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**SILESIA
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Comparison of knowledge and opinions of Czech, Polish and Catalan students about the use of Snoezelen in helping professions

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Abstract

The Snoezelen multisensory method is currently considered an innovative method that aims to encourage people with disabilities to be active based on sensory stimulation through the unique environment which is for this reason created. Snoezelen uses and combines many therapeutic, educational and relaxation activities to enhance the quality of life and purposefully promote human development. The concept was created in the 1970s in the Netherlands and its development can be seen all over the world.

The present paper reflects on selected comparative data obtained from students and graduates of three fields of study - special education in the Czech Republic, occupational therapy in Poland and psychology in Catalonia, with the aim of mapping knowledge and opinions on the use of the Snoezelen method.

The "*Use of the Snoezelen multisensory environment*" is included as a regular course in the curriculum of the above-mentioned study programmes in these countries. The research is related to the project *Support of Snoezelen and its integration into university education* (Erasmus project KA2+), which aims to develop and extend the Snoezelen concept in university education and to create a universally adaptable curriculum. Specifically, it concerns the introduction of innovative approaches and practices in the education of students in the educational, psychological, social and therapeutic fields of the helping professions and the promotion of a systematic improvement of the quality of care for people with disabilities across Europe and their social inclusion into the society.

Methodologically we present quantitative and comparative research in which analytical and statistical methods were used. For this purpose, an original questionnaire was developed and distributed through three partner universities: the Silesian University in Opava (CZ), the AWF in Kraków (PL) and the University of Lleida (SP). The data were then compared with the aim to find equal and differently variable values in the students' responses. The paper concerns the respondents' preferences and opinions on working in Snoezelen multisensory rooms, and the using of Snoezelen by different professionals in different institutions, the preferences of the objectives of working with this concept, its problematic parts and the opinions on its use in terms of specific activities.

In the conclusion, the author presents a unique comparative synthesis of the views of students and graduates who have only had limited opportunities to study this method as part of their curriculum. Given the very rapid spread of this method, the research into the views of respondents from three European countries is quite original.

Key words:

Snoezelen, multisensory environment, students of helping professions, use of Snoezelen, activation, relaxation.

1 Introduction

Snoezelen is now regarded as an innovative method whose aim it is to encourage a person with disability or disadvantage to be active by means of sensory stimulation thanks to a unique environment created. Snoezelen uses and combines numerous therapeutic, educational and relaxation activities which enhance the quality of life and purposefully promote human development. The concept was already created in the 1970s in the Netherlands and its spreading is evident throughout the world. Its

professional patronage is formed by the International Snoezelen Association – Multisensory Environments (abbr. ISNA-MSE).

Our project *Support of Snoezelen and its Integration into University Education* is focused on the development and expansion of Snoezelen in university education. Specifically, we concern on the inclusion of the innovative Snoezelen course in the field of helping professions – special education, psychology and occupational therapy related to certain partners from the Czech Republic, Spain (Catalonia) and Poland. The course will foster the quality of graduates for subsequent labour market needs because they gain new skills and knowledge. Promoting Snoezelen and especially its integration into university curricula will improve the quality of care for people with special needs and disabilities living in a 24-hours social and educational institutions, and provoke humane approach of the society.

In this article we try to analyse and compare certain Snoezelen knowledge and opinions of students from three universities, from the Silesian University in Opava, the University of Physical Education in Krakow and the University of Lleida.

Snoezelen sessions and their effective use is not an easy task. Gone are the days when many caregivers used this method only intuitively ([2]). Snoezelen theory must be based on research, results and documentation, analysis and practical experience. Many research studies are published, both the qualitative and the quantitative studies, on the topic of Snoezelen and its effectiveness in practice ([13], [7]) Others concern on detail changes in mindset, calming, and relaxation, or users' preferences regarding Snoezelen equipment, tools, and methods ([8], [12], [5], [9]).

The integration of Snoezelen courses into university accreditations, specifically into fields of helping professions (occupational therapy, special pedagogy, psychology, etc.) is in its infancy. Snoezelen is not very common topic at universities yet. Our aim was to find out whether the theory of Snoezelen, which is taught at three different universities, is reflected in the knowledge and opinions of students. **Which is a much-needed step towards analysing the level of knowledge of Snoezelen concept among students, and those working in the helping professions.**

This is only the first step in an ongoing project which is planned for several years, and this article focuses on analysis of only some questions. The first question concerns **the essence** of the Snoezelen – MSE. The second question concerns **the advantages** of the Snoezelen - MSE method – what possibilities, options, and opportunities this method gives to the therapists and pedagogues that use it. When formulating both the first and the second question, the authors used and relied on the definition of Snoezelen from 2012, the eight principles of Snoezelen, and the authors' own experience, derived from their many years of therapeutic and didactic work in the field of Snoezelen-MSE.

2 Methodology

For our purposes, a joint original English questionnaire was created, containing 41 questions. This questionnaire was subsequently translated into Czech, Polish and Catalan language. The questionnaire contained a number of closed and open questions, but most questions were answered by selecting an option from a five-point Likert scale: (1) "I definitely agree", (2) "I somewhat agree", (3) "I don't know", (4) "I somewhat disagree", and (5) "I definitely disagree". We considered the first two variants to be positive responses, and the last two variants to be negative responses. Variant 3 was considered a neutral response.

The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms, the free survey administration software available from Google. Students in all three countries were sent a national version of the questionnaire via a specific web link. To maintain the validity and reliability of the research, the questionnaire questions were referred to experts on methodological data processing. As a result of this consultation process, some questions were changed so that their informative value was clearer, more understandable and usable for statistical analysis. The content of the questions was then compared with the research objectives, and, as far as possible, questions were grouped according to the specific research aims. In the final part of the questionnaire, three questions were included which encouraged students to express their opinion on the use of Snoezelen in their field.

The participants in the research were Czech, Polish and Spanish students and graduates formally educated in the theory of the Snoezelen - MSE. The Czech research group consisted of a total of 145 respondents: 132 women and 13 men; the Polish participants consisted of 93 respondents: 91 women and 2 men; the Spanish participants consisted of 80 respondents: 70 women and 10 men. The largest group of respondents were in the age category 18-23 years, (41% of Czech students, 30% of Polish students, 70% of Spanish students) which is understandable, since the research focused on university students.

The data were analysed quantitatively. Individual questions from the Czech, Polish and Catalan questionnaires were systematically classified, and the answers were totalled and then converted into an absolute value of percentages and ratios. The data obtained from all three groups of respondents were compared, and the difference between their values was expressed by correlating the difference.

The following section describes findings from the quantitative data derived from analysing the group of questionnaire items concerning:

1. opinions on the level of importance of **Activation and Stimulation** and **Relaxation** in Snoezelen - MSE;
2. opinions on the strong points of Snoezelen – MSE: The **Possibility of a Special Personal Approach to Clients**; the **Flexibility** of the concept; and the **Possibility of Using Different Methods**.

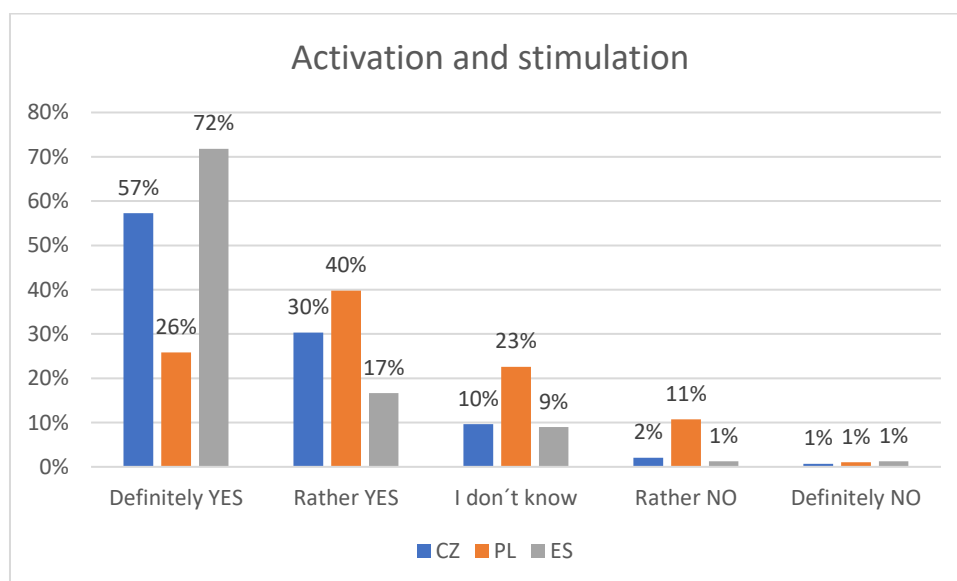
3 Results

In the following part we present the answers and reactions of students to the questionnaire’s items:

- **The most important function of Snoezelen is activation and stimulation**
- **The most important function of Snoezelen is relaxation**

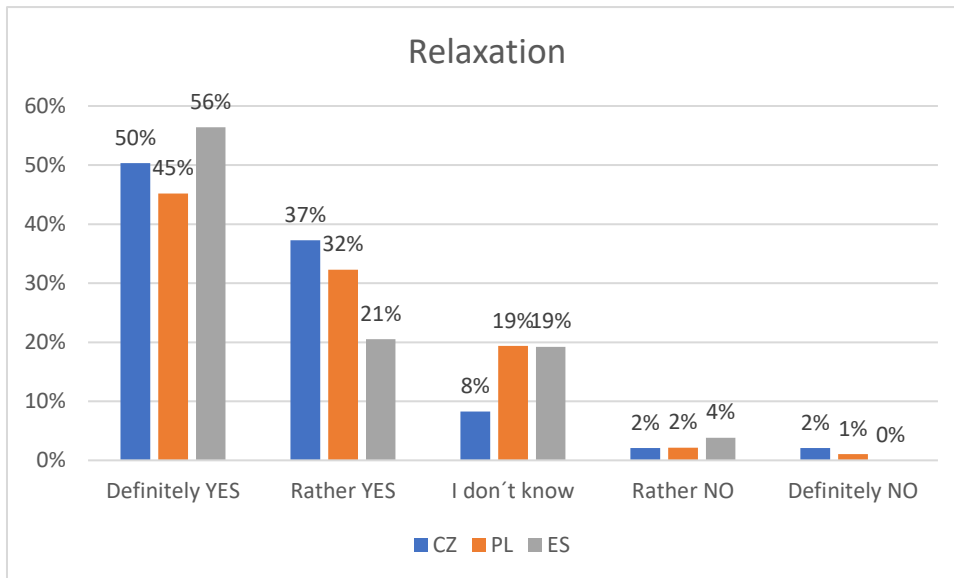
Czech, Polish and Spanish respondents indicated a belief in the importance of the item ‘**Activation and Stimulation**’, most frequently choosing the first two positive options on the scale (“I definitely agree”: CZ = 57%, PL = 26%, ES = 72%; and “I somewhat agree” CZ = 30%, PL = 40%, ES = 17%). However, almost a quarter of Polish students also chose the neutral option (23% = “I don’t know”) and the first negative option (11%). Respondents from all groups significantly agreed on both variants of the negative answers: “I somewhat disagree”; and “I definitely disagree”, although the choice of “I somewhat disagree” was, again, selected by more Polish students than Czech and Spanish students. Although Activation and Stimulation cannot be considered the most important function of Snoezelen, **the majority of Czech, Polish and Spanish students did consider it of importance, since most (CZ = 87%, PL = 66%, ES = 89%) chose the first two (i.e., positive) variants of the scale. Czech and Spanish respondents most often chose variant 1 and Polish respondents chose variant 2.** The same answers can be found only in the last variant 4 “I definitely disagree”. (see the percentage distribution of Czech, Polish and Spanish variants of answers in Figure 1, below).

Figure 1: The most important function of Snoezelen is activation and stimulation (%)



The second analysed item was the importance of **Relaxation** in Snoezelen - MSE. We found that the respondents of all groups generally agreed on its importance, with most students choosing the first and second positive variants on the scale (variants 1 and 2 combined: CZ = 87%, PL = 77%, ES = 77%). Significant agreement (difference $\leq 10\%$) was found in both negative variants 4 and 5 ("I somewhat disagree"; and "I definitely disagree"). Polish and Spanish respondents chose the similarly neutral variant ("I don't know") more often than Czech students did (CZ = 8%, PL and ES = 19%). Nevertheless, it is clear that in the ratio of positive answers that more students identified Relaxation as the most important function of Snoezelen – MSE, ahead of Activation and Stimulation (CZ: 87% and 87%, PL: 66% and 77%, ES: 89% and 77%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The most important function of Snoezelen is relaxation (%)



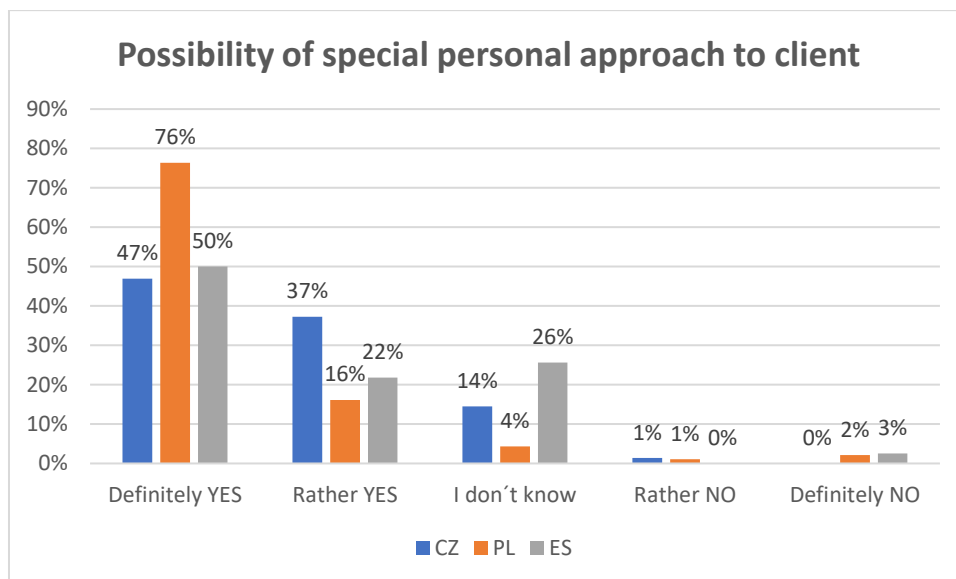
- The most respondents from the CZ chose in Activation and Stimulation variant 1 (57%) and in Relaxation variant 1 (50%).
- The most respondents from the PL chose in Activation and Stimulation variant 2 (40%) and in Relaxation variant 1 (45%).
- The most respondents from the SP chose in Activation and Stimulation variant 1 (72%) and in Relaxation variant 1 (56%).

In the following part we present the answers and reactions of students to the questionnaire's items:

- ***The strongest point of Snoezelen is possibility of a special personal approach to the client.***
- ***The strongest point of Snoezelen is flexibility of the concept.***
- ***The strongest point of Snoezelen is possibility of using different methods.***

Regarding the first value - whether the **Possibility of a Special Personal Approach to the Client** was a strong point of the Snoezelen – MSE - students mostly selected positive variant 1 "I definitely agree" (CZ = 47%, PL = 76%, ES = 50%); and variant 2 "I somewhat agree" (CZ = 37%, PL = 16%, ES = 22%) . Negative variants 4 + 5 ("I somewhat disagree"; and "I definitely disagree") were chosen only by a minimum number of students (CZ = 1%, PL = 3%, ES = 3%). Neutral responses ("I don't know") made up a total of 14% of Czech, and only 4% of Polish but 26% of Spanish responses. The combined positive Czech variants (1 and 2) totalled 84%, while the sum of positive Polish variants was even higher, at 92% and Spanish much lower 77%. **In summary**, the students, by a clear majority, agreed **that the Personal Approach to the Client offered by the Snoezelen - MSE is a strong argument in favour of the use of this method.** (see Figure 3).

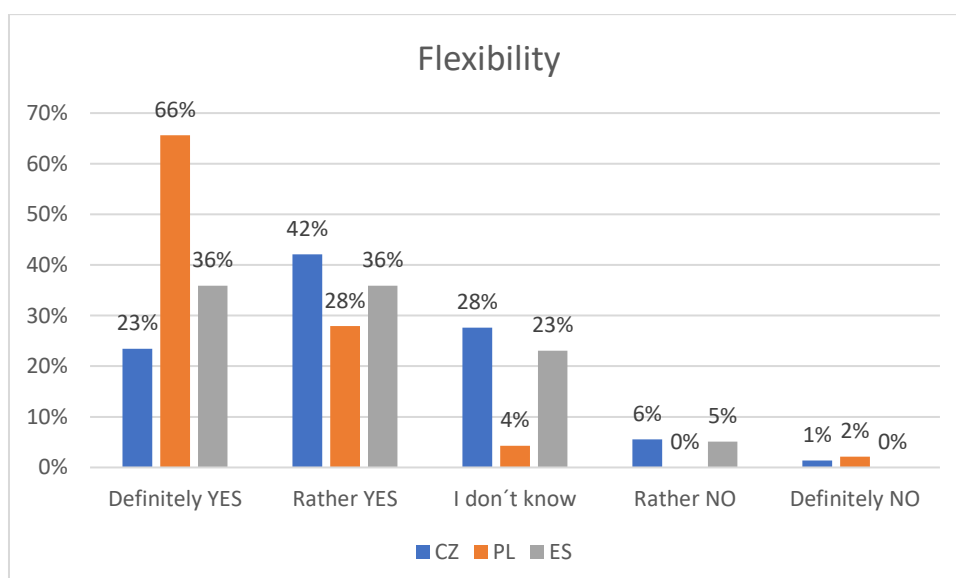
Figure 3: The strongest point of Snoezelen is the possibility of special personal approach to client (%)



The value - **Flexibility of the Concept** – refers not only to being able to change the multi-sensorial environment, but also to being free to use time differently, to being able to make special demands on the groups, or to having the freedom to use different aids and techniques – in short, it means being **able to modify the structure of the Snoezelen sessions according to the needs of the client and therapist, in terms of maximising room effect and quality of time spent there.**

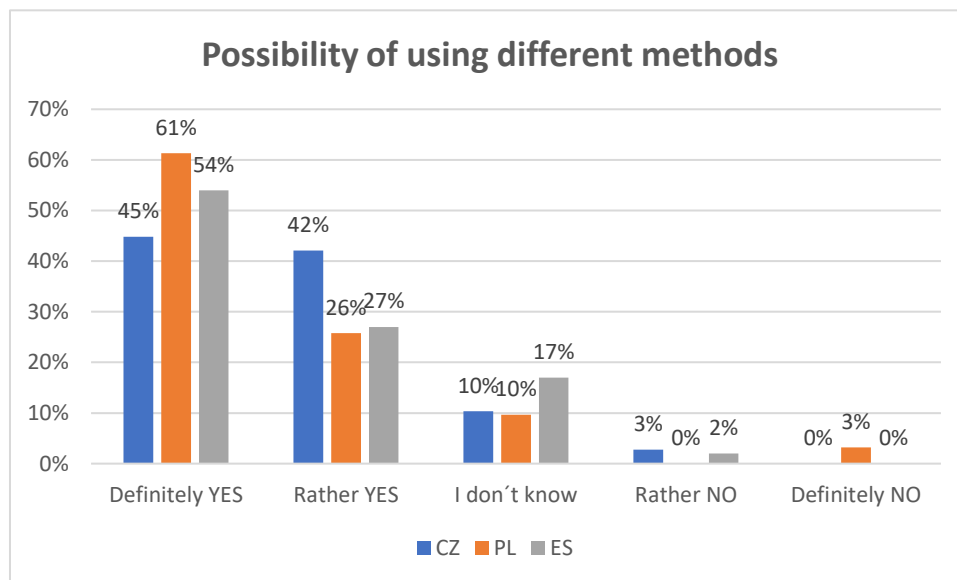
Again, for this item, the opinions of all students were concentrated in the first half of the scale, (i.e., they mostly selected variants 1,2, and 3). The first variant (“I definitely agree”) was chosen by more Polish than Czech and Spanish respondents (CZ = 23%, PL = 66%, ES = 36%), and, therefore, we can assume that Polish students are more confident than their Czech and Spanish counterparts in this opinion. On the other hand, the second variant (“I somewhat agree”) was chosen by Czech and Spanish students more often than by Polish students (CZ = 42%, PL = 28%, ES = 36%), and for the neutral third variant (“I don't know”) Czech and Spanish respondents also outnumbered Polish respondents (CZ = 28%, PL = 4%, ES = 23%), suggesting that Czech and Spanish students were not so convinced that Flexibility was a strength of the Snoezelen - MSE. An overwhelming majority of 94% of Polish respondents chose the first two variants, indicating their confidence in Flexibility as a strong point of the method. The sum of the first two positive variants of Czech responses was 65%, lower than the Polish total by 29% and Spanish responses sum was 72%, means 22% lower than Polish (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The strongest point of Snoezelen is the flexibility of the concept (%)



The next possible strong point of the Snoezelen concept that we decided to explore is the Possibility of Using Various Methods and Techniques. Students also evaluated this area very positively, with all groups of respondents choosing variants 1 and 2 very often (CZ = 87%, PL = 87%, ES = 81%). However, the distribution of answers between variants 1 and 2 was not the same - the first variant ("I definitely agree ") was chosen by more Polish students, and the second variant ("I somewhat agree ") by more Czech students. For this item, as well as for the previous one concerning Flexibility, we found more hesitant answers from the Czech and Spanish respondents and more certainty from the Polish group. All participants agreed significantly on variants 4 and 5, for which the difference did not exceed 3%. As for previous items, positive answers predominated. **We can therefore state that the Possibility of Using Various Methods in Snoezelen - MSE is also seen as one of the strong points of this method** (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: The strongest point of Snoezelen is the possibility of using different methods (%)



- As the strongest point of the Snoezelen the most respondents from the CZ chose *Possibility of a Special Personal Approach to the Client* in variant 1 (47%).
- As the strongest point of the Snoezelen the most respondents from the PL chose *Possibility of a Special Personal Approach to the Client* in variant 1 (76%).
- As the strongest point of the Snoezelen the most respondents from the ES chose *Possibility of using different methods and techniques* in variant 1 (61%).

4 Conclusion

Respondents in our research rated Relaxation as the most important feature of Snoezelen - MSE (from the four selected options in our questionnaire: Relaxation, Activation and Stimulation, Support of Communication and Social Skills, and Personal Development and Education). Relaxation is mentioned as a component in most research studies, covering very different groups: people with dementia, patients in palliative care, people with intellectual disabilities, people with mental illness, even women undergoing labour ([1], [3], [14], [10], [6], [4]). In the original Dutch concept of the 1970s, which the authors of the article respect and incorporate into their own teaching and research activities, also activation had a high priority, due to the historical connection with the primary target group of clients with profound mental disabilities, for whom Snoezelen meant the certainty of leisure activities that stimulated the development of active perception through sensory stimulation. The current professional community of all three countries (the Czech Republic, Poland and Spain) included in the research offers a number of opportunities and activities to its clients (with a wide range of disabilities, disorders, and risks). In professions such as special pedagogy, occupational therapy and psychology, the use of the Snoezelen method is not the only possible activity; nevertheless, the creation of Snoezelen rooms in these countries has greatly expanded.

Individualization of the approach to the client is at the core of all modern helping professions and approaches, but it has not always been emphasized as strongly as it is today. From this perspective, Snoezelen is a pioneering method, and at the same time convergent with the concepts of those such as Maria Montessori, Virginia Axline, Tom Kitwood, and Carl Rogers. This part of the Snoezelen education program appears already to be optimally planned and implemented, and, therefore, needs only to be maintained at its current level.

Overall, the results of the research for all three groups of students were very similar, allowing us to draw two conclusions:

1. The didactics in the three university courses are very similar, thus **Snoezelen – MSE is taught in the same way with much of the same content only with specialization of the study fields.**
2. **Snoezelen is a method** –and, despite its flexibility, has a recognisable and systematic **structure.**
3. **Students of all groups consider mostly very similar opinion on Snoezelen functions and strengths.**

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