

# The Effect of the Special Olympics' Unified Program upon the Attitudes towards Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Greece

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**How to cite this paper:** Karkaletsis, F., Theotokatos, G., Chrysagis, N., Tsifopanopoulou, Z., Staebler, T., Papadopoulou, V., Yin, M., Hussey, M., Vougiouka, A., & Skordilis, E. (2021). The Effect of the Special Olympics' Unified Program upon the Attitudes towards Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Greece. *Advances in Physical Education*, 11, 460-480.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ape.2021.114038>

**Received:** October 1, 2021

**Accepted:** November 26, 2021

**Published:** November 29, 2021

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## Abstract

The study examined the effect of the Unified Sports program (UNS) (Play Unified: Learn Unified) upon the attitudes towards the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disability (ID), from the perspective of their non ID counterparts. A questionnaire was used for that purpose, with 12 items presented on a 5 point Likert type scale, examining the behavioral (7 items) and emotional (5 items) domains of the attitudes construct. Further, 10 brief semi-structured interviews were held, with 2 principles, 7 faculty members and 1 student, to provide more in depth data and validate the results. A total of 219 students from general schools in the wider area of Athens, aging 12 to 18 years old, provided their responses before and after the UNS program (pre and post tested). The statistical analyses revealed that the majority had no previous experience with ID sports. Through the UNS program, however, they were more sensitized, willing to exchange messages and provide interpersonal support to their ID counterparts. These findings were further supported by the semi-structured interviews. The results are discussed in accordance with the attitudes theory, previous studies conducted in Greece and the respective limitations. Overall, the UNS programs appear as a promising vehicle to promote the inclusion of individuals with ID through sports in the communities

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of their same age peers without disabilities.

## Keywords

Unified Sports, Attitudes, Intellectual Disability, Inclusion, Special Olympics

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Literature Review

The Unified Sports (UNS) program was developed in 1989, in the USA by Special Olympics (SO) (Townsend & Hassall, 2007), as a vehicle to promote the social inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) into their respective communities (Baran, Top, Aktop, Ozer, & Nalbant, 2009). The establishment of the program followed the “inclusion movement” (Ozer et al., 2012), in an attempt to fight the social stigma and isolation from society (McConkey et al., 2013), and improve attitudes towards individuals with ID (Sullivan & Glidden, 2014; Townsend & Hassall, 2007). The athletes (with ID) and partners (without ID) involved have the opportunity to develop their athletic skills and fitness, as well as experience a variety of psychosocial benefits such as the promotion of well-being, self-esteem, self-concept, and friendship throughout sports (Hassan, Dowling, McConkey, & Menke, 2012; Menke & Braycich, 2014; Block, Breaud, McNulty, Papa, & Perry, 2019). The UNS focuses mainly on youth ages (Menke & Braycich, 2014), is implemented often at schools or local clubs (Bota, Theodorescu, & Serbanoiu, 2014) and is the fastest growing program nowadays of the SO movement (Hassan et al., 2012).

The attitudes element of the Planned Behavior Theory (PBT) guided the present study (Ajzen, 1991). According to Ajzen (1991), behavior may be perceived as a joint function of intentions and perceived behavioral control, followed by certain variables such as the subjective norms and attitudes towards a (desired) behavior. Attitudes towards a behavior, in turn, represent the extent to which an individual possesses an unfavorable or favorable appraisal or feeling of a certain behavior in question (Ajzen, 1991). According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) attitudes motivate individuals to exhibit certain behaviors towards others, and reflect the cognitive, emotional and behavioral human responses (Rajecki, 1990; Townsend & Hassall, 2007). For the above reasons, previous researchers (Antonak & Livneh, 2000; Townsend & Hassall, 2007) claimed that attitudes, in general, constitute an important variable to examine and intervene for the successful inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

The effect of the UNS programs globally has been of interest to several researchers in the field. The results presented below are mainly promising, but permanent conclusions may not be drawn due to a variety of intervention protocols employed, measuring instruments used, samples examined (athletes vs. partners), etc. Rosegard et al. (2001) examined the effect of a 12-week Unified

bowling program upon the maladaptive behaviours exhibited among individuals with ID in the USA. The researchers found that the bowling team exhibited lower internalizing and externalizing scores across time, such as anxiety, depression, intrusiveness, cruelty, fighting, anger, etc., and suggested that more research is needed to evaluate similar programs in the future (Rosegard et al., 2001). Baran et al. (2013) assessed the fitness and sport skills of athletes and partners in a Unified football program in Turkey. The researchers stated that the individuals involved (partners and athletes) improved significantly and their findings may support school administrators and personnel to add Unified sports into their daily curriculum to enhance the inclusion process (Baran et al., 2013). Hassan et al. (2012) examined the impact of the SO Unified Sports program across five European countries (Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Hungary). The researchers found that the Unified Sports programming had a positive effect upon the inclusion process and the role of coaches was essential to that extent (Hassan et al., 2012). McConkey et al. (2013) examined the effect of Unified football and Unified basketball programs in Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Hungary, upon the inclusion of individuals with ID. Interviews were conducted in each country and four major themes were extracted as facilitators of social inclusion through UNS: 1) personal development for both athletes and partners, 2) inclusive environment with equal status in each team, 3) positive perception of the Unified Sports in general and the athletes involved, and 4) alliances with local communities. McConkey et al. (2013) claimed that the UNS appear to satisfy their purpose, but more research is required to generalize the findings, across a variety of countries and a wider range of sports involved. Menke and Braycich (2014) described the effect of a Unified football program upon the psychosocial attributes of female athletes and partners from Serbia, Hungary and Ukraine. The researchers stated that the findings were encouraging, with respect to the social acceptance and public recognition of female athletes with and without ID.

With respect to the partners involved, the retrieved literature provided promising results as well. Townsend and Hassall (2007) examined the attitudes of elementary school students in New Zealand upon their inclusion in Unified Sports with students with ID. The researchers stated that the participants held favorable attitudes, but these attitudes were moderated by age and gender. The researchers suggested that caution is always necessary with respect to the mainstream teachers involved, whose presence as either coaches or coordinators may be important for the successful outcome of the Unified Sports endeavor (Townsend & Hassall, 2007). Sullivan and Glidden (2014) examined the effect of a 6-week Unified swim program in the USA. The researchers reported that the program had a significant effect upon the attitudes of the individuals involved towards their counterparts with ID. The key to enhance positive attitudes was the comfort experienced throughout practice of the partners. Baran et al. (2009) examined the satisfaction with Unified football of SO athletes, parents, coaches and partners in Turkey. The football program lasted 8 weeks, and the researchers reported an

increase in partners' enjoyment during practice and highlighted the necessity expressed by coaches to modify the activity rules. The athletes on the other hand claimed that they would recommend the program to a friend, while the parents of both partners and athletes stated that their children improved in terms of both psychosocial and sport skills combined. [Baran et al. \(2009\)](#) suggested that the program supported the inclusion process and the awareness of individuals without ID towards their counterparts with ID in general. [Ozer et al. \(2012\)](#) examined the effect of a Unified football program on certain psychosocial attributes (behaviours, friendship and attitudes towards new peers) of partners and athletes involved in Turkey. The researchers claimed that the program had a positive effect and enhanced the social competence of athletes as well as the attitudes of partners towards their counterparts with ID.

Similar research studies in Greece, evaluating the effect of the UNS program were not retrieved. The literature review revealed relevant studies examining the attitudes and behavioral changes of Greek students without disabilities towards their peers with disabilities by age, gender, previous experience, school setting (inclusive/non-inclusive), class (physical education class) etc. [Soulis et al. \(2016\)](#) found positive attitudes towards classmates with disabilities in a sample of primary Greek students at general public schools. The researchers claimed that certain variables, such as previous experience, gender and age may be considered with caution for the success of the inclusive process within the Greek schools. [Bebetsos et al. \(2013\)](#) examined the intentions, attitudes and behaviors of elementary school students for the inclusion of their counterparts with disabilities in physical education. The researchers found that behavior was related to general attitudes towards disabled peers in the physical education class ([Bebetsos et al., 2013](#)). [Georgiadi et al. \(2012\)](#) explored the attitudes towards peers with ID in elementary school students. The researchers found that girls and students enrolled in inclusive classes held more positive attitudes in general ([Georgiadi et al., 2012](#)). [Kalyva and Agaliotis \(2009\)](#) examined the contact experiences for the formation of positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities in a sample of elementary and high school students. The researchers stated that previous contact is essential and teachers need to consider effective interventions in the future to promote the development of positive attitudes towards classmates with disabilities ([Kalyva & Agaliotis, 2009](#)). [Panagiotou et al. \(2008\)](#) examined the effect of the 'Paralympic School Day (PSD)' upon the attitudes towards inclusion of elementary school students. The researchers found that the PSD had a positive impact upon the general attitudes of Greek students, but no differentiation was evident across gender ([Panagiotou et al., 2008](#)). [Magouritsa et al. \(2005\)](#) examined the effect of recreation softball activities towards the inclusion of borderline intelligence high school students in the physical education class. The students played softball with their counterparts with borderline intelligence and the researchers stated that their experiences had a positive effect upon their perceptions and acceptance into the physical education class ([Magouritsa et al., 2005](#)). [Nikolarazi](#)

et al. (2005) examined the attitudes towards inclusion of kindergarten students and found more acceptance for students attending inclusive classes but no gender differences. Finally, Genova (2015) conducted a cross cultural comparison upon the barriers for inclusive education in Greece, Spain and Lithuania, collecting data from individuals with disabilities aging 18 to 30 years old. The analyses revealed that the major barrier towards successful inclusion is the accessibility to higher level educational institutions, while the academic staff is not adequately prepared to face the respective challenges (Genova, 2015).

In Greece, the inclusion process for individuals with disabilities (including ID) is planned from the Ministry of Education which ensures free public education in one of the following settings: inclusive classes within the “general” school, inclusive classes with one-to-one support, special schools, special classes within hospitals or institutions, and at home (Eurydice, 2021). The Ministry emphasizes the importance of inclusive education, but evidence suggests that most families with children with disabilities send their children to special schools (Pappas et al., 2018). The parental decision is based on the belief that their children will receive more attention and individualized treatment adjusted to their needs (Pappas et al., 2018).

Recently (at 2018), the Special Olympics Hellas (SOH) initiated the Unified Schools program in consultation with the Greek Ministry of Education to foster social inclusion of individuals with ID in the school community (Special Olympics Hellas at <http://www.specialolympicshellas.gr/>). The planning of the Greek State towards inclusion was enhanced therefore with the UNS program (SOH-UNS), which offered wider inclusive experiences through sports training and competition in the school environment. Since 2018 the SOH activated more than 90 schools in 15 regions of Greece and received hundreds of monthly applications by schools to participate in the UNS program until today (Special Olympics Hellas at <http://www.specialolympicshellas.gr/>). Approximately 86 Unified Teams were created, with more than 800 partners and 500 athletes involved, more than 25 Unified Sports competitions were held and 4000 youth had directly and/or indirectly engaged in the project up to the initiation of the pandemic crisis (Special Olympics Hellas at <http://www.specialolympicshellas.gr/>). Further, the feedback received by SOH supported the assumption that the UNS program in Greece may have had similar impact compared to respective programs conducted in other parts of the world.

## 1.2. Research Problem/Objective

Based on the above literature review supporting that the UNS program may have a positive effect upon a range of outcomes for both partners and athletes in several countries such as Germany, Hungary, New Zealand, Poland, Serbia, Ukraine and the United States, the present study was designed to examine the effect of the program in Greece. Specifically, we examined the effect of the UNS program held in the wider area of Athens, upon the attitudes towards the inclusion of in-

dividuals with ID from the partners involved. The attitudes served as the dependent variable, while time (pre vs. post) served as the independent variable.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Study Design and Development

The present study is part of a wider project planned and executed in accordance to the Special Olympics International (SOI), the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the Special Olympics Hellas (SOH). During the first phase of the project, the research team developed an evaluation framework, following the guidelines provided by AIR and SOI. Further, contact with the Greek Ministry of Education was established, in accordance with SOH, in order to get the permission to 1) visit the relevant schools involved in the Unified program (named: “Play Unified: Learn Unified”), 2) use the evaluation framework, and 3) conduct the survey within the selected schools. When permission was granted, informed consent letters were sent to parents, seeking their permission, asking them to sign and return the consent to the school administrators.

Material from the SOH was sent to the selected schools as a reinforcement. Communication with the administrators and personnel (teachers, physical educators and coaches) involved in the UNS programming ensured that the selected schools remained motivated to participate.

After accomplishing the above milestones, the research team continued with conducting a pilot survey round with 50 students from 3 schools, to examine whether the adapted evaluation framework could be applied in each of the school settings. The research team requested feedback from the schools and participants which was taken under consideration for the final adjustments to the survey tool.

To evaluate the Unified programming in Greece, the research team planned to collect data from the wider area of Athens and from smaller suburban cities. The goal was to collect data from adolescents, equally numbered across gender (stratified random sampling). This fact however depended upon the availability of the applicant schools to participate in the Unified Sports programming and the engagement of both male and female students. Each of the selected schools in and around Athens provided a data base of (approximately) 10 students, finalizing the total sample to a figure of (approximately) 30 schools and 300 participants. The students exposed to the Unified Sports treatment were expected to constitute the experimental group. A control group was planned to incorporate the responses of (approximately) 100 students, from schools in the same geographic areas. The responses of the experimental and control groups were planned to be assessed twice, within the 2019-2020 school year (October 2019 through May 2020). The goal was to assess the effect of the Unified Sports (UNS) training program upon the attitudes towards inclusion of individuals with ID.

The pandemic crisis however, initiated during the 2019-2020 academic years, led to certain restrictions in the data collection process. First, a total of 13 general schools actually participated in the study. These schools had applied to partic-

participate in the Unified program and were perceived as experimental units. Within these schools, a total of 313 adolescent students were assessed. From the total sample, 219 students were assessed pre and post treatment and these students constituted the experimental group. The remaining sample ( $N = 94$ ) was only assessed once, because of the restrictions imposed by the Greek Ministry of Education.

First, the research team, supported by the SOH staff members, collected the data during the Unified Sports events (before and after), according to the guidelines from the AIR and SOL. Data collection was conducted during school hours, held usually within the classroom, before and after the Unified events, in a calm and quiet environment for the participants.

Alongside collecting student-level survey data, the research team collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with 2 principals/administrators, 7 school teachers/faculty members and 1 student with questions relevant to the UNS training, motivation to participate, barriers and attitudes towards individuals with ID, etc. Triangulation from the qualitative data was obtained from the involvement of two researchers, in an attempt to reach at least 80% agreement between them in the extracted “themes”. Summarizing the above, the goal was to gather quantitative data from 400 students (approximately, 300 in the experimental group and 100 in the control group) during the 2019-2020 academic year. The plan to collect qualitative data was estimated to (approximately) 10 administrators, teachers (or coaches/physical educators) and students. It is clear that during the coronavirus pandemic the school program had utterly disrupted and the UNS paused, for a period of 6 months and therefore the data collection process was restricted and no control group was assessed and incorporated in the statistical analyses.

## 2.2. UNS Activity Implementation

Following the selection of the participating schools, the SOH supported by the research team prepared the Unified events. A personal visit was initially held at the school sites, before the events, and communication was established with the students and the staff involved. A presentation was held by SOH to all students, teachers and coaches, with issues related to the SO experience, the Unified Sports concept, and finally a hands-on experience with respect to Unified activities in Unified basketball, football, table tennis, bocce, etc. Having in mind the goals of Unified Sports, namely friendship, form attitudes, social participation, meaningful inclusion, sport skills development and competition experience, the SOH combined local general schools with special schools according to proximity to start the project implementation based on an individualized schedule for Unified Sports presentations and events. The purpose was to develop a sustainable plan for the schools and create continuous activities for students of the same area to meet, participate in Unified Sport activities and get to know each other better. The Unified teams were then formed and the schools were prepared for the up-



coming official events. The emphasis placed in the presentations was that people with ID (called athletes) and without ID (called partners) play together on the same team and that makes Unified Sports a quick path to friendship and social inclusion.

Among the three basic models of Unified Sports (Unified Sports Competitive model, Unified Sports Player Development model and Unified Sports Recreation model), the recreation model was selected for the purposes of the present study. All models are driven by fun, development of new skills and talents supported by positive attitudes, community activation and engagement. In Greece however, the educational system is mainly segregated and that led the SOH and the research team to adopt the Recreation as the best applicable model in the visiting schools. The Unified Sports Recreation model is an inclusive recreation sports event ('Come and try'—event, training or competition) for athletes and partners. It is fun driven, and therefore it was the best way to introduce to students without ID the world of Special Olympics (SO) and the "Play Unified: Learn Unified" concept.

During the events, the athletes with ID had arrived at the respective school site in advance. All athletes with ID had travelled from their respective special school, with their school buses and were escorted from their physical educators and staff. They had all a diagnosis of ID but not a comorbid condition, according to the UNS criteria (Baran et al., 2009). A brief introduction was held at the school site (usually at the gym), following by a brief presentation of the athletes, and the upcoming sport events. The teams were pre-arranged, by the school's staff (physical educators) and the coaches from the SOH. The teams, all mixed from partners and athletes, entered the gym and participated in the scheduled event (e.g. basketball, football, bocce, table tennis). The remaining students were watching and waited for their turn to enter the gym and participate as partners too. The physical educators and school's staff were responsible for the rotation of the partners in the Unified teams. The whole events lasted approximately 2 hours and a brief ceremony was held afterwards to praise the effort of all athletes and partners involved. A quick snack was offered then, followed by a quick tour of the athletes in the respective school site, and a brief discussion and interaction with the students. The events were terminated with the escorting of the athletes to their buses and thanking them for the fruitful experience they all shared.

### 2.3. Measuring Instruments

A questionnaire was designed for the purposes of the present study. Following previous studies (e.g. Townsend & Hassall, 2007; Baran et al., 2009; Bota et al., 2014), the questionnaire was developed in accordance to the AIR and SOI partners, as part of the evaluation framework, in an attempt to measure the attitudes towards inclusion of the students with ID involved in the UNS programs. The questionnaire incorporated 12 statements in total, classified into the seven item behavioral (e.g. 'I would invite a student with ID at home') and the five item emotional (e.g. 'I feel comfortable in a conversation with a student with ID')



domains. The respondents had to provide the extent of their agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 5: strongly agree, to 1: strongly disagree.

During the pilot study, the respondents claimed that it was easy to read and understand, requiring no more than 15 minutes to respond. The estimated Cronbach alpha indexes were .713 and .852 for the behavioral domain, and .744 and .761 for the emotional domain respectively. The above evidence led the research team to assume that the instrument had sufficient evidence of content validity and internal consistency.

The interview protocol consisted of seven sections designed to gather holistic, retrospective accounts of the participants' experience in the UNS program. At section one, descriptive data on interviewees' background, such as their position at school, the role in the UNS program and the previous experience with student with ID, were collected. Section two focused on knowledge of the UNS program and contained questions, which invited the participants to describe the goals of the UNS program with their own words. Section three contained questions about establishing Unified Partnership Model, information on the students' recruitment and the challenges experienced by the participants. Section four contained questions that sought information on involvement in the UNS program generally, such as number of events and activities. Section five contained questions related to quality of the UNS program. In this section, the participants reflected on their own expectations. Section six focused on the perceived effects of the UNS program on schools. The participants were invited to evaluate the impact of the UNS program on students' knowledge and attitudes, along with their wider community. Finally, in section seven the participants were invited to propose ways in which UNS events could be improved in the future.

## 2.4. Participants

The demographics of the participants can be seen in **Table 1**.

The student's experience with SOH, during pre-test, was mainly attributed to track and field events (N = 11), followed by bocce (N = 7). Other sports included basketball (N = 3), volleyball and basketball (N = 2), and soccer (N = 2). In turn, the student's involvement with SOH, during post-testing, were attributed to their involvement with the UNS program at their own school, meaning bocce (N = 118), bocce/other (N = 2), bocce/soccer/track and field (N = 2), track and field (N = 48), basketball (N = 34), soccer/basketball (N = 5), soccer (N = 1), track/soccer/bowling (N = 1) and other (N = 8). Further, semi-structure interviews with 2 principals/administrators, 7 school teachers/faculty members and 1 student with relevant questions concerning the attitudes towards the inclusion of individuals with ID through the UNS.

## 2.5. Statistical Analyses

The quantitative data, recorded in an SPSS file, was checked for outliers, according

**Table 1.** Demographics.

	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Males	127	58
Females	92	42
<b>Age</b>		
12 years' old	91	41.6
13 - 18 years old	128	58.4
<b>Type of school</b>		
Private	159	72.6
Public	60	27.4
<b>Experience with SO</b>		
<b>Any experience</b>	86	39.3
No experience	133	60.7

to certain pre-specified criteria (skewness < 2.0, kurtosis < 3.2) (Wilson et al., 2006). The transcribed verbatim of the qualitative data, along with the tape recordings, were recorded in Microsoft Word. For the quantitative data analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 18) was used. Repeated measures MANOVAs, with univariate post hoc comparisons, examined the time (at baseline-pre and at the end of the Unified Schools programming-post) differences, with respect to the dependent variables (behavioral and emotional domains) (Pedhazur & Pedhazur-Schmelkin, 1991; Hair et al., 1998). The .05 level of significance was selected to test the statistical hypotheses.

The qualitative content analysis was conducted to determine the presence, meaning and relationships of certain words, themes or concepts within transcribed interview texts (Côté, Salmela, Baria, Trudel, & Russell, 1993; Patton, 1987). Both deductive and inductive methods were applied to analyze the data, according to the Creswell's (2013) criteria. All semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim soon after the interviews were completed. The data analysis used a content comparison approach to identify and organize codes, themes and patterns that emerge through the responses (Patton, 2002). Codes and interpretations of two separate analysts were discussed until consensus was reached (>80%).

### 3. Results

A series of survey items were used to examine the impact of the UNS program. The seven items related to the behavioral domain examined whether the partners involved would spend time, lend something, invite at home, provide interpersonal support, call, sent messages and become social media friends with individuals with ID. The mean scores, during pre- and post-testing are presented in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** Pre- and post-test responses on the behavioral domain.

Variable	Mean	SD	F	p-value
Item 1: Spent with him/her outside of the programs				
Pre	2.08	0.88	1.343	0.258
Post	2.38	0.88		
Item 2: Lend him/her something that belongs to you				
Pre	2.46	0.72	0.001	0.997
Post	2.46	0.78		
Item 3: Invite him/her over to your house				
Pre	2.13	0.90	0.390	0.539
Post	2.21	0.83		
Item 4: Provided interpersonal support				
Pre	2.88	0.34	3.286	0.083
Post	3.00	0.00		
Item 5: Call him/her on the telephone				
Pre	2.33	0.82	1.150	0.295
Post	2.50	0.72		
Item 6: Sent messages to him/her				
Pre	2.13	0.90	6.928	0.015
Post	2.54	0.66		
Item 7: Friend him/her on social media				
Pre	2.29	0.81	1.334	0.260
Post	2.50	0.72		

Accordingly, a repeated measures multivariate analysis was used, with univariate post hoc comparisons, to examine the time effect (pre- vs. post-testing) with respect to the above items. The multivariate findings were not significant ( $\Lambda = 0.608$ ,  $F = 1.556$ ,  $p = 0.212$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.392$ ), but the univariate findings revealed significant differences with respect to Item 6 (sent messages:  $F = 6.928$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.231$ ) and approached significance for Item 4 (provide interpersonal support:  $F = 3.286$ ,  $p = 0.083$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.125$ ). The univariate results for the remaining items were not significant (Item 1—spent time:  $F = 1.343$ ,  $p = 0.258$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.055$ , Item 2—lent something:  $F = 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.997$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.001$ , Item 3—invite at home:  $F = 0.390$ ,  $p = 0.539$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.017$ , Item 5—call:  $F = 1.150$ ,  $p = 0.295$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.048$ , Item 7—social media friends:  $F = 1.334$ ,  $p = 0.260$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.055$ ). Examination of the mean Item 6 (sent messages) and Item 4 (provide interpersonal support) scores revealed that the students involved were more prone during post-test to: a) send a message to a friend with ID and b) support a friend with ID in case he/she was threatened, compared to pretest.

With respect to the five items grouped together to examine whether the stu-

dents involved had: thought of personal strengths, learn from others, learn to be patient, understand the impact of their emotions and acts, and felt they can make their school a better place (emotional domain), the results are presented in **Table 3**. Accordingly, a repeated measures multivariate analysis was used, with univariate post hoc comparison, to examine the time effect (pre- vs. post-testing) with respect to the 5 items presented above. The multivariate findings were not significant ( $\Lambda = 0.762$ ,  $F = 1.308$ ,  $p = 0.298$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.238$ ), but the univariate findings revealed significant differences with respect to Item 1 (thought of personal strengths:  $F = 7.118$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.222$ ). The univariate results for the remaining Items were not significant (Item 2—others:  $F = 0.019$ ,  $p = 0.892$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.001$ , Item 3—patience:  $F = 0.149$ ,  $p = 0.703$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.006$ , Item 4—emotions & acts:  $F = 1.061$ ,  $p = 0.313$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.041$ , Item 5—better place:  $F = 0.025$ ,  $p = 0.876$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.002$ ). Examination of the Item 1 mean score (thought of personal strengths) revealed that the students involved in the UNS program were more prone to consider their personal strengths during posttest compared to pretest.

The qualitative research was used to describe the participants' experience in UNS program in-depth. Sampling was purposive and consisted of 10 participants (5 females and 5 males) aging from 17 to 55 years. The participants were experienced teachers who worked in five different school settings, three general (two private and one public) and two special (one private and one public) schools, and a single student without ID. Data was gathered by means of individual interviews, keeping the identities of the participants confidential. Interview duration ranged from 10 to 20 minutes and all interviews were recorded

**Table 3.** Pre- and post-test responses on the emotional domain.

Variable	Mean	SD	F	p-value
Item 1: Thought about what my strengths are				
Pre	3.06	1.37	7.118	0.013
Post	3.31	1.29		
Item 2: Learned from people who are different from me				
Pre	4.00	1.20	0.019	0.892
Post	4.00	1.13		
Item 3: Learned how to be patient with others				
Pre	4.00	1.01	0.149	0.703
Post	4.01	1.15		
Item 4: Understand how my emotions & actions affect others				
Pre	4.12	0.95	0.95	0.313
Post	4.15	1.04		
Item 5: Feel like I can make my school a better place				
Pre	3.88	1.14	0.25	0.876
Post	4.00	1.19		

and transcribed. Trustworthiness of research was established through triangulation and member checking.

Data analysis from all interviews performed revealed in total 406 units, 129 codes, 23 sub-themes and 7 themes (Saldana, 2015). The results are presented in **Table 4**. The numbers of the right column represent the frequency that words, phrases or meanings appear to the texts, forming a set of qualitative descriptors.

The “Perceived Effects of Unified Schools” was the theme that covered the majority of the total amount of units (22.6%), following by “Involvement in Unified Sport Events Generally” (20.20%). The themes of “Background” and “Establishing Unified Partnership Model” ranged to similar percentages of units (13.55% and 13.05% respectively), followed by “Recommendations” (9.36%),

**Table 4.** Results from the qualitative data analysis.

Themes (7)	Sub-themes (23)	Units frequency
1. Background	Role at the school	13.55%
	Role in the Unified Program	
	Previous experience	
2. Knowledge of Unified Schools	Goals of Unified school program	7.64%
3. Establishing Unified Partnership Model	Participation Motivation	13.05%
	Students Recruitment	
	Challenges	
4. Involvement in Unified Sports Events Generally	Location	20.20%
	Unified events	
	Audience	
	Publicity	
	Contacts	
5. Quality of Unified Schools Events	Favorite part	8.87%
	Expectations	
6. Perceived Effects of Unified Schools	Students	22.6%
	Teachers	
	Community	
	Barriers to the social inclusion	
7. Recommendations	Dissemination	9.36%
	Methodology	
	Events & Activities	
	Cooperation with Greek Ministry of Education	
	Exchanged Good Practices	

“Quality of Unified Schools Events” (8.87%) and “Knowledge of Unified Schools” (7.64%).

The majority of participants were familiarized with ID and most of them had already previous experience of participation in programs and actions for disability awareness. This finding indicated that the teachers involved in the UNS program showed increased awareness and positive attitudes towards disability. Therefore, they were capable of describing successfully the main goals of the program, such as inclusion, cooperation and development of proper attitudes.

The previous experience of participation in programs led the administration of one private general school to develop appropriate methodology for the students’ recruitment, training, participation and evaluation of each action. At the same school, the students from kindergarten participated on intervention programs related to disability. The administrator highlighted the impact of early intervention to students’ attitudes and beliefs.

With the “Establishing Unified Partnership Model” theme, four interviewees recognized as the main criterion for the students’ recruitment, their internal motivation. The attitudes, abilities, empathy and previous experience of students with and without ID were mentioned as well. The most significant challenges that the teachers faced were firstly the cooperation among colleagues and subsequently the COVID-19 outbreak, which was the reason why the UNS program was postponed.

The UNS events took place in the facilities of general private or public schools and the sport activities included mainly Unified bocce, track and field (Unified relay), soccer and basketball. According to the responses, the spectators were students and teachers and only one person mentioned that a UNS event was attended by external spectators. For the purposes of publicity, schools used their social media accounts together with their official site. The “word of mouth” method was mentioned as one of the most efficient way to promote the program.

The interviewees highlighted the action time as the most interesting part of the events, which offered chances for interaction, cooperation and fun. Across seven study interviews, “satisfaction” of participation was coded 8 times, which indicated that the expectations of participants were fulfilled.

As reported in the majority of the interviews, students with and without ID had the chance to interact in the past within the frame of previous inclusive actions. However, all participants agreed that the UNS program served positively the attitudes, knowledge, empathy, friendship and citizenship. Additionally, a physical education teacher from a general school stated that after the UNS event the students without ID started to play football with students with ID during break times. Participants underlined that the UNS program had also significant impact on their community. The main categories revealed among others were “social interaction” and “dissemination”.

The Greek reality was highlighted as the main barrier for the social inclusion of persons with ID in the community. A teacher from a general school stated

that “the persons with ID are invisible in our society... they don’t go out; they don’t interact with other persons”. Another teacher from a special school referred that “the UNS program is the pillar of inclusion” in the Greek society, where prejudice, lack of knowledge and negative emotions towards disability are still existing.

At the end of interviews, the participants were invited to propose ideas in order to improve the UNS program in the future. Most responses referred to the “events and activities”. The participants suggested that “afternoon activities”, “early intervention programs” and “different content” of actions could offer more opportunities for social inclusion. Furthermore, a teacher from a general school proposed web Unified games as a means to continue the UNS program during the pandemic. Importantly, the majority of interviewees highlighted the role of stability and consistency of those actions at schools and referred that the cooperation with the Greek Ministry of Education is essential in order for the UNS programs to become part of a national education program. Other recommendations emerged were “dissemination” through “TV shows” and “bigger cultural events”. Finally, an admin from a special school expressed her thoughts regarding exchange of “good practices” with colleagues from other countries.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study was designed to examine the effect of the Unified Sports program held in Greece. The program, organized from SOH, recruited certain high schools in the wider areas of Athens. Throughout the program, the SOH visited the schools and organized several Unified Sport events (lectures, video presentations and sport events). During the sport events, the students with and without Intellectual Disability (ID) participated in the UNS organized by the SOH, the respective schools and the research team. The participants expressed their attitudes towards the inclusion of individuals with ID and their responses were recorded and analyzed accordingly.

The majority of the students without ID had no knowledge regarding UNS and no previous experience with individuals with ID, prior to the events. Their experience therefore was enhanced throughout the program, and the results revealed that they became more sensitive and willing to provide interpersonal support and exchange messages with their ID counterparts. The UNS program, in general, provided them the chance to get a more in depth view of themselves and consider their personal strengths as human beings.

The above findings were further supported from the interviews with teachers and a student at the respective schools. The teachers involved, expressed awareness and positive attitudes, named attitude change and inclusive strategies as the core goals of the program and developed strategies to enhance interaction of their students with their ID counterparts since kindergarten. They claimed that the internal motivation of the students involved was already high, and the events were promoted among the students themselves on social media accounts and on



schools' websites. The most interesting part of the program was the action time held during the events and some students even started to play Unified football after the termination of the program. The personal and academic background was crucial for the success of the whole endeavor and the major challenges was related to the cooperation among students, staff and personnel, the pandemic held and the "Greek reality" expressed.

The present findings are mainly in agreement with related studies conducted in Greece so far (e.g. Soulis et al., 2016; Bebetos et al., 2013; Georgiadi et al., 2012; Kalyva & Agaliotis, 2009; Magouritsa et al., 2005; Kalyvas, Koutsouki, & Skordilis, 2011). Soulis et al. (2016) found that the primary students in general classrooms held positive attitudes towards their counterparts with disabilities. Further, variables such as gender, age, and previous experience may have an impact, while younger students become more easily friends compared to older. On the other hand, the respondents claimed that students with disabilities should mainly attend special classes while few of them expressed fear towards their disabled peers (Soulis et al., 2016). Bebetos et al. (2013) used the Planned Behavior Theory as a general framework and stated that positive attitudes are essential for predicting student's behavior in an inclusive physical education class. Georgiadi et al. (2012) found that the type of school and gender differentiated the attitudes of students without disabilities. Specifically, girls and students exposed to an inclusive setting, expressed more positive attitudes towards their peers with ID, compared to boys and students from non-inclusive settings (Georgiadi et al., 2012). Kalyva and Agaliotis (2009) found that the frequent contact with a classmate with disability led to the formation of more favorable attitudes towards inclusion, compared to no-contact. The researchers concluded that peer interaction, either inside or outside the school environment, may be the most essential intervention to enhance the formation of positive attitudes towards academic inclusion of individuals with disabilities (Kalyva & Agaliotis, 2009). Magouritsa et al. (2005) examined the effect of an intervention program to enhance the perceptions and attitudes of secondary school students for the inclusion of individuals with borderline intelligence in a recreational class. The researcher found that the interaction among students in the experimental group supported the development of positive attitudes and perceptions compared to their counterparts in the control group (Magouritsa et al., 2005). Finally, Kalyvas et al. (2011) examined the effect of a unified sports program enriched with Paralympic sports upon the attitudes of 470 Greek physical education students towards participation in a disability infusion curriculum. The researchers found that the students developed positive attitudes for disability infusion curriculum programs. Positive attitudes were more prone for female students compared to males, and previous interpersonal or working experience with individuals with disabilities. The researchers concluded that the university curriculum may need to incorporate training opportunities for physical educators and coaches to develop the necessary attitudes, knowledge and skills to interact and work with individuals with

disabilities in the future (Kalyvas et al., 2011).

The results of Genova (2015) on the other hand are partially in conflict to the present findings. Genova (2015) conducted a cross-cultural comparison among Greece, Spain and Lithuania, with respect to the barriers for participation in the inclusive educational system. The accessibility to education was perceived as the main barrier, while disability in Greece was often perceived as problematic, leading to a sense of marginalization and negative attitudes from the society in general. The researcher stated that the skill and training of the teachers involved may be crucial, since the majority is not properly trained on how to deal with individuals with disabilities in general (Genova, 2015). In the present study, the “Greek reality” was expressed as a concern throughout the interviews, claiming that the prejudice experienced within the Greek society and the absence of social interactions may hinder the inclusive process of individuals with ID in general.

The present findings may be viewed from the perspective of Ajzen (1993) who described in depth the attitudes theory employed in the present study. The researcher stated that attitudes may be perceived as functions of individual behavioral beliefs representing probable consequences of certain behaviors. The more favorable the attitudes, the impact of important others and the perceived behavioral control, the more prone will be the intention to exhibit certain behaviors. Ajzen (1993) reported that attitudes represent a multidimensional construct classified in the behavioral, emotional and cognitive domains. They are usually stable across time and situations, and they may not be used exclusively to predict human behavior. Still, realizing the ways they are formed appeared early in the literature as an essential theoretical construct for the understanding and assessing of human behavior (Ajzen, 1993).

In the present study, only the behavioral and emotional domains were incorporated in the measuring instrument used to record the attitudes towards the inclusion of individuals with ID. The presupposition of Ajzen (1993) was adopted, claiming that when the attitude assessed is attempting to predict a certain behavior, then the assessment needs mainly to incorporate the behavioral element. The emotional domain was perceived necessary to incorporate too, and this became evident from the empirical evidence viewed throughout the pilot study and the UNS program. The students with and without ID were eager to meet and participate, exchanged gestures and smiles during the events and were supportive towards each other. On the other hand, it was not feasible for the research team to collect the respective information required to form and assess the attitudinal cognitive domain towards the inclusion of the students examined (i.e. previous knowledge, skills and experiences) (Ajzen & Madden, 1986).

## 5. Limitations

Certain limitations do not allow generalization of the present findings without caution. First, the UNS program was designed and executed throughout the pandemic period, when the Greek Ministry of Education had to cancel all the events

planned during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years. The program therefore was not fulfilled in some schools and no post-testing data was available to compare our findings and draw conclusions accordingly. Second, the program was executed at the respective school sites, with different students enrolled. In turn, the SOH coaches presented different sport activities each time (e.g. Unified bocce, basketball, football, track and field-relay) and invited the students to actively participate with their counterparts with ID. The experimental setting therefore was not stable across the different schools, but we attempted to overcome this limitation by recruiting a wide number of participants and collect data from different areas around Athens. Third, the statistical analyses comparing pre- and post-testing data were not always significant. This may be due to the high pre-testing scores recorded from the students, who exhibited already positive attitudes and empathy upon entering the program. We attempted to overcome this limitation by collecting more in depth information, through the semi-structured interviews. Fourth, the research tools employed were based on the Delphi method and presented by experts in the field. However, no established psychometric properties were provided and despite the acceptable Cronbach alpha coefficients, no validity evidence was recorded. Fifth, the absence of a control group constitutes an essential limitation as well. The pandemic crisis however did not allow the research team to proceed as planned and collect the data from schools in the same area serving as controls. Finally, related socio-economic variables, such as family income and parental education were not provided by the schools' authorities and could not be taken under consideration. These variables may have increased the student's awareness, possibly through the parental decision to attain certain schools which already have the sensitivity to address issues related to academic and social inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

## 6. Future Implications

Future researchers may consider overcoming the above limitations and enrich the related literature. The experimental setting therefore may be more stable in the future, e.g. in a particular school setting, from the same individuals involved, following the same exact treatment. Related variables, such as the socio-economic status and parental income may be useful to consider as covariates in the future. Further, the involvement of a control group and the establishment of specific research tools assessing attitudes and designed to evaluate the effect of the UNS programs towards the inclusion of individuals with ID worldwide, may be other issues to consider. The established psychometric properties will provide the confidence to examine the effect of the UNS programs worldwide and assess the cross-cultural differences.

## 7. Conclusion

Overall, the present findings are promising since the UNS program held in Greece

had a positive effect on the attitudes towards the inclusion of individuals with ID. Administrators, teachers, and authorities in the Greek Ministry of Education may consider expanding the present effort and invite more schools in the future to participate. Afternoon activities and/or early intervention programs may offer more opportunities in the future for social interaction and the establishment of preferable attitudes towards the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. The pandemic crisis however poses the most prevalent barrier nowadays, but alternative issues may be examined, such as online seminars, interaction through alternative channels, developing Unified virtual games environments, teaching of Unified Sport concepts through related videos and movies, etc. These alternatives may not overcome the in-person interaction and the importance of individual presence during the events, however they may be considered as an alternative strategy to promote interaction and enhance positive attitudes towards the inclusion of individuals with ID. Further high quality research shall examine the impact of Unified Sports in order to enhance and promote inclusive attitudes and have a comprehensive view of how integrative behavior can be developed.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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