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1. What is Inclusion?

First and foremost, it is important to clarify the term “inclusion” when we talk about sport and inclusion, as well as the terms that are often linked to it, such as integration, social cohesion, or social coexistence, as opposed to exclusion, segregation, discrimination or vulnerability. There are many definitions and practices associated with the term “inclusion”, which makes it a multidimensional and complex concept with strong ideological connotations. According to the narrowest and the most widely used definition in society, social inclusion occurs when people who are considered excluded adopt the norms and the standards of the community or the organization in which they find themselves. This understanding has been criticized as the dominant groups might be a threat as they can take over social control.

A broader and wider definition of inclusion understands it as a collective and a bidirectional process which involves all citizens. This way, it implies the readjustment of all parts which jointly develop a new model of coexistence. In fact, it is not a matter of changing, correcting or adapting the difference of the person, rather than enriching the entire community with it. This requires a dialogue in which everybody takes part on an equal basis, as well as in overcoming the existing differences between the hegemonic or the majority group - which has the dominant position- and the rest. Then, inclusion is also understood as an integral process considering several aspects such as legal, economic, political, educational, social, cultural and ideological, among others. In addition, if the interaction between stakeholders takes place equally and holistically, there will be a greater chance of success with the inclusion process. The result of this process would be the development of an organization (school, club, company, etc.) and an inclusive society which are in a continuous process of transformation that guarantees the full involvement and participation of all groups in the social, economic, cultural and political level.

2. Identifying the Problem

The White Paper on Sport developed by the European Commission in 2007 (European Commission, 2007) promotes the development of measures to improve social inclusion through sport, by using European Union's programs and resources. In this context, political bodies recognize the potential of sport as a tool to foster social inclusion.

Sport and Physical Activity as Tools for Social Inclusion: Despite the potential of sport and physical activity (PA) to contribute to the process of social inclusion, several theoretical approaches and empirical studies indicate that sport and inclusion do not happen spontaneously (Balibrea & Santos, 2011; Maza, 2009). Although it can improve individuals' living conditions and reduce vulnerability levels, it cannot solve structural problems that generate inequality, nor the basic needs of vulnerable groups (Kelly, 2011). Moreover, social inclusion through sport in the context of social vulnerability is not a mechanical process. Sport and PA aimed at groups at risk of social exclusion is without doubt a powerful tool for social inclusion, but as with any other activity, it has its limits and its effects depend on how it is used (Balibrea & Santos, 2011; Lecumberri, Puig, & Maza, 2009). Therefore, the role of sport coaches is key to promote social inclusion (Van der Veken, Lauwerier, & Willems, 2020). In this context, sport coaches need some guidance and support when working with children from marginalized and underprivileged groups (Devis-Devis, 2006; Future+, 2019; Soler Prat, Flores Aguilar, & Prat Grau, 2012). Several studies show that there is a lack of training of sport coaches and PE teachers to address the needs and interests of different underprivileged groups, such as women (Serra et al., 2016), immigrants, people of low socioeconomic status (Soler, 2004), refugees (Cseplö, Wagnsson, Luguetti, & Spaaij, 2021; Duran, 2018), or inmates (Soler et al., 2020).



3. Low-SES children and Sport

It is well established that PA has a beneficial effect on overall health across the lifespan (Hallal, Victora, Azevedo, & Wells, 2006). In this context, we need to distinguish between general PA and participation in sports. The former describes PA which occurs throughout daily life (e.g. playing, means of transportation, domestic work), while the latter addresses participation in organized sports at school or in clubs. In pediatric literature, PA often includes all forms of activity, which depicts an overall level of PA, yet it does not distinguish between different domains of activity. However, this differentiation becomes relevant when discussing social inclusion of children from under-privileged families and neighborhoods. An extensive review of scientific literature on the topic has shown that there is no significant association between SES and overall PA (Henchoz et al., 2018), which means that the PA level of children is independent of their SES. Of course, this does not imply that interventions to get low-SES children to participate in sports would be wasted efforts. Quite the contrary is the case, as PA and participation in sports is important for the development of any child. Children should be encouraged to participate in organized sports, because research has shown an association between sports participation and health-related quality of life in children, regardless of SES (Moeijes et al., 2019).



Furthermore, findings suggest that sports participation during youth can promote healthy habits later in life (Howie, McVeigh, Smith, & Straker, 2016; Palomäki et al., 2018). Those who participate in sports during childhood and youth tend to smoke and drink less, have a healthier diet, and/or are more physically active during adulthood. From a long-term and preventive perspective, this underscores the importance of the role of organized sports for children.

In addition to the beneficial effects of general PA and sports participation on the physical health in children and adolescents, scientific evidence also shows a benefit of PA on mental health, especially during adolescence (Rodriguez-Ayllon et al., 2019). More specifically, an inverse relationship is often observed between PA level and mental ill-being as well as between sedentary behavior and satisfaction with life and happiness. And again, the type of PA (e.g. sports participation or outdoor play/commuting) has differential associations with mental health. Sports participation, especially during adolescence, in team sports without aesthetic implications - but not overall PA - seems to be associated the strongest with mental well-being (Brunet et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the scientific evidence in younger kids (e.g. preschoolers and elementary-school children) is rather limited. Nonetheless, the importance of participation in organized sports is once again manifested and leads to the assumption that other factors besides the mere physical exercise – such as social interaction with peers, experience of accountability responsibility, resilience, and self-esteem – may play a mediating role. In fact, there is a link between the perceived self of an individual and mental health (e.g. self-esteem) (Lubans et al., 2016) and it has been suggested that increasing low-SES children's self-esteem should be a goal as much as providing them with access to sports in the first place (Veselska, Madarasova Geckova, Reijneveld, & van Dijk, 2011). In addition to these mediating factors, sleep onset, duration, and efficiency may be behavioral factors that have the potential to explain the effect of PA on mental health. However, no sound and definitive conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the current scientific evidence.



In summary, children can benefit immensely from sports participation - during their up-bringing as well as later throughout adulthood. As evidence suggests, SES does not influence the efficacy, yet low-SES children might have more difficulty finding access to organized sports in the first place. This can be due to certain barriers of either personal nature (e.g. bad experiences, peer disapproval, self-consciousness, competition) or practical nature (e.g. cost, time, and location). Furthermore, children who live in low-SES conditions often find themselves socially isolated and lack adequate health services and eating behaviors (Buonomo et al., 2019). Therefore, it seems plausible to provide low-SES children with access to organized sport offerings as a first step. Secondly, once initial engagement is established, long-term participation and strong engagement should be encouraged (Eime, Charity, Harvey, & Payne, 2015). Thirdly, in the attempt to make sure sports participation does not merely lead to an alleviation of symptoms, children should be provided with the opportunity to gain knowledge on health-related topics outside of exercise (e.g. nutrition), in order to counteract malnutrition, for instance.

4. Coaches, Sports Clubs and Social Inclusion

Social justice education recognizes the discrepancy in opportunities among disadvantaged groups in society. According to Knijnik and Luguetti (2020), education on social justice and critical pedagogy in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) enables future teachers and coaches to create a sense of social agency and community purpose in their teaching or coaching. Fostering this sense of social agency and community helps position them with more certainty when facing the political and professional hurdles embedded in their careers.

Training PE and sport professionals is not merely about acquiring new knowledge or resources, but it is above all about encouraging a change in attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, etc. that influence them on a daily basis. The role of the coach is in fact much more complex than it may seem at first sight. In a consensus statement by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) published in 2015, the authors described the coach's role as an unique mixture of competences and knowledge, combining pedagogical competence with the ability to teach sport-specific skills, knowledge in pediatric physiology as well as the ability to create and maintain relationships with others (Bergeron et al., 2015). As Freire (2005) proposed from his critical pedagogy theory, it is about providing future educators and coaches with political tools so that they can face the challenges of today's society and build a better world for the next generations (Knijnik & Luguetti, 2020). Furthermore, in order to deliver truly useful and transformative training for coaches and educators, it is not just a matter of collecting and describing activities. Instead, it is about challenging PE teachers and coaches to „discover, address and change their own personal biases, contradictions and misinformation, as well as to identify and modify educational practices that do not challenge racism and other institutional discrimination or prejudices“ (Sabariego, 2002, p. 188). Within this paradigm, a teacher or a coach is considered to be a reflective practitioner who recognizes the mechanisms of social control, the power of structures and social institutions, and is further able to develop skills for social action. Therefore, training PE teachers and sport professionals for social action should be both theoretical and practical.



This way, they will acquire the resources they need to adapt their teaching and pedagogical practices to the diversity of students by focusing on cooperative learning.

In the specific field of PETE and coach education, a surge of research has emerged that has examined the teaching practices of PETE programs concerned with social justice and critical pedagogy (Carter, López-Pastor, & Fuentes, 2017; Marques, Sousa, & Cruz, 2013; Ovens et al., 2018; Philpot, 2016; Schenker et al., 2019; Soler, 2004; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018), which serve as key references for the Future++ project.

In practice, coaches in youth sports mostly work within a sports club where they are responsible for the development of young athletes through training and competition. They are the primary persons of contact for athletes within a sports club aiming to cultivate their athletes' competence, confidence, connection and character. Prior research has examined the coach-athlete relationship and has shown that perceived coach support and the athletes' self-esteem are significantly associated with their subjective well-being (Peng, Zhang, Zhao, Fang, & Shao, 2020). We also know that self-esteem is a mediator of positive outcomes through sport participation. Therefore, it is crucial to keep up the motivation and self-confidence of the athletes in order to yield the desired results. Recent research has also explored the connection between physical literacy in children and adolescents and coaching efficacy, showing significant associations between the parameters (Li et al., 2019). The concept of physical literacy combines several domains related to exercise and PA and is not restricted to improving physical skills, but also incorporates cognitive and affective elements, which in turn develop physical competence. Of course, physical literacy applies to all children regardless of SES, with a need to address person-centered barriers to participation, which any child might have. However, it is important to acknowledge that access to sports can be more difficult depending on SES and, as explained in Section 2, the most impactful barriers faced by low-SES children are time, cost and location (Somerset & Hoare, 2018, see Figure 1).

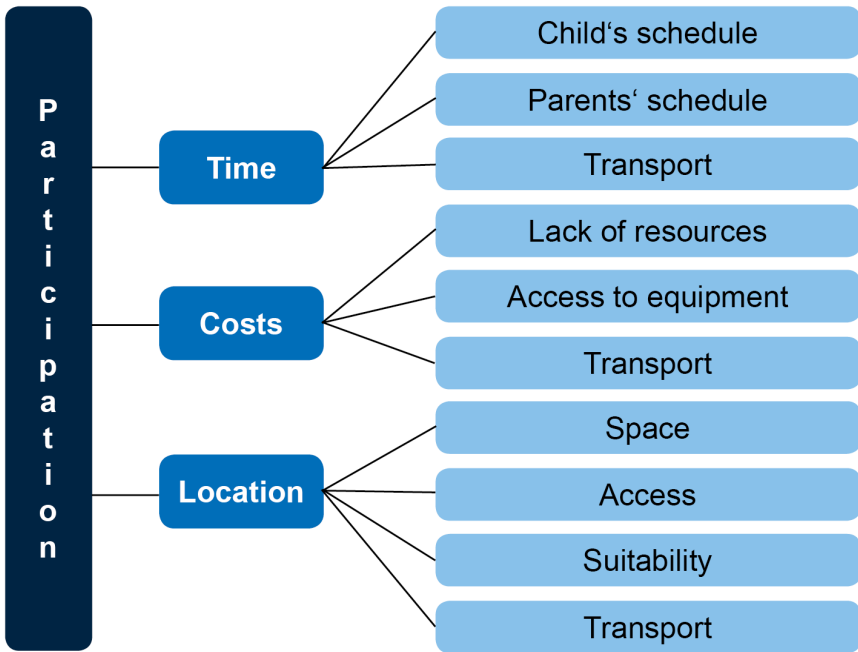


Figure 1: Practical barriers to participation in sport for children (Figure from publication by Somerset and Hoare (2018))

Children may wish to participate in sports, but cannot do so because of their own or their parents’ schedules (including working hours), a lack of resources, or the location of the sports offering. Unlike the personal barriers, these practical barriers can hardly be addressed by the coach. Instead, this is where the sports club can make an effort to facilitate the access for low-SES children by addressing these barriers specifically. An example outlined in a journal article describes the provision of free access to local pools for children living in a deprived local authority in England (Higgerson, Halliday, Ortiz-Nunez, & Barr, 2019).



When compared to a similarly deprived local authority that did not provide free access to pools over the same time frame, the authors could show an increased rate of participation in swimming activities. In this specific case, free-of-charge access to pools was enabled by funding of the local authority, although this is not necessarily a sustainable strategy in the long-term that can or should be employed by all sports clubs. It does show, however, that pricing strategies may lead to an increased participation in organized sports.

Alternative strategies could include subsidized fees, phased-in fees after free trial period, adding a low-fee category, or equipment/uniform loan schemes. Regarding transport, possible strategies to increase participation of disadvantaged kids could include the provision of car transport by volunteers, the use of community busses, or locating activities in close proximity to public transportation (Smith, Thomas, & Batras, 2016).

Strategies as listed above are extremely dependent upon the specific context and may have to be revised and adapted accordingly. It therefore makes sense to consider other alternative strategies, analyze the group of interest and the local circumstances, and cooperate with the local schools and authorities.



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5. Outlook

Children can benefit tremendously from being physically active, especially in an organized context. In order to tackle inequity in children, this matter should be of concern to policy makers, local authorities, parents, schools, and sports clubs alike. Underprivileged children often times face barriers excluding them from participation in sports. Practical barriers (e.g. time, cost and transport) should be addressed by clubs and/or local authorities in order to provide children with access to organized sports. Once access and engagement is established, personal barriers (e.g. self-esteem, athletic ability, peer disapproval) should be addressed by the coaching staff in order to ensure sustained participation and increase the likelihood of its beneficial impact on children. Therefore, in the development of an education program, it is logical to consider and address all barriers children and everyone involved in organized sports might face by including the sports club as well as the coaches.

In this context, the coaches have to recognize the structural and social conditions that influence the participation in PA and sports of the children, and they need skills for social action. Therefore, training PE teachers and sport professionals for social action should be both theoretical and practical.



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