Barriers and Facilitators of Developing Physical Literacy of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities through Special Olympics

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Sport for Development - Other (Disability Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)

Abstract 2020-276

Approximately 6.5 million individuals in the United States have an intellectual disability (ID), which can adversely impact quality of life and life expectancy (Healthy Children, 2015). Sedentary behaviors, obesity, and secondary health conditions are more prevalent among individuals with ID (Rimmer, Yamaki, Lowry, Wang, & Vogel, 2010). Factors associated with decreased physical activity include both personal characteristics (e.g., social and physical challenges) as well as environmental barriers (e.g., insufficient access to physical activity resources; Tint, Thompson, & Weiss, 2017). Sport programs can reduce physical inactivity and, in turn, mitigate secondary health complications (Bryl, Matuszak, & Hoffman, 2013). Special Olympics (SO) is the largest organization that utilizes sport to improve the health of people with ID (Special Olympics, n.d.). Participation in SO has been associated with positive health outcomes (Maude, 2010); however, many SO interventions are not guided by a definitive theoretical framework.

Physical literacy is an emerging theoretical framework considered an important antecedent of physical activity (Edwards, Bryan, Keegan, Morgan, & Jones, 2017). It encompasses the “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life” (International Physical Literacy Association, 2017). The physical literacy framework can potentially radically reform sport interventions, improving wellness outcomes by promoting physical activity for life. However, physical literacy interventions for different ages, abilities, and environments have not been adequately studied (Edwards et al., 2018). The objective of this study was to explore the perspectives of SO stakeholders (i.e., administrators, coaches, and athletes) to identify barriers and facilitators to improving physical literacy of athletes with ID through SO Ohio using an inclusive research design.

The researchers approached the study from a social constructivist epistemology, using qualitative methods to explore the perspectives of SO multi-stakeholders. Strategies were employed to enhance trustworthiness of the data. With the support of SO Ohio (community partner), 12 SO administrators, 12 SO coaches, and 21 SO athletes were purposefully recruited to participate in the study. The researchers utilized a semi-structured focus group protocol to facilitate four administrator focus groups, four coach focus groups, and five athlete focus groups. Each focus group lasted 60-90 minutes and was comprised of three to four participants, organized by stakeholder group. A follow-up interview with one individual from each focus group, lasting 30-60 minutes, was completed to gain deeper understanding and clarity of the emerging themes.

The audio recorded data were transcribed verbatim, imported to NVivo software, and analyzed. The researchers identified preliminary themes through inductive analysis via open and axial coding and constant comparison methods. Results thus far indicate that barriers and facilitators of physical literacy development were not mutually exclusive, with preliminary themes including: social agents’ influence on athletes’ physical activity behaviors, technical constraints of SO participation (e.g., transportation), inclusive programming accommodating disabilities, coaching education and experience with special population, and program intervention curricula. Results from this study will provide foundational data to inform development and management of physical literacy interventions that reduce health disparities and improve wellness among people with ID through sport.