



PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPANTS IN SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED SPORTS TEAMS

doi: 10.2478/v10038-012-0032-3

MACIEJ WILSKI^{1*}, ANNA NADOLSKA¹, SANDRA DOWLING², ROY MCCONKEY²,
DAVID HASSAN²

¹ University School of Physical Education, Poznań, Poland

² University of Ulster, Jordanstown, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Purpose. This study aims to identify the impact of the Special Olympics' Unified Sports program on the personal development of its participants. **Methods.** A qualitative method was used, which included gathering data by interviewing individual athletes and unified teams, by collecting individual personal histories and by use of connection charts from five European countries that participate in the Unified Sports program. A total of 221 data samples were recorded. **Results.** Athletes reported improvements in their abilities on the field as well as increased fitness and technical ability. They emphasized the importance of team-work and trust between athletes. Improvements in confidence, self-esteem and communication skills were also reported by athletes. Partners also reported a positive change in attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities. Friendships were a central and vital aspect of taking part in the teams. Friendships developed between athletes and partners. Athletes reported increased access to community "places" such as sports facilities and social venues. **Conclusions.** Unified Sports is an exciting initiative that holds much promise in transforming the life experiences of young athletes with intellectual disabilities. The impact of the Unified Sports program on the personal development of participants applies to all areas of human functioning – physical, mental and social. Our evaluation suggests that its concepts and modes of operations transcend national boundaries and cultures at least within a European context.

Key words: unified sports, intellectual disability, personal development, empowerment

Introduction

Among the key objectives often cited in the case of disabled individuals during their rehabilitation process is the need to create conditions for their personal development. This should be reflected in all forms of human functioning, such as physical, mental and social development. As this is not an easy task, especially in cases of individuals with serious disabilities, there is a search for other forms of interaction that can positively affect disabled individuals in the most comprehensive way possible. One very desirable feature is versatility, as it can provide an individual with a balanced form of personal development.

One of these, as we can call them, integrative rehabilitation approaches is through sport and physical activity. It can be surmised that the main objectives of practicing sport are relegated to the development of motor skills and sensorimotor functions, improved movement patterns as well as learning healthy lifestyle habits [1]. Yet these are just a few of the advantages that physical activity can provide. According to Sherrill [2], one of the most important goals is rather to gain a sense of independence in order to allow for personal growth. However, this can only be achieved if an individual

activates their development potential in all areas of human functioning. As a result, this goes hand in hand with intellectual development, developing positive character traits, perseverance, ambition, mental strength, the understanding of appropriate social behaviors as well as taking advantage of opportunities and overall social integration.

The benefits of physical activity for disabled individuals are well known. Patterson and Pegg [3] indicated that recreational activities and sports help the disabled improve their quality of life, allow their lives to be more tolerable, reduce hypertension, allow them to build and maintain relationships with family and friends as well as increase self-esteem and improve their physical fitness and health [4, 5]. Sport and physical activity can also be a great form of stimulating personal development and empowerment. Numerous studies conducted on persons with a disability suggested that participation in organized sports had a positive effect on mood and self-efficacy and contributed to the growth of individual empowerment [6, 7]. Sport also provides a number of opportunities for learning new skills, taking risks, reducing the risk of disease and helps build and maintain social relationships and networks [5, 8]. In examples where young people with intellectual disabilities took part in sports, the results pointed to overwhelming positive results. Taking the above into consideration, it is evident that there is a need for more

* Corresponding author.

organized sports activities for the disabled, which in a comprehensive and well-planned structure can provide ample opportunities for personal development.

In order to meet this need, the Special Olympics introduced the Unified Sports program, whose aim was to integrate individuals with intellectual disabilities (athletes) with those without intellectual disabilities (partners) through common practice sessions and team games. The Unified Sports program in Europe/Eurasia primarily focuses on team sports or competitions (such as football and basketball in Poland). The idea of the program is to create conditions that allow for the effective integration of athletes and partners, with all team members having equal status, the same common goals and experiences, and for the group to work together as a team, with each individual contributing equal effort in order to achieve success [9]. By fulfilling these conditions and maintaining a well-organized program it can be possible to establish friendships and partnerships between the team members and promote the acceptance of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Taking into consideration the benefits provided by the Unified Sports programs, it is not surprising that the organization has rapidly grown. In 2009, the program was operating in 28 countries in Europe/Eurasia with over 16,000 young athletes.

So far, few studies have assessed the Unified Sports program and how it functions. A few notable mentions include the studies conducted by Castagno [10] and Norins et al. [11], which were also carried out in Poland. Therefore, there is need for additional research on assessing how Unified Sports fulfills its objectives and whether it contributes to the personal development of its participants.

As such, the main objective of our study was to assess the impact of the Unified Sports program on personal development, as comprehensive personal development is only possible when it touches on all aspects of human functioning. The rationale for our study was underlined by the assumption that organized sport can provide an important source of support in disabled individuals' development. However, we would like to emphasize that although the study was international in nature, it was not the goal of this study to assess the differences of the Unified Sports program between countries. On the contrary, we focused more on the search for similarities. It is believed that it is far more important to find common, universal factors that can support to the personal development of people with intellectual disabilities, regardless of cultural background, in order for the program to succeed when entering new European/Eurasian countries.

Material and methods

As the study was designed to identify the needs and capabilities of disabled individuals, it was decided to

employ the ever-more popular research method of qualitative methodology, where in the last 10 years its use has tripled [12]. Qualitative research allows for a more insightful look in identifying what problems disabled individuals have, mainly by allowing participants to freely express themselves unencumbered by research restrictions. In addition, it provides a broader context of the difficulties that arise in the lives of those who are disabled [7, 13].

The study began in April 2009 and lasted for fifteen months. Inclusion criteria when selecting which countries to study were as follows: for the Unified Sports program and its teams to have existed for at least one year, that the teams meet and train regularly as well as participate in competitions, that there should be a sufficient number of teams to allow a fair assessment in deciding on a representative Special Olympics team, that the program is professional in nature, and that there should not be other similar programs of this nature or having objectives similar to those of the Unified Sports program.

A total of eight countries were found to meet this criteria, of which five were selected (Serbia, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine and Germany) due to their geographical distribution (in eastern, western and central Europe). In each of the participating countries, it was found that the Unified Sports practice sessions and sports tournaments usually took place in two or more different places, therefore, data were collected from both sources. The sports that best satisfied the study's requirements were football in Serbia, Poland and Hungary and basketball in Ukraine and Germany. Data were collected using interviews with the players and partners (aged 12–25 years), coaches, parents and local community representatives. Interviews with coaches, parents and local community representatives were used to gather information on the functioning of the participants on the unified teams. Each of the interviewers had a set of questions aimed at gathering information on each of the disabled athletes' in terms of their ability to function on a team and outside of it as well as his/her views on the Unified Sports program.

The interview questions were predominantly open in nature, e.g., "What did you learn from being a member of a unified team", "Did you have any negative experiences when participating in the Unified Sports program?", "Would you like more people to participate in Unified Sports – if so, why?". Although the interviewer had a list of prepared questions asking for specific information, the main purpose of the experiment was to elicit a spontaneous response on any problems the athlete experienced in the Unified Sports program. The interviews were also conducted with the entire teams, in which the interviewer again attempted to elicit natural responses from both partners and athletes. The main advantage of this method was in the ability to compare what the interviewees said as an in-

dividual and what was said in the presence of the entire team. Additional information was also collected on each athletes' history as shared by other athletes and partners.

The participants were also asked to describe in a spontaneous and unlimited manner about the course of their life. This method was primarily designed to note whether their participation in Unified Sports was an important part of their life. This study also made use of connection charts, whose objective was to identify the extent of the social contacts and support networks the athletes and partners encountered. The respondents were asked to graphically represent the places they most often stayed in and the people they met there. Demographic data were collected by use of a questionnaire. All data for each participant was collected one at a time with each method. After concluding the study, the data were analyzed by using a triangulation method.

All interviews with the athletes, partners, coaches and parents were recorded digitally and in their native language and then uploaded to a computer and translated into English. Each of the translated "sections" were then forwarded to the study's local project manager where they were transcribed and further analyzed. All data were transcribed verbatim by the project manager as well as secured with a password in order to ensure the anonymity of the respondents.

The next stage consisted of analyzing the obtained data from the interviews by re-reading the responses in order to better understand the content. The qualita-

tive data from the interviews was read by more than one person from a group of expert evaluators in order to facilitate the selection of data that specifically dealt with the topics analyzed in this study and to avoid subjective evaluation. At this stage of analysis the data were also divided into the method subcategories (athletes, partners, coaches, parents, etc.), with the sections then subjected to another round of coding to ensure that no data were omitted during the first stage of data analysis. A breakdown of the number of individuals and what methods were used in presented in Table 1.

On average, the teams analyzed in the study were composed of 60% disabled athletes and 40% non-disabled partners. This ratio varied from country to country, for example the smallest amount of partners was in Ukraine (36%), while the largest in Serbia (48%). In Poland, the number of partners was similar to the group average (38%).

The vast majority of the team participants were men, both among the athletes (81%) and partners (84%). The small number of women may be due to the types of sports analyzed in this study. On the whole, there were more women in those countries whose teams played basketball than in countries where the main team sport was football. By far the largest number of participants were in the 16–18 age group (42%). It is worth mentioning that the partners were significantly younger than the athletes. A distribution of the participants' age is shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Numbers of participants examined in each country

Method	Serbia	Poland	Ukraine	Germany	Hungary	Total
Athlete interviews	6	6	6	3	4	25
Partner interviews	7	7	7	3	4	28
Family member interviews	5	5	8	2	4	24
Coach interviews	7	5	4	4	5	25
Team interviews	6	5	3	2	4	20
Local community representative interview	4	6	4	3	5	22
Life history – athlete	4	4	4	2	4	18
Life history – partner	4	4	3	2	4	17
Connection chart – athlete	7	5	4	2	5	23
Connection chart – partner	3	6	4	2	4	19
Sample total	53	53	47	25	43	221

Table 2. Characteristics of the participants based on age

	Age groups				Total
	12–15	16–18	19–21	22–25	
Athletes	32 20.5%	65 41.7%	32 20.5%	27 17.3%	156
Partners	47 43.5%	45 41.7%	8 7.4%	8 7.4%	108
Total	79	110	40	35	264
%	29.9%	41.7%	15.1%	13.3%	

Another significant factor, other than age, that differentiated the groups of athletes and partners was how long they were involved in the Unified Sports program. Only 14% of the partners were members for more than two years; the number of athletes involved in the program was decidedly higher (38%). This undoubtedly points to a higher turnover rate of partners in the program.

The vast majority of the intellectually disabled athletes (92%) attended special schools, most lived with their families (64%) or in special centers (24%). The socio-economic status of the athletes' families was significantly lower than that of the partners' families. The athletes were also found to receive less support from their family. In addition, the social network variable that was considered in this study showed that the disabled athletes have far fewer friends and acquaintances than the partners, and that they did not regularly participate in social life or leisure activities.

Results

Based on the opinions of the respondents, it was found that the personal growth of the disabled athletes was stimulated in all three areas (physical, mental and social) of human functioning.

Physical aspect

Most of the athletes participating in the Unified Sports program are individuals who are active in sports and that they have a certain level of motor skills, acquired mainly through their participation in basic sports disciplines that are a part of the Special Olympics. Many of the partners also declared their previous involvement in sports clubs for disabled individuals. Despite the level of difficulty encountered in the games, both athletes and partners noticed an improvement in their fitness levels but also technical abilities. The disabled athletes also commented that the opportunity to train with non-disabled partners allowed them to increase their over physical fitness levels. This was evidenced in a number of comments: "Until recently, we had to take it easy during practice as the athletes quickly became tired. Now they want to train even when we, the partners, feel tired." (partner, Ukraine) This opinion was also held by the coaches: "The athletes grew in terms of their mobility, they are in better shape, they are becoming faster and have better technical skills." (coach, Ukraine)

Partners often stressed the fact that they were surprised at being able to improve their skills when competing against disabled athletes. As an example, one partner stated: "My skills have improved, I feel more tough, I run faster, I shoot better, so yes, I am better than I was before, we train hard and we have a good team." (partner, Hungary)

Analysis of the data also found that the disabled

athletes' technical skills improved thanks to the joint practice sessions: "I think I play a lot better than before, my technique is much better, for example in ball control, passing, shooting and my contact with others players on the field." (athlete, Serbia) Contact with other players, as was mentioned above, is a very important element of teamwork. This aspect of team play was also frequently highlighted by the participants as a factor that improved the quality of the team. For example, one of the coaches said: "This team is completely different from the teams I had coached earlier [able-bodied teams], as it is dependent on working together. Here, there is no room for individuality, because if there was, the team would cease to function. Everyone on this team understands that they are as one, and not individuals making up a team." (coach, Serbia)

The emphasis by coaches on the importance of teamwork over individual wants and needs was well understood by both partners and athletes: "The most important is to pay attention on how we can work together, even though we do not go to the same school and that we did not know each other before. On the field we make a great team." (athlete, Serbia)

Such an attitude fosters trust. This is especially important for athletes. They often emphasized the importance of feeling that they are a trusted member of the team, as someone who can be relied on. This is often a completely new role for individuals with intellectual disabilities, as in most contexts they have to rely on the help of others. The increased physical fitness level of disabled athletes creates a situation where they cease to perceive themselves only through their disability. Instead, their self-evaluation shifts in the direction of their motor skills and capabilities as a team member. One of the coaches stressed that: "You have to look at the different skills each individual provides if you want to create a team... it is very easy to see who you can rely on, who can run the longest, who hits the ball the hardest. You do not look at who attends a special school." (coach, Serbia)

Sport provides the same opportunities for all; it provides a completely different form of perception for people with intellectual disabilities. One's level of intellectual ability ceases to be of importance, where attention is shifted to the skills and abilities needed in game play.

Mental aspect

The development of the mental aspect was found to be most commonly referenced by the respondents in three main areas – an increase in self-confidence, self-esteem and the ability to communicate with others. This is a very interesting phenomenon, especially in regards to the growth of self-esteem. In situations that frequently feature rivalry between disabled and non-disabled individuals, there is always the risk that those with disabilities would feature a drop in self-esteem due

to them comparing their abilities and skills to the non-disabled. However, as was made clear in the interviews, this problem was found to not exist in the Unified Sports program. On the contrary, the joint practice sessions and rivalry during competitions were found to help raise the self-esteem of the athletes with intellectual disabilities. One of the athletes described his experience: “Yes, I believe in myself, I worked hard to be part of this team, and now I believe that if I work hard I can achieve many things.” (athlete, Hungary)

The increase in self-esteem was found to correlate with a rise in athletes’ self-confidence and their ability to establish social contacts outside of sports activities. For example, two athletes stressed this point by saying: “It is easier for me to meet with others as I have got used to making contact with other people,” (athlete, Poland) or, “There is a girl I like, I talked about her with a few of my friends and they told me that I should talk to her. When I saw her in the city, I started to talk to her and asked her what her name was. I told her that I play on our team and she said that she heard about us and she saw us in town. I would have never talked to her otherwise.” (athlete, Serbia)

The development in communication skills was not only relegated to the athletes, partners also noted certain changes in this area: “In the beginning, when I joined the team, it was difficult for me because I did not know anyone, I could not talk to them like I did with my friends, but after a few days, the problem disappeared and now it is very easy for me to communicate with them.” (partner, Ukraine) Although some cases of major changes in the personal development of the partners were found, it should be noted that these types of changes were rare: “I have become more confident and I think I can communicate with others more easily, especially with people with intellectual disabilities, because I did know knowing anything about them before but now they are my friends.” (partner, Hungary)

The partners also noted that their perception of people with intellectual disabilities had changed: “Stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities work only to keep us away from them, we are afraid they may be dangerous, but when you are a part of a unified team you can break down those stereotypes and see that they are just normal people.” (partner, Poland) A change in the attitude towards individuals with intellectual disabilities was attributed by partners to their partnership in the unified teams: “This is entirely thanks to Unified Sports [*in response to changes in attitude towards people with disabilities*], before I kept away from these people, but now, for me, they are the same.” (partner, Poland) In addition, the changes had far-reaching consequences on some partners’ everyday lives, which points to the strength of these newly formed attitudes: “I had to stop seeing some friends because they did not understand what I was doing here [*on a unified team*]. I realized that we have nothing in common if they

could not accept my commitment to the team.” (partner, Ukraine)

Social aspect

The development of individual skills and personal abilities was found to also occur in the social aspect of the disabled athletes by improving their relationships with other individuals. Friendship was a major and very important aspect mentioned in regards to participating in the program. In some cases, it created a strong bond between the athletes and partners, as well as between the athletes and coaches. There was mention that these newly formed relationships prospered outside the project: “Team integration is all about friendship, it is the most important. We are friends both on and off the field. We also have a strong relationship with our coaches, who I would also call my friends.” (partner, Poland)

In a few cases, the athletes reported that they began to frequent public places that they rarely or never visited before, such as sports facilities: “We now go to the old market square and talk, or to the arcade or coffees shop. The guys from my team know a lot of different places and if we have time, we go there after practice.” (athlete, Serbia)

However, it should be noted that in most cases the relationships that were created during the joint practice sessions did not translate into the athletes and partners meeting together in non-sport contexts. Most of the times when the athletes and partners met outside practice they either played sports or went on trips to see their favorite sports team as fans. One of the cited reasons for this by most of the respondents was in the distance that the individuals team members lived from each other: “After practice I only meet with those who live close to me. Many of us live in different parts of the city and it is not easy to meet after practice, you have to catch a bus or a train and that becomes more difficult.” (athlete, Serbia)

A large disparity was noted between the amount of spare time the athletes and partners had during the connection chart aspect of this study; the latter group was found to have more time for extra-curricular activities, they were generally more active and they also possessed a greater group of friends and close friends: “The partners are very busy, they have a lot of things to do, school, work... we, as the athletes, have more available time and often have to wait for our partners.” (athlete, Ukraine)

A summary of the results are provided in Table 3 to better illustrate what were the more important areas of functioning mentioned by the athletes and partners through their participation in the Unified Sports program. The program was found to influence both groups in a similar manner and promoted development in the same areas of functioning. The Unified Sports

Table 3. Main functional aspects that developed through participation in the Unified Sports program

Physical aspect	physical fitness technical ability teamwork
Mental aspect	increase in self-esteem (athletes) confidence social skills changes in attitude (partners)
Social aspect	mutual trust new social contacts making friends greater participation in public events (athletes)

program allowed both the athletes and partners to have more opportunities to develop their sports skills and social skills and positively affect their mental functioning. The latter aspect was found to somewhat differentiate between the two groups. For the athletes the largest developmental change was in an increase in self-esteem, while for partners it was the change in their attitude towards individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of Unified Sports on the personal development of all of the involved participants by using a qualitative method that would allow the respondents to freely express their thoughts, beliefs and perceptions with no constraints. All of the participants noted major changes in the three areas of human functioning that were analyzed in the study.

First, both athletes and partners declared a positive change in their sports skills. This has also been confirmed by others authors, such as Rikken and Ulrich [14] and Castagno [10], who noted positive changes in the basketball skills of athletes with intellectual disabilities in the Unified Sports program. Castagno also found that these changes affected partners, who declared they also significantly improved their basketball skills. In his study conducted on a unified Polish football team, almost all of the disabled athletes (99%) reported that their skills improved as a result of their involvement in the team, while 82% of the partners also reported an increase in their football skills.

In individuals with intellectual disabilities, physical activity was found to not only improve physical fitness, but, above all, contribute to better life satisfaction, higher self-efficacy and fewer cognitive-emotional problems [15]. This was also found, as part of the second area of human functioning, to be noted by the study participants (both partners and athletes). Particularly noticeable was growth in the development of personal skills

and an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Other researchers found similar results: Castagno [16, in 10] observed a significant improvement in the self-perception of children with and without intellectual disabilities after taking part in a 12-week fitness program. Other studies performed by the same author [10] showed an increase in self-esteem in both athletes and partners who were members of a unified team. However, our study did not observe an increase in partners' self-esteem. Similar results were reported by Norins et al. [11] on a Polish group, where partners did not show the same level of change in their self-perception as athletes. In this study, 51% of the partners noted no change in this regard.

However, an interesting change was observed in the attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities. Our research has shown that the partners gradually noticed the abilities of the athletes on their teams and, as a result, changed their perception about their disabled colleagues. This change was narrowed down to the increase in the abilities of the disabled athletes on the field, which later expanded into other spheres of life. This is particularly important, as change in this area signifies one of the most important goals that underline the idea of unified sports. This idea is based on the assumption that this change is the result of having contact with individuals with intellectual disabilities [17].

Whether this change is positive or negative depends on the type and the context of the interaction that people are exposed to; contact that is well thought-out and requires peoples' direct involvement has been found to have a positive impact on attitudes [18]. This has been confirmed in research carried out during the Special Olympics World Games in China [19], where a significant change in able-bodied individuals' attitudes towards those with intellectual disabilities was observed. The largest changes were found in those individuals who were directly involved in the Olympics, such as volunteers or spectators. As Unified Sports only further engage non-disabled individuals, it can be assumed that the benefits would be even stronger.

Random and unstructured contact with individuals with intellectual disabilities is not enough to promote change, it requires interactions that are organized, structured and constructive [20]. Moreover, it seems that a very significant impact on attitudes is the quality of the experiences and the feeling of happiness from both parties when meeting each other [21, 22]. A change in attitude is a long-term process, one that progresses gradually in shaping a coherent and sustainable context. This change needs to take place in favorable circumstances if contact with individuals with intellectual disabilities is to foster positive attitudes. As the results of the study show, the Unified Sports program offers such opportunities as it increases the chances that peoples' attitudes can be changed and in opposite to situations where such contact is sporadic and unstructured.

These conclusions have been confirmed by both this study and earlier studies. For example, Norins et al. [11] also observed changes in partners' better understanding of disabled individuals. The vast majority of partners (92%) claimed that their involvement in Unified Sports helped them better understand those with intellectual disabilities. In response to being asked what they learned about individuals with intellectual disabilities, the players said they now perceive them as good athletes, friendly, funny and similar to themselves. In others studies, Arbour et al. [23] found that presenting the disabled as active and exercising individuals changed people's former stereotypes. Individuals who exercise, when compared to those who do not, are evaluated more positively in terms of their physicality and personality. The authors suggest that encouraging the disabled to take part in physical activity may be an effective method at combating the stigma and prevailing stereotypical image of disabled individuals.

The third area in which the respondents declared significant changes was in the social sphere, where among one of the most important factors was the opportunity to gain new social contacts. This was frequently reported by the athletes but also perceived by their partners. Overall, the social and communication skills that athletes develop helped them participate in their local communities. According to Devine and Wilhite [24], children with disabilities experience the greatest amount of social inclusion in sport and recreational activities, where they are equally treated, they are able to experience mutual friendship, feel accepted and feel that the physical activity they practice is matched to their capabilities.

It is felt that the Unified Sports program undoubtedly provides this conditions. It is worth noting that the social inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities is not something that is done *for them*, but rather something that naturally occurs when they find themselves being active participants in public life. What is also important is that sport and physical activity can help create these situations that can allow the establishment of friendships between able-bodied and disabled individuals. Sports rivalry can foster positive relationships between team members and has been reported as being the perfect backdrop to develop friendly relationships between the participants [25]. This has also been confirmed by Seymour et al. [26], whose study found that integrated physical education classes significantly contributed to the development of friendships between all of the participants. The opportunity to develop friendships is considered one of the most important factors in the process of social inclusion. Friendship, activated by having disabled children participate in sports, was found to play an important role in having these individuals develop a sense of acceptance and belonging as well as a rise in their self-esteem [27, 28].

Given these results and the respondents' opinion, it is clear the Unified Sports program contributes to the creation of optimal conditions for individual development. Such an environment allows a disabled individual to take advantage of their environment in such a way that it can maximize their own personal resources while only minimally experiencing the encumbrances of their disability. In such a way, these individuals can build upon their self-efficacy and trust more in themselves and their environment. Sport and physical activity allows these individuals to further explore and build their own relationships; it provides them with the right means to take control of their personal, social and environmental conditions [29]. Thanks to a greater sense of ability, disabled individuals become more resistant to stigmatization while also being able to independently self-assess themselves and their actions free from outside opinion. Such a form of independence encourages them to undertake new activities while also building the perseverance needed to overcome difficulties stemming from their disability.

The process by which members of a marginalized group are able to change their perception of themselves, develop skills, increase their abilities to act independently, gain greater control over their lives and become more active in improving their standard of living is frequently relegated as empowerment [30, 31]. This process always takes place in a specific social context, which itself may be a factor in supporting or hindering empowerment. When taking into consideration the presented results, it can be unequivocally stated that Unified Sports is entirely conducive in the development of this process.

What is also important is that our study shows that the interaction mechanisms of Unified Sports remain the same regardless of the cultural context. Although minor or even sometimes significant differences can exist in the cultures and practices of different countries, the end result is pointed in the direction of improving the personal development of its participants in the same areas of functioning. This reflects the universal and comprehensive basis of the program, which makes it especially valuable in terms of expanding the program at an international level.

One limitation that was found in this study was the small number of women that composed the sample population. This may be due to the types of sports that are part of the Unified Sports program. Including a larger number of disciplines, especially those that women frequently participate in, is one way at increasing the scope of the program in terms of gender.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the Unified Sports program, based on the opinions of its participants, has a significant impact on personal development. Participation in

the programs allows individuals to develop their communication skills, confidence, common experiences, knowledge of people and places, and physical fitness. It allows the participants to use these facets as tools that can contribute to their active involvement in life as well as the unconscious inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The program's partners declared major developmental changes in their understanding of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their change in attitude towards such individuals. This can be considered particularly important as peer attitudes towards disabled individuals depends on the success of the social inclusion process [32].

Taking into account the results that were found in this study, further development and expansion of the Unified Sports program is warranted under the condition that the expansion process does not lose sight of its main principles. An absolute prerequisite for future success is upholding the program's main tenets.

Acknowledgements

This study was conducted with funding from the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, under Cooperative Agreement U59 DD0003 awarded to Special Olympics International, Washington DC, USA.

Our sincere thanks to the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Senior Manager for Youth Education and Unified Sports Sabine Menke and National Coordinators and Special Olympics partners in the five participating countries: Sven Albrecht, Florian Pochstein, Magdalena Bethge (Germany), Milana Jeremic, Eminovic Fadilj (Serbia), Orsolya Karpati, Anita Viranyi, Eniko Regenyi, Judit Felegyhazi, Sara Pasztor (Hungary), Konstantine Slynivachuk, Irina Kogut, Evgeniy Goncharenko (Ukraine) and Joanna Styczen (Poland).

References

1. Kowalik S., Theory and practice of the impact on disabled people. In: Kowalik S. (ed.), *Physical culture for people with disabilities* [in Polish], GWP, Gdańsk 2009, 41–64.
2. Sherrill C., *Adapted physical activity, recreation and sport. Crossdisciplinary and lifespan*. McGraw-Hill, Boston 1998.
3. Patterson I., Pegg S., Serious leisure and people with intellectual disabilities: benefits and opportunities. *Leisure Studies*, 2009, 28 (4), 387–402, doi: 10.1080/02614360903071688.
4. Dattilo J., *Inclusive leisure services*. 2nd ed. State College PA, Venture 2002.
5. Driver B., Brown P., Peterson G.L., *Benefits of leisure*. State College PA, Venture 1991.
6. Greenwood C.M., Dziewaltowski D.A., French R., Self-efficacy and psychological well-being of wheelchair tennis participants and wheelchair non-tennis participants. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 1990, 7 (1), 12–21.
7. Blinde E.M., Taub D.E., Personal empowerment through sport and physical fitness activity: Perspectives from male college students with physical and sensory disabilities. *J Sport Behav*, 1999, 22 (2), 181–202.
8. Aitchison C., From leisure and disability to disability leisure: Developing data, definitions and discourses. *Disabil Soc*, 2003, 18 (7), 955–969, doi: 10.1080/0968759032000127353.
9. Dłużewska-Martyniec W., Adapted physical activity of people with mental retardation. In: Kowalik S. (ed.), *Physical culture for people with disabilities* [in Polish]. GWP, Gdańsk 2009, 425–465.
10. Castagno K.S., Special Olympics Unified Sports: Changes in male athletes during a basketball season. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 2001, 18 (2), 193–206.
11. Norins J., Harada C., Brecklinghaus S., Inclusion of young people with intellectual disabilities in Europe through Special Olympics Unified Sports. Special Olympics International, Washington 2007.
12. McReynolds C., Koch L., Qualitative research designs. In: Bellini J., Rumrill P. (ed.), *Research in Rehabilitation Counseling: A Guide to Design, Methodology, and Utilization*. Charles C. Thomas, Springfield 1999, 151–173.
13. Niesz T., Koch L., Rumrill P.D., The empowerment of people with disabilities through qualitative research. *Work*, 2008, 31 (1), 113–125.
14. Rikken K., Ulrich D., The effects of sports participation on individuals with mental retardation. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 1993, 10 (1), 42–51.
15. Heller T., Hsieh K., Rimmer J.H., Attitudinal and psychosocial outcomes of a fitness and health education program on adults with Down syndrome. *Am J Ment Retard*, 2004, 109 (2), 175–185.
16. Castagno K.S., A study of effects of an after school physical education program on self-concept of middle school EMR students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Connecticut, Storrs 1991.
17. Tak-fai Lau J., Cheung C., Discriminatory attitudes to people with intellectual disability or mental health difficulty. *Int Soc Work*, 1999, 42 (4), 431–444, doi: 10.1177/002087289904200405.
18. Acton I.I., Zarbatany I., Interaction and performance within cooperative groups: effects on nonhandicapped students' attitudes toward their mildly mentally retarded peers. *Am J Ment Retard*, 1988, 93 (1), 16–23.
19. Norins J., Parker R.C., Siperstein G.N., Impact of the Special Olympics World Games on the Attitudes of Youth in China. Available from: URL: http://www.specialolympics.org/uploadedFiles/LandingPage/WhatWeDo/Research_Studies_Description_Pages/ECNU%20final%20report.pdf [accessed March 2010].
20. Rees L., Spreen O., Harnadek M., Do attitudes towards persons with handicaps really shift over time? Comparison between 1975 and 1988. *Ment Retard*, 1991, 29 (2), 81–86.
21. Eigenbrood T., Retish P., Work experience employers' attitudes regarding the employability of special education students. *Career Dev Except Ind*, 1988, 11 (1), 15–25, doi: 10.1177/088572888801100104.
22. McConkey R., McCormack B., *Breaking Barriers: Educating people about disability*. Souvenir Press, London 1983.
23. Arbour K.P., Latimer A.E., Martin Ginis K.A., Jung M.E., Moving beyond the stigma: The impression formation benefits of exercise for individuals with a physical disability. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 2007, 24 (2), 144–159.
24. Devine M., Wilhite B., The meaning of disability: Implications for inclusive leisure services for youth with and without disabilities. *JPra*, 2000, 18 (3), 35–52.
25. Smith A.L., Peer relationships in physical activity contexts: A road less traveled in youth sport and exercise

- psychology research. *Psychol Sport Exerc*, 2003, 4 (1), 25–39, doi: 10.1016/S1469-0292(02)00015-8.
26. Seymour H., Reid G., Bloom G.A., Friendship in inclusive physical education. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 2009, 26 (3), 201–219.
 27. Place K., Hodge S.R., Social inclusion of students with physical disabilities in general physical education: A behavioral analysis. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 2001, 18 (4), 389–404.
 28. Spencer-Cavaliere N., Watkinson E.J., Inclusion understood from the perspectives of children with disability. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 2010, 27 (4), 275–293.
 29. Giacobbi P.R., Stancil M., Hardin B., Bryant L., Physical activity and quality of life experienced by highly active individuals with physical disabilities. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 2008, 25 (3), 189–207.
 30. Gutiérrez L.M., Working with women of color: An empowerment perspective. *Soc Work*, 1990, 35 (2), 149–153.
 31. McWhirter E.H., Empowerment in counseling. *J Counsel Dev*, 1991, 69 (3), 222–227, doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.1991.tb01491.x.
 32. Block M.E., Obrusnikova I., Inclusion in physical education: A review of the literature from 1995–2005. *Adapt Phys Activ Q*, 2007, 24 (2), 103–124.

Paper received by the Editors: April 6, 2011

Paper accepted for publication: March 1, 2012

Correspondence address

Maciej Wilski
Katedra Kultury Fizycznej Osób Niepełnosprawnych
Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego
ul. Królowej Jadwigi 27/39
61-871 Poznań, Poland
e-mail: mwilski@wp.pl