



THE EMPATHY AND INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

The empathy can play crucial role in process of integration of disabled children in educational process. In framework of project Sport as mechanism for early integration, we investigated how empathy can make the process of integration easier and more efficient. We have organized a workshop in which students of High School at Velenje performed simulation of everyday situations, which are simple for regular population, but very difficult for people with disabilities. Students had for example to do some activities using only one arm, or have to do something with closed eyes. After those exercises the participants had to answer questionnaire. Most of them answered that after doing the simulation they understand better the students with disabilities and that performing such simulation can make integration of children with disabilities. Students suggested that it will be very useful to organize simulations every year in each class.

Key Words: Empathy, integration, disability, simulation.

INTRODUCTION

The empathy is becoming one of most important sense in 21st century (Pink 2006). In accordance with J. Rifkin (2009) we are a fundamental empathic species what have profound and far reaching consequences for society. Working on project Sport as Mechanism for Early Integration, which is funded by European Regional Development Fund in framework of Operational Programme Slovenia Croatia in we investigate the empathy and its role in process of integration of children with disabilities. We concluded that empathy is crucial for integration process, because children from regular population have to be able to understand the problems, which children with disabilities have in their everyday activities.

So we decided to simulate the situations with which are faced children with disabilities and to ask children from regular population to try to realize some simple tasks however in the conditions which are similar to real situations which people with disabilities are faced every day.

We have supposed that after such experience most of children will change their attitudes against people with disabilities, will better understand their problems and will easier accept people with disabilities.

METHOD

We made investigation in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th class of High School at Velenje. There were 80 students participating in experiment. Investigation was realized in the form of workshop. In the first part of workshop we shortly explained the empathy, the problem of integration of students with disabilities, the experiments, which we wanted to realize. We asked the students to participate in experiments. After the experiments in which we simulated the conditions similar to problems, which people with disabilities have in everyday activities have been realized, we asked the participants to fill short questionnaire and to discuss the results of this social experiment.

Using simple tools we have simulated the conditions of blindness, poor sight, deafness and paralysis. For example we asked students to tie their shoes with one hand Fig 1.



Fig 1: Student trying to tie a shoe with one hand

Or to go from one place to another with closed eyes Fig 2.



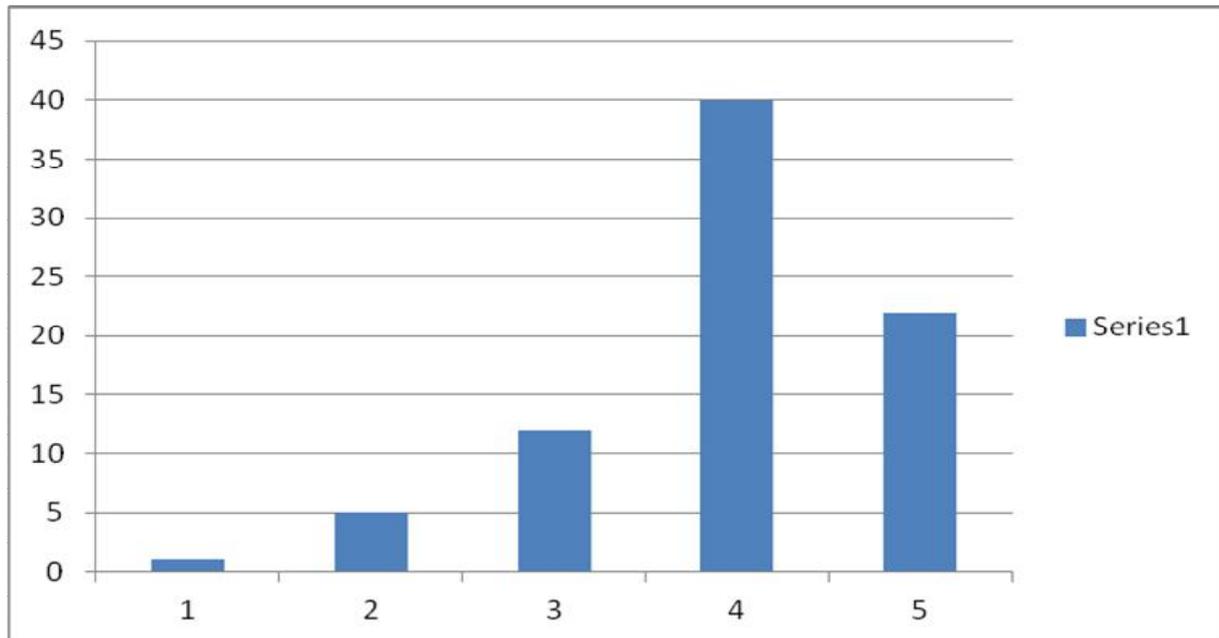
Fig 2: Preparation for simulation of blindness

After the experiments have been realized we asked the students following questions:

- 1) Have you been in contact with people with disability
- 2) Do you know what is empathy
- 3) Did you think to put yourself in the situation of other person?
- 4) Did you change your attitude to people with disabilities after experiment?
- 5) Such experiment will change understanding of people with disabilities.
- 6) Realization of similar experiments will support the inclusion of people with disabilities
- 7) Do you want to learn more about empathy?
- 8) Do you want to work in association supporting people with disability?

FINDINGS

Students were strongly motivated to participate in experiment. The most important results of experiment are that most students changed their attitude against people with disabilities as can be seen from the graph 1.



Graph 1

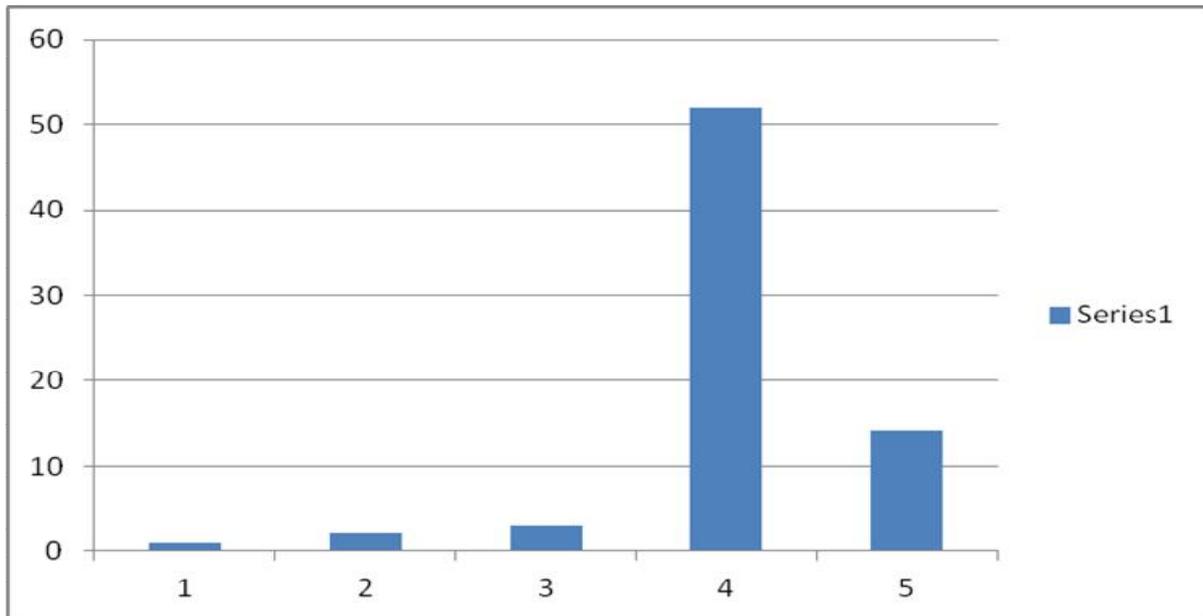
We have asked to answer how much they agree with a statement I changed my attitude. Most of them agreed or strongly agreed that they changed their attitude against people with disabilities after participating in experiment.

On the y axis the number of students is presented. On x axis is shown how much students agree with a statement namely:

- 1 strongly disagree
- 2 disagree
- 3 do not know
- 4 agree
- 5 strongly agree

The second important result was that think that performing such kind of experiments will support the integration of students with disabilities in the society. The results on graph 2 shows have much the participants in experiments agree with statement the performing of experiments will support the integration of people with disability in society.

As can be seen from graph 2 most of students believed that experiment simulating the condition of everyday activities of people with disability will support the integration of people with disabilities.



Graph 2

Most of students wanted to learn more about empathy and wanted to work in NGOs supporting people with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

From analysis of data we can conclude that:

- Empathy is important factor in the process of integration of people with disabilities in society
- It is easy to organize experiments in which participants will understand the every day problems of people with disabilities.
- It will be useful to organize such type of experiments starting from kindergarten at least once per year in each classroom.
- Empathy experiments can decrease the level of violence in schools.

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