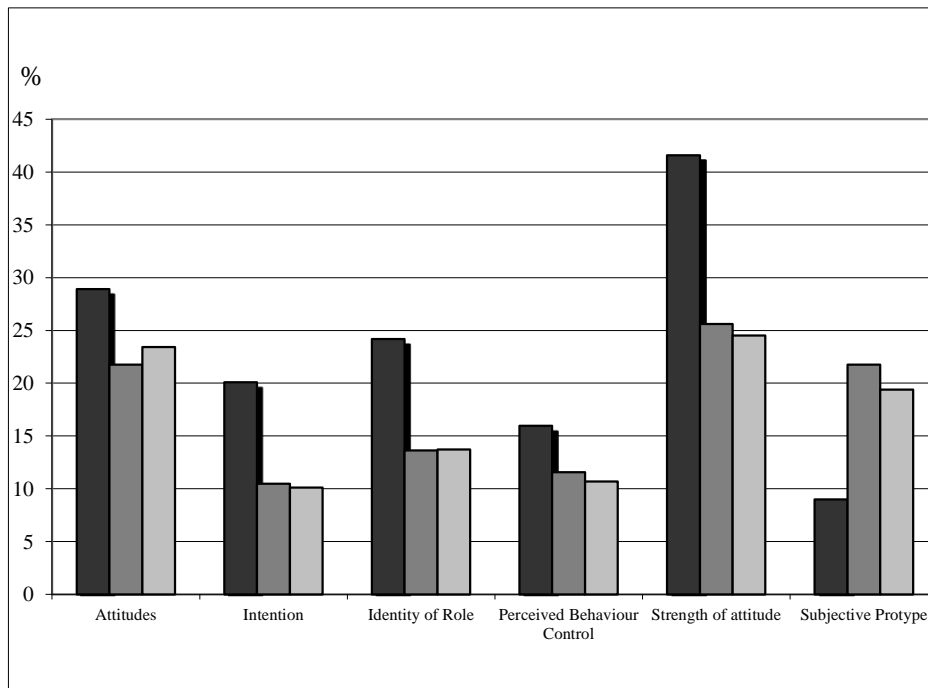
## Results

Table 1 shows the average (M), standard deviation (SD) and number of subjects (N) who have been questioned in each specialty. The table also shows the index F obtained from the comparison between the averages of the three indices on each variable. Index F shows that for all variables there are significant differences for the students of Adapted Physical Education. In no situation is there a significant difference between the other two categories. The biggest differences for students of APE were observed on intention to be involved with persons with disabilities and on strength of attitude towards individuals with disabilities. The smallest difference was noted on perceived behaviour control (see Graph 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	Adapted Physical Education			Sports for all & Swimming			Basketball & Volley Ball			F	P<
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD		
1. Attitude	24	28,92 <sup>a</sup>	5,19	30	21,77	6,55	63	23,43	6,64	9,27	0,001
2. Intention	24	20,08 <sup>a</sup>	1,41	30	10,47	5,82	65	10,12	5,05	41,19	0,001
3. Identity of role	24	24,17 <sup>a</sup>	3,10	30	13,63	7,13	66	13,74	6,65	26,88	0,001
4. Perceived behaviour control	24	15,96 <sup>a</sup>	2,82	30	11,57	3,41	64	10,71	3,67	20,56	0,001
5. Strength of attitude	23	41,58 <sup>a</sup>	4,13	30	25,60	10,27	66	24,52	9,44	34,21	0,001
6. Subjective prototype	24	9,00 <sup>a</sup>	6,89	30	21,77	20,13	63	19,38	16,06	4,92	0,01

Note. <sup>a</sup> significant difference for Adapted Physical Education specialty



Graph 1. Comparison of mean values for the three categories on all examined variables.

Note. ■Special Physical Education, ■Sports for All-Swimming, ■Other Specialties

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients between all the variables for the whole sample. It is clear from this table that attitude towards behaviour, intention, identity of role, perceived behaviour control and strength of attitude are correlated positively and, in all cases, at a statistically significant level. Subjective prototype is negatively related to the other variables, but statistically significant only for intention and strength of attitude.

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between all the examined variables for the whole sample

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attitude					
2. Intention	.61 **				
3. Identity of role	.62 **	.83 **			
4. Control	.29 **	.54 **	.57 **		
5. Strength of attitude	.56 **	.80 **	.83 **	.60 **	
6. Subjective prototype	-.06	-.26 **	-.13	-.06	-.27 ** **

Note. \*\*p < 0.01

## Discussion

This study aimed to review the literature for identifying theories on human behavior that could be used for establishing a tool able to foresee the future professional orientation of PE students towards people with disabilities and to test this tool in a sample of PE students with high, medium or no previous experience with

disabled people for assessing its effectiveness. four findings arose that will be discussed below.

The first finding of this study was a clear difference for the APE specialty sample on all variables. The tendency for a negative correlation between subjective prototype and the other variables in this specific sample and the other samples can be explained by the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). According to this theory, adults are not influenced significantly by the social pressure exerted on them by other people for performing or not performing certain behaviour.

Likewise with the theory of planned behaviour, the research findings corresponded with the results of several other previous studies. In particular, they confirmed that the students' choice to work with persons with disabilities has been created by their attitude and intention to work with the disabled, by how they perceive their role in society and by how secure they feel (see Theodorakis, Bagiatis & Kioumourtzoglou, 1996). Moreover, they confirmed the close relationship between attitude and future behaviour, a relationship that is the control axis of planned behaviour theory (see Theodorakis et al., 1992).

The third finding of the present research was that the students' specialty affected significantly their attitude towards teaching individuals with disabilities. APE students had significant academic preparation and interaction with persons with disabilities when they completed the questionnaire. the interaction of those specialized in "Swimming" and "Sports for all" was limited. The difference in experience explains why the APE students had a positive influence towards individuals with disabilities, whereas the students of the rest specialties did not. These findings corresponded with previous research (Patrick, 1987; Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996; Steward, 1988).

The final finding of this study was that attitudes towards people with disabilities can be positive after relevant practice with them or the implementation of related strategies. This was confirmed by those specialized in APE and the rest specialties and corresponded with previous research (Rowe & Stutts, 1987; Rizzo & Vispoel, 1992). Such strategies can be used in the education programmes for APE for changing the attitudes of the teachers (Theodorakis, Goudas & Kouthouris, 1992).

The current findings are subject to a number of different sources of potential bias. Given that this study was the first that attempted to adapt an existing questionnaire in order to use it as a means for foreseeing the future professional orientation of PE students, more studies are required to replicate its findings. Also, the convenience sampling method of choosing students from a single university might have affected the results.

Despite the above limitations, these findings have a number of implications for PE students and researchers. According to the theory of planned behavior that we studied, it seems essential to create informative and practical programmes that will strengthen the attitude of PE students towards individuals with disabilities. For reasons of social sensitivity, students of any education specialty should acquire such experience. Researchers should focus in the future at strength of attitude towards persons with disabilities according to experience, sex and specialist knowledge.



## Conclusion

Not surprisingly, it is concluded that the students who choose the specialty of APE have clear attitude, perceived behaviour control, strength of attitude, identity of role and intention to work with individuals with disabilities, and scored higher on all these variables than do students who have occasional or no contact with individuals with disabilities. Occasional contact with persons with disabilities does not influence students' attitude, perceived behaviour control, strength of attitude, identity of role or intention towards individuals with disabilities.

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