

The Benefit of Sport for People with Disabilities

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Abstract:

Starting points: People with disabilities face daily obstacles that do not allow them to integrate adequately into society. Health disadvantage itself is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which carries with it several specificities. Social inclusion is a phenomenon that is still present in the academic world than in society itself. A specific part of inclusion is precisely the participation of people with disabilities in sporting activities. Although sport can be understood as the most beautiful means of inclusion of people with disabilities, it is here that we can observe shortcomings in participation in sport. Very little attention is paid to the management of sport of persons with disabilities and their support from society is at a minimum. We chose this issue precisely because of the increase in the interest of people with disabilities in sports activities.

Methods: The study analyzes sport as a means of inclusion of people with disabilities in society. We carried out the research

in qualitative design and as a method of data collection we chose a semi-structured interview, which we conducted with 9 informants between October 2021 and March 2022. We analyzed the results of our research was to find out what sport brings to the lives of people with disabilities and to find out in what areas sport has enriched the lives of people with disabilities.

Results & conclusions: Based on our findings, we can conclude that people with disabilities reflect the changes that occurred in their lives after they started active sports. Through sport, they managed to improve not only their physical condition, but also brought positive changes to them by sport in the fields of mental and social. Our research also confirmed the positive impact of sport on the autonomy of people with health disadvantages.

Introduction

The issue of health disadvantage can still be understood today very fragmentarily, both conceptually and institutionally. This fact is confirmed by a large number of professional definitions that we can encounter in publications from authors such as Kiuppis 2013, Le Clair 2011, Wilson, McColl, 2017, Juhasova (2012) etc. However, if we want to address the issue of people with disabilities comprehensively and professionally, we must have a basic knowledge of the health disadvantage and its specificities that it entails. Health disadvantage represents a certain social event for a person, it brings about a change in social status, which in some way affects the whole life of these people. These changes, however, affect not only the life of a person with a health disadvantage, but also their whole family. However, the truth is that we cannot define health disadvantage exactly, as this is a very broad concept. However, as Vítková (2006) points out, health disadvantage can be understood as a long-term change in the state of health, which puts a person at a certain disadvantage to other people. This change is most often related to the musculoskeletal system, changes in the mental area, but also with sensory organs.

Our study is primarily focused on researching the issue of social inclusion of people with disabilities. The process of socialization is a long-term process in which a person adopts the cultural rules and norms of the society in which he lives and learns the way of behavior that is considered right and moral in a given society

(Payne, 2020). Largest, a prerequisite for successful inclusion, is the acceptance of the otherness of a person with a health disadvantage and respect for him or her as an equal partner, regardless of the disadvantage (Magee, 2018). Recently, we can see an increase in the interest of people with disabilities in sports activities.

According to Bardiovsky & Labudova (2010), it is the persons who have socialized through sporting activities; who have shown a great degree of tolerance, optimism; have found the meaning of life. The contribution of sports activity in a person's life is also highlighted by the authors Pasichnyk et al. (2021), who argue that sport can be considered an important part of inclusion as it contributes to the emergence of several positive, not only physical but also personality traits. However, the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society can take place only on the basis of taking into account their individual abilities and the characteristics that they possess. It is precisely this consideration and subsequent inclusion that is the means by which fundamental human rights and the dignity of persons are realized (Hayes, 2005). Sport can be considered one of the most effective forms of inclusion of persons into society, as it has a positive and significant impact on the social ties and mental well-being of a person with disabilities. The inclusive potential of sport is highlighted, e.g., by the 2007-201 in Qi, Jing, Ha Amy (2012), McConkey (2019), Haudenhuyse (2017), Tacon (2017) and more.

Sport has an inseparable place in society and its importance is appreciated by institutions at

international levels such as the UN, UNESCO and beneficial effects are also perceived by governments of most countries. It also has its place in the scientific world and the subject is devoted to scientists, experts, but also the public. Sport can be understood as a social, internally structured complex process that contributes to the overall development of personality, but also society. Through sport comes to satisfy the physical, psychological, social, and moral aspects of a person's personality (McConkey, 2019). If we look at the issue of sport of persons with disabilities through the long-term experience of experts, we can conclude that the positive effects of these individuals are more pronounced in several indicators than in the intact population (Haudenhuyse, 2017). There are many sports clubs in Slovakia where people with disabilities can meaningfully spend their free time and develop their abilities. The most popular clubs and sports include boccia, floorball, basketball (in a wheelchair), sports shooting, tennis, archery, ping pong, triathlon, swimming, and many others.

Material & methods

The aim of our research was to find what sport brings to the lives of people with disabilities.

The research methodology offers several ways to compile a selection set. Due to our research problem, we have chosen the available selection, through which we have selected persons with disabilities who are engaged in sports activities. The available selection is used in the studies in cases where the researcher does not have the possibility to make a random selection in a stratified or non-lost way. This selection can be made according to Denzin et al. (2017) characterized as "I take what I have". The research sample consisted of 9 informants, aged between 19 and 53 years. Of the total number of informants, 4 were women and 5 were men. In addition to health disadvantage, the condition for inclusion in the research file was also the personal experience of informants with regular sports activities, whether at recreational level or at the level of top-level sport.

For better clarity, we list the characteristics of informants in the table.

We carried out the research in qualitative design, and we chose semi-structured conversa-

tion as a method of data collection. The semi-structured interview is characterized by the readiness of the researcher for an ongoing interview. The advantage is the possibility to attach new questions to the conversation as needed. In the interview, we obtained basic data about informants such as age, education, profession, sport, the sport he is engaged in and the duration of sports activities. We conducted the interviews directly with informants, either by face-to-face meeting or via an online space. The duration of the interview was on average from 30–45 minutes. Even after the first interview, we interviewed a literal transcript. Literal transcription helped us visualize the data we are looking for and then analyze it through open encoding, which we can describe as disassembling text into fragments to which we assigned a more general meaning and thus created codes. Between them, we then searched for codes with similar meanings. It is important to start analyzing the collected data from the very beginning, as it can show us the direction of the next conversation. If we find that we do not receive an appropriate answer to some questions, we can reformulate them at this stage. The next phase was the primary interpretation, which came to an end after the open encoding ended. At this stage, we descriptively analyzed the created categories and subcategories, described what their content is and what they relate to (Lukacova, 2017).

Results

Based on the analysis, we note that our informants divide their lives into two significant periods: the period before they started more active and regular sports: the period when they connected their lives with sport. Another significant finding is associated with the feelings that informants associate with sport. The third category, which we have also created through axial coding, reports on the profits/benefits that sport has brought to the lives of our informants.

Category BEFORE SPORT

We saturated the category before sport with the following codes:

it felt like healthy, resignation, absence of sport, torment, loneliness, change, before injury, after injury, after injury, torn, new directions and a new chapter.

Based on the analysis, we can conclude that our informants reflect the period before they

started sports and then. As Informant II also said, *"because of my disability, I have been somehow detached from my peers."*

Health disadvantage affects a person in several areas of life and affects the integration of a person with a health disadvantage into society. Informant IB remembers the period before he started actively

sporting *"But until I was involved in sport, I spent time at home alone, I played games on the Internet and watched TV for hours. I didn't have friends, I felt alone, but I couldn't change it."*

Cooperation between athletes with disabilities with disabilities with intact athletes can be considered an important prerequisite for the success of inclusion through sports activities. In a statement, he goes on to state *"All of this happened around 5th grade in elementary school. Hmmm then, for many years, I gave up the idea that I could play sports. I only returned to sport in high school, which was designed for people with disabilities. Here at this school, I came across a boccia and a great bunch and of course the coach around them."*

Table 1 Participants

Informant	Sex	Age	Type of disability	Education/ Occupation	Sport	Position	Duration
IA	Man	23	Physical disability	University student	Boccia	Sports person	9 years
IB	Man	19	Physical disability	University student	Table tennis	Sports person	3 years
IC	Man	53	Physical disability	Postgraduate (PhDr., PhD.) President of the Paralympic Union Slovakia	Table tennis	Sports person	45 years
ID	Woman	35	Physical disability	Postgraduate	Alpine skiing	Sports person	18 years
IE	Woman	26	Physical disability	Postgraduate	Boccia	Sports person/ coach	14 years
IF	Man	21	Physical disability	University student	Boccia	Sports person	4 years
IG	Woman	42	Physical disability	Postgraduate lawyer	Table tennis Curling in a wheelchair	Sports person	26 years
IH	Woman	38	Physical disability	Postgraduate	paragliding	Sports person	25 years
II	Man	25	Physical disability	PhD. Candidate	Boccia	Sports person/ coach	12 years

By comparison, we present the testimony of an Informant IC who has experience in sports activities before the injury and also returned to the sport after the accident *"There is no clear answer with regard to my two worlds before and after the injury. But after the accident, it was primarily an activity to improve the health of rehabilitation sport but today it is a professional sport with everything that belongs to it, including emotions."*

Sporting activity helps a person to maintain physical as well as mental fitness and can become a new lifestyle in a person's life. Thanks to his sporting activities, informant IJ found a new direction *"Sport is a whole new chapter in my life, which has taken its own direction, filled most of my life and shown completely new directions and challenges that I can address."*

Similarly, the situation is perceived by informant IB, who told us *"I would no longer want to live my life as before."*

Category FEELINGS

We saturated the category of feelings with the following codes: *encouragement, strong emotions, responsibility, perseverance, meaning of life, emotions, recognition, love and meaning*. Based on the analysis, we can conclude that our informants reflect their feelings, which are associated with sport mainly positively. Let us say that these are indeed strong feelings experienced by athletes with disabilities in sporting activities. As many cite through sporting activity, they have found their meaning in life. We base this claim on, for example, the testimony of informant IB who said *"Sport has given me a new meaning of life, and I am not saying that. I've found it possible to live differently and I'm grateful for that."*

Informant ID feels like it *"for me sport is already such my purpose of life... Basically, since I got into top-level sport or that sport at the level of representation, it's really that lifestyle and my life."*

According to informant IE, sport is the most important thing in her life *"Sport in my life is basically a complete priority"*.

Athletes with disabilities are accompanied by various emotions during sports activities. Among the strong we can include joy, gratitude, and humility. Informant IA describes his feelings as

follows *"Tremendous joy, gratitude, tremendous really great humility, but also responsibility."*

Informant IB himself was surprised by the emotions in it of sport *"Certainly joy, gratitude and happiness. I didn't expect sports activity to evoke such feelings in me one day."*

Their claims are shared by informant ID, who, when asked what brought sport to her life, replied *"Great beautiful experiences, such joy, which brings to my life the sport is very important to me the good feeling that I have thanks to sport and especially thanks to skiing. I'm sure the joy. That great feeling that actually fills mine and enriches basically my daily life."*

We consider gratitude to be the strongest emotion for the fact that a person with a health disadvantage can participate in sports activities. This fact is also declared by informant IF *"Also gratitude that I can do something, to devote myself to some sport."*

Among the other emotions that people with disabilities associate with sporting activity, we can include recognition, which plays a major role in the life of every single person. A person with a health disadvantage often feels that society is undervalued by society, and it is in this that sports activity can be very helpful. This fact was confirmed to us by informant ID. *"It was like I had more of the recognition that before, whatever I wanted to do, so it just wasn't there. And basically, through that sport, I knew myself in some way as if to present and implement. And basically, that's where I felt, through him, like acknowledging me and what I'm doing and how I'm doing it."*

This fact is also stated by informant A *"I am terribly encouraged to place myself on the winners' stage at the first professional competitions."*

Category BENEFITS/GAINS FROM SPORTS

We saturated the category of benefits/gains from sports with the following codes *endurance, contacts, contribution of sport, friendship, choice of sport, self-esteem, overcoming, communication with people, pushing boundaries, independence, living to the fullest, work, development of qualities, representation and finding ourselves*.

As informants themselves reflect, sport acts on the overall development of personality and helps them improve all areas of their lives. *"So,*

for me, the sport really has an irreplaceable place in life and I am very grateful for the many experiences I have had thanks to him, for the amount of people I have met, the amount of experience that I have gone through and developed through sport and developed myself and my personality, as well as various negative ones. I'm certainly grateful to the sport for who I am now and for what I've been able to experience through sport. To overcome yourself, your limits, whether in that sporting field, from that physical point of view or from a fitness sports point of view, but also in terms of personal growth."

Informant ID further states in her statement "on the one hand, the person feels good on the physical side. He's going to improve his fitness, his strength, his construction, his body, in general, and some of those mental abilities. One feels maybe more cut. In fact, thanks to sport, he tries to overcome himself and improves even that endurance, a strength general not only as a physical strength, but also trying to learn, through that sport, not to give up, to work on himself, to be consistent. Overcoming obstacles in everyday life, because one must overcome, especially when he starts the sport or wants to push those limits. So, I definitely think it develops the full potential of man."

Often a recurring gain in the testimony of informants is the strengthening of perseverance. Informant IA put it this way as "certainly the perseverance to go for the goal, the ability to be able to control your emotions in a significant way" - but also a wealth of new experiences, the possibility of travel and the joy of life. Also, informant ID states that it was thanks to her sporting activity that she managed to increase her self-esteem "certainly so much more self-esteem." also improved.

Informant IB describes this fact "It is thanks to sport that I have friends today who understand me, and I no longer spend all days alone."

Similarly, informant IA said "contacts with people who have helped me in other areas of my life."

Informant II feels similarly "a lot has changed since I've been sporting. I've met an awful lot of people; I've seen a lot of different places. I've learned to push my limits. Basically, my whole life revolves around sport and various preparations for other sporting events. Also, of

course, in the social sphere, but it also gave me a lot personally."

Communication for people can often be frustrating because they have negative experiences of the past. Sport represents a great opportunity for them to overcome these feelings of fear ID "I have definitely improved in communication. I was tight, I was less confident, I feared people, I had such a social phobia. It certainly helped me, in fact, in this as if to overcome myself and improve in communication, and it certainly improved my self-esteem. Also, such general perseverance and will."

However, the increased interest in communication may not always be just a positive, as informant IF states, "I see it as both a positive and a negative, it is a take of 50 to 50, that more people have started talking to me and communicating with me, that people have started to talk to me, especially in the social sphere."

The greatest benefit of sports activity in people with disabilities can be considered precisely that a person becomes more independent. This plays a major role in the lives of every single person, and for people with disabilities, this fact is crucial. As informant IF put it: "Sport pushes my boundaries, I can do things I've never been able to do before on my own. Personally, it moves me terribly."

Similarly, informant IJ said "Certainly discipline, conscientiousness, leadership, physical abilities are at a much higher level than I exercise regularly. My hands are looser and freer. Overall, I'm much more independent, which manifests itself in everyday life."

A person with a health disadvantage will encounter several obstacles during his/her life that have to be overcome. As informant I describes it, "I have had many obstacles in my life and this, too, was one of those people who was able to deal with her somehow. And with all this, sport helped me. Sport is no longer just a means of filling in my free time, but it is my job. It makes me happy, and it feeds me."

Discussion

Based on the testimony of our informants, we can conclude that people with disabilities notice significant changes in their lives from the moment they started to engage in sports activities. Through sport, people with disabilities develop

internal discipline, competitiveness, develop physical strength, endurance, but also contribute to psychological well-being. Sport offers people with disabilities space to make friendships, develop social skills and communicate. This finding was confirmed in their research by the authors Kizan et al. (2015), who in their research investigated the positive effects of sport activity in children with disabilities. As part of their research, they have shown that sport not only contributes to the process of solving the problems of social adaptation and loneliness of children with disabilities, but contributes to the development of a positive sense of self, social competence, motor skills, the elimination of anxiety, etc. These were schools on the territory of Slovakia, namely the cities of Bratislava, Lucenec, Levoca, Nova Bana, Bardejov, Kremnica, Dobsina, Nitra, Kosice, Presov, Trnava and Zilina. We contacted individual primary schools asking whether pupils with disabilities can actively participate in physical education classes. School representatives answered this question in the affirmative. However, on a practical level, it seems that the pupil has the option of choosing a physical education lesson, visiting a physiotherapist or other activity that depends on the school in question. Based on the findings we have from our informants, we consider it important to strengthen sports activity in primary schools, which are intended for people with disabilities.

Authors Kudrjavcev et al. (2019) devoted their study to addressing the issue of inclusive education in physical education classes at higher education institutions. The literary analysis they have processed has shown that students who have significant health restrictions often face a lack of quality physical education and suffer from social isolation. This fact is confirmed by our research, as our informants have repeatedly stated that they felt lonely before they started playing sports. Kudrjavcev et al. (2019) consider it justified to conduct physical education classes for students with disabilities in conjunction with intact students. The results of this analysis are identical to our assertions, namely that sporting activity leads to an increased interest of people with disabilities to participate in social action together with an intact part of the population, which helps them to develop all areas of their lives.

The presented results of our research signal that sport occupies an important place in the integration of people with disabilities into society. We also confirmed the positive impact of sport on the overall development potential of an individual with a health disadvantage. Tacon (2017) made similar findings when it noted that the inclusion of people with disabilities through sporting activities can be beneficial for participants, practitioners, and policy makers, as well as for the sports clubs and communities they serve.

Despite the positive results of the research, we are of the opinion that the sport of disabled people is not created by sufficient opportunities in our society and is still not at the required level. The effects of sporting activity could be even more pronounced if it were given an adequate place in society. Similar conclusions were drawn from the authors Kitchin & Howe (2014), according to which real integration within the sporting process is still not realized.

Conclusions

It is clear from our findings that fundamental changes in the lives of people with disabilities occurred after they started actively engaged in sporting activities. If a person finds him or herself in social exclusion, she or he is isolated from society and suffers from a lack of social experience and contacts. Sporting activity creates space for people to meet, exchange experiences, create social contacts, but also through it people with disabilities learn to cope with obstacles they encounter during their lives. Thanks to new trends in the inclusion of people with disabilities, it is indeed very desirable to educate experts in the field of application of physical activities and the impact of sports activities on the inclusion of persons with health disadvantages in the population. We also consider it important to prepare educators in this area for the possibility of integrating pupils with disabilities into the physical education teaching process.

In Slovak society, in the framework of the graduate training of future educators, we will not encounter a subject/course that would convey to them the specifics of integrated physical education. As a result, pupils with disabilities are only marginally involved in activities in physical education classes, which is not only contrary to

the principles of inclusive education, but also negatively affects relations between intact classmates and pupils with disabilities.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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