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‘Life is team play’: social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the context of Special Olympics

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ABSTRACT

This article provides insights from an empirical study on the meaning of social inclusion for Finnish athletes with intellectual disabilities (ID) who participate in Special Olympics (SO). A further objective was to explore the athletes’ perceptions of the role SO has played in their lives regarding their personal experiences of social inclusion. Data were transcripts of five focus group interviews carried out with a total of 31 participants during the last SO World Winter Games in 2017. The content was analysed with the aim of identifying the main themes in the athletes’ conversations about social inclusion. Three main themes were identified: inclusion as a contrast to past discrimination; inclusion as receiving and providing assistance; and inclusion as participation in teamwork. The results indicate that SO and arguably sport more generally can assist people with ID in moving forward on a path from being excluded toward social inclusion.

Inclusion in sport: disability and participation

The inclusion of people with disabilities in sports has become an international issue with increasing numbers of UN member states ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN 2006). Article 30.5 of the convention addresses aspects of enabling the participation of people with disabilities in recreational, leisure and sporting activities on an equal basis with others (Kiuppis 2018a). In most countries, the obligations placed on nations who ratify the CRPD represent a remarkable shift from the middle of the twentieth century to the present, both in terms of attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in particular and in the promotion of opportunities for greater inclusion within society. In the 1950s, people with ID were considered as ‘mentally retarded’, which

was framed as a health-related issue, and they were excluded from a sports-related discourse (Braddock 2010). The inception of Special Olympics (SO) in the USA in the 1960s started to bring 'mental retardation' out of its stigmatized and medicalized location in the health sector by providing recreational sporting opportunities for people with ID albeit in segregated settings (Hourcade 1989). As the move away from the traditional medical model of disability gained momentum toward a holistic public health perspective (Sobey 1970), sport for people with disabilities in general became increasingly organized also in integrated settings. In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, debates around the guiding principle of integration were first and foremost concerned with the question of how children with disabilities could ideally participate in mainstream sport settings (Orr 1979; Santomier 1985). This was in line with the social model of disability (Shakespeare and Watson 2001). The 'Integration Continuum' for sport participation that was developed in the USA (Winnick 1987) built upon models developed for provision of special education services (Reynolds 1962; Deno 1970) and Physical Education in particular (Winnick 1987, 160; see Kiuppis 2018a, 7). Since the mid-1990s, the spectrum of sporting opportunities for people with disabilities has been recast within debates around inclusion (see Wolff and Hums 2018). After various revisions of the 'Integration Continuum' carried out in the UK, the 'Inclusion Spectrum' was developed as a model that has been reworked into a practical tool (Black and Stevenson 2011) and could since then be used to support practitioners when planning and delivering inclusive activities in sport (Stevenson 2009). That model distinguishes five modalities that cover the spectrum of opportunities for people with disabilities, ranging from 'inclusion within disability-specific opportunities' to 'inclusion within mainstream settings' (Kiuppis 2018b).

Social inclusion

Social inclusion is considered one of the core domains of quality of life for all individuals including people with ID (Schalock 2004). The concept of social inclusion in sport embraces the heterogeneity of athletes with disabilities and takes their diversity as a starting point for inclusive sport theory and practice. Consequently, the concept is defined and measured in a variety of ways (Louw et al. 2020). Recent literature reviews relating to the social inclusion of people with ID have emphasized its multi-dimensional character. Overmars-Marx et al.

(2014) identified five levels in which inclusion can be defined and conceptualized, namely in terms of individual competences; informal networks; professional care; neighborhood characteristics; and governmental policies. Cobigo et al. (2012) argued that social inclusion needed to be seen as an evolving process where a person's social inclusion improves with increased opportunities to interact with others and participation in activities. The authors also noted a sense of belonging and well-being should feature in definitions and measures of social inclusion. Simpican et al. (2015) concluded from their review that for persons with ID social inclusion comprised of two main domains: interpersonal relationships and community participation. The authors identified the structures and functions to support each domain. However, they also stressed the interaction between these two domains, for instance that strong interpersonal relationships can increase the level of involvement in the community and vice versa. The dual conceptualization of social inclusion and its developmental nature were further confirmed in the review of intervention studies aimed at enhancing social inclusion, undertaken by Louw and colleagues. They concluded that social inclusion is 'a constantly evolving process where individual experiences of social connectedness are based on the level of participation in society and the impact it has on an individual's personal interactions' (Louw et al. 2020). Importantly, the aforementioned reviews emphasize that the subjective perspectives of people with ID are a central aspect to be included in investigations about social inclusion. Measuring social inclusion only quantitatively, in quasi-objective terms, such as increasing numbers of participation in activities, means leaving out the viewpoint and experiences of the people whose quality of life we, as researchers into inclusion in sport, are ultimately analysing and discussing. This is especially necessary in order to identify person-centred strategies for enhancing social inclusion. A growing number of studies have demonstrated that efforts to promote the inclusion and participation of people with ID in leisure activities including sports have been justified by the positive outcomes achieved, notably greater functional independence, positive attitudes in the community and creating a sense of belonging (Merrells et al. 2018). However, the issue of social inclusion is contested. In some cases, people have little appreciation of that concept, e.g. because inclusive sport cause harm to them, for instance by triggering experiences of isolation (D'Eloia and Price 2018, 92–94), if not done in a way that allows all individuals a high degree of contribution to the activity (Sisti et al. 2021; Kiuppis 2021). In

other cases, people with intellectual disabilities perhaps do not understand that concept because they do not know what it means to feel socially excluded, even if they are excluded in wider society. Only for some persons with ID it is common to feel socially isolated, and extending their social circles beyond the family usually requires support and facilitation, for instance in a form of a structured peer group (Louw et al. 2020; Wilson et al. 2017). Others might take for granted that their absence from sport life (Kiuppis and Stambulova 2020), their exclusion from sport (DePauw and Gavron 2005, 10), or their involvement in disability sport in segregated settings (Mojtahedi and Katsui 2018), is to be considered the normality, and thus may not be able to easily differentiate between being socially excluded and socially included.

Sport and disability in Finland

In Finland, as in all the Nordic societies, the public sector is responsible for providing sporting possibilities as part of its welfare services. It is generally believed that a person's own choice should be in the centre of attention, and accordingly, people with disabilities should have the right to choose where and with whom they want to practice sports. However, Finland is no different from other western countries in that a fully inclusive sport culture is still an unattained goal, although developments towards more inclusive approaches have taken place in recent years. However, people with ID undertake extremely low levels of physical activity and have many barriers that limit access to sporting opportunities (Bossink et al. 2017). People with ID face similar barriers in Finland that leads to limited opportunities for sports participation (see Armila et al. 2018). Finnish municipalities have focused on providing various specialist services to individuals with ID and their families, including organizing adapted physical activity services. Different disability sports have been run mainly by non-governmental, disability-specific sport organizations. This means that sporting possibilities have usually been segregated, although justified by being a step toward inclusion. During recent decades, sports for people with disabilities in general have seen a shift toward inclusion in mainstream sports, but there are major hindrances to full inclusion (Saari 2011). The stigma and prejudices associated with disability have further alienated particularly people with ID within their communities, sometimes even within their family circles (Kivirauma

et al. 2006).

Social inclusion and SO

SO is the world's largest sports organization for people with ID with more than 4.9 million athletes in 172 countries. SO's newest vision statement promotes greater inclusion of people with ID through the medium of sport (Special Olympics 2018). SO arrived to Finland in the early 1990s. As in other countries, SO in Finland offers access to sport for people with ID through year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with ID. SO's winter sports are very popular in Finland, with an increasing number of athletes with ID engaging in for example alpine skiing, cross country skiing, figure skating, snowboarding and snowshoeing, as well as in floorball, which is included in the SO World Winter Games. Despite SO's efforts to promote greater inclusion of people with ID through the medium of sport, the athletes' perceptions of the role SO has played in their lives regarding their personal experiences of social inclusion is considered worthy of further investigation (McConkey et al. 2020). While there are recent studies that identify potential benefits for athletes through participation in SO (see e.g. McConkey et al. 2021), research is rare about the meanings that persons with ID assign to their inclusion in SO and more widely to social inclusion in society. Everett et al. (2020) contend that 'there is a need for more voiced opinions from Special Olympic (SO) athletes in contemporary literature'. The empirical study presented in this article goes beyond questions of who has access to sport and the barriers to participation and instead moves towards a fuller consideration of the various 'terms of inclusion' (Kiuppis 2018a, 17). The focus is on understanding social inclusion from the point of view of people with ID with the lived experience of participating in SO. As Wilson et al. (2017, 849) noted:

What the literature does lack, however, is the voice of people with intellectual disability who, with support, have started to counter social exclusion, have friends and participate in society. Current research tends to focus on describing the myriad of problems related to social inclusion, rather than on the narratives of people who have benefited from a social intervention.

By investigating social inclusion from this point of view, we contribute to further refining the definition of the concept as experienced by people with ID, thereby also enhancing the possibilities to achieve social inclusion in the lives of people with ID as they will be grounded

in their present realities. It would also be a further test of the theoretical conceptions developed in the literature to date. Hence, the specific aims of this study were: (1) to understand the meanings of social inclusion to SO athletes in Finland, and (2) to identify the athletes' perceptions of SO as a means of enhancing their social inclusion in sport and wider society.

Methods

This study focuses on the experiences of Finnish athletes who were recruited at the SO 2017 World Winter Games in Graz, Austria. This provided a unique opportunity to interview athletes from across Finland with experience of training and competing in winter sports. The study was a part of a transnational research project on social inclusion through sports for players with ID (see McConkey and Menke 2020; Asunta et al. 2021).

Participants

The complete group of 34 Finnish athletes at the SO Winter Games chose to participate in the transnational research project. They were recruited with the help of their coaches in the Finnish teams. The data for this study was collected in five focus groups, carried out with a total of 31 participants from adolescence to late middle age (71% men; mean age 30). Three athletes did not participate in the focus groups, due to their competition schedule. For the SO World Winter Games in Graz, the participants had trained and competed in floorball, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, alpine skiing and figure skating. There were few first timers in SO; most of the participants had been training in SO for more than three years, many of them also in summer sports. The participants lived in different urban and rural municipalities. Their housing arrangements varied: 17 persons lived with their family, six in supported group homes, and eight independently in their own homes. Everyone was able to express themselves verbally well enough to participate in the group discussions.

Research ethics

An ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of SO. Voluntariness of the athletes' participation was ensured by giving them adequately accessible and understandable information on the nature of the study and on the focus group method, and by stressing their own choice regarding participation. An information sheet and consent

form with easy language and illustrative pictures was given to all participants. Both documents were read to them if they could not read by themselves. The researchers secured participants' understanding of the consent by discussing with them and making sure everyone understood what it is all about. A verbal agreement was obtained from each participant. During data collection, special attention was given to creating an open and accepting atmosphere, encouraging all the participants to share their thoughts. To ensure anonymity, only the sport is used as a descriptor of the person being cited. Other descriptors, like gender and age, are not mentioned because of the small number of SO athletes in Finland.

Data collection

The use of focus group interview was chosen as it is considered suitable for gathering qualitative data on participants' opinions, perspectives and feelings. Furthermore, the method enables an interactive process of sharing ideas and comparing them between participants, which results in the participants' co-constructing of meanings (Morgan 2012). The method also served the purposes of the transnational research project as a whole, as a strategy to collect comparable data on the perceptions of athletes of different nationalities (see e.g. Lupo et al. 2018). The focus groups consisted of five to nine athletes who practice the same sport. This means that the participants were already familiar with each other, which furthered open discussion. The focus groups were conducted by P. Asunta and P. Rintala who have abundant experience in interacting with people with ID. The focus groups were semi-structured; the topics and questions were predetermined and sequenced into three parts, although the order of questions was modified based on the participants' trail of thought. In the beginning, the facilitators focused on ensuring a common understanding of the topics to be covered in the discussion. Then a series of open-ended trigger questions were used along with picture prompts, which were accompanied by short stories of a person with ID placed in different social settings. The prompts were used to introduce the topics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as to stimulate the discussion and to create a permissive and relaxed environment that encouraged participants to share their perceptions (see Krueger and Casey 2015). Based on the images and the stories, all the participants articulated an unambiguous understanding of the concepts of being excluded or included. The three main topics were: (1) perceptions and feelings on inclusion (the questions included e.g. 'Do

you have examples from your own lives when you have felt included?'); (2) perceptions and feelings associated with exclusion (e.g. 'What would help this person to become more included?'); and (3) views on SO as an arena of inclusion and exclusion (e.g. 'Within Special Olympics, some people can feel left out/excluded? Why is this?'; 'How has Special Olympics helped you to feel included in your local community?'). The focus groups lasted 24–31 min. All sessions were audio-recorded.

Data analysis

Verbatim transcriptions were made from the audio-recordings of the sessions in Finnish and then translated into English. The total length of the transcripts was 42 pages. Transcripts in both languages were utilized in the analysis to ensure that the messages conveyed by the participants were not distorted due to language issues. The analysis was targeted at interpreting the constructed reality of the participants by identifying how the athletes perceived the phenomena and by trying to place the perceptions in their sociocultural context. Thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2016; Maguire and Delahunt 2017; Vaismoradi et al. 2013) was applied by coding, categorizing, and drawing thematic maps, to generate the overarching themes capturing the shared meanings of social inclusion in the data. P. Asunta and E. Hasanen worked in a dialogue, coding first individually and then discussing codes and revising the coding structure, as they went through the data several times. Some of the preliminary codes were developed utilizing previous research on the topic (compare McConkey and Menke 2020), but the code structure was developed mainly inductively. Moreover, as the authors represent different fields of sport science, namely sociology and pedagogy, the process may be characterized as a collaboration influenced by theoretical assumptions and analytic resources deriving from several disciplines (Braun and Clarke 2019). Overarching themes which recurred across all the focus groups were constructed and reviewed by drawing maps of the relationships between codes and prominent patterns. The findings were discussed between the authors, and confirmation was obtained from other members of the transnational team for the study.

Results

The meanings of social inclusion to SO athletes

Three main themes in the athletes' experiences and perceptions of social inclusion were generated. First, the athletes looked at inclusion through their past experiences, contrasting it to discrimination. Second, they talked about assistance as a prerequisite of inclusion in two ways: they were both receivers and providers of assistance. Third, participation in teamwork was an expression of being included. The order in which the three themes are presented here depicts a path toward social inclusion, an overall story generated from the data. The persons' own role in the activity and thus agency in the particular social context strengthen the move from one theme to the next. The base level is when inclusion is realized as the right for everyone not to be discriminated against in their social communities. At the second level, individuals with disabilities get assistance from different significant persons in order to personally exercise that right, and when included, they themselves assist others. At the third level, people with ID experience a significant role as an agent in the community, such as being a member on the same basis with all others in their team in SO.

Inclusion as a contrast to past discrimination. The athletes' descriptions about inclusion and exclusion as they discussed both the picture prompts and their own experiences, indicated that their meanings of inclusion are often derived from a contrast to discrimination. Many athletes had extremely unhappy memories and experiences of inequality in different communities in society, and inclusion was seen in clear contrast with these experiences. Inclusion meant being visible, well-treated and respected like anyone else. The focus group participants continuously emphasized the importance of being equal and the positive feelings they associated with participating in sports and in SO more generally. The need to feel like an equal participant also in other groups in the local community, such as in school, was also clearly highlighted in the data. Contentment with the present compared to the past experiences was evident in the focus groups. A cross country skier described this in the following words: 'I stumbled upon this same thing at school. I was always left aside. Now I'm with the group!' Several participants talked about their experiences of exclusion which included discrimination, isolation, and physical and verbal mistreating. Expressions such as being seen as 'not important' and 'not equal' were used with relation to past experiences. The participants' right for equality had been actively

violated; they had not only been passively left aside but also actively pushed away. The following two quotes are illustrative examples of the athletes' past experiences of exclusion: 'I couldn't go anywhere safely in [the neighborhood] without being pushed or called names or mocked' (Alpine skier). 'I remember from my childhood at home, that I was really separated from the rest of the world [...] there was no respect, it was sort of like I was only filling up an empty space' (Cross country skier). The contrast between being excluded and included is particularly visible also when comparing the feelings which the athletes associated with exclusion and inclusion. Negative feelings such as fear, sadness, emptiness, insignificance, loneliness and depression were associated with exclusion. Conversely, positive feelings such as happiness, fun, pride, confidence and comfort were associated with being included. These expressions of positive feelings often appeared in the context of SO. Seeing inclusion in contrast to past discrimination was sometimes combined with participants' own subsequent efforts to correct the unfairness, to claim one's status as equal and to seek inclusion. In the athletes' accounts, taking action required courage but would eventually lead to positive outcomes. 'When [...] walking from school to my home, I was being called names, but I asked them which one of us is disabled, you or me? Look in the mirror! And it ended immediately', said an alpine skier. Courage is a central thematic aspect also in the following citation from a floorball player: 'If you are just brave enough, there are different club activities available. If you just dare to try these out, you may get new relationships.'

Inclusion as receiving and providing assistance. Assistance appeared as a prerequisite for inclusion of a person with ID. This second theme is twofold. First, the athletes acknowledged their need to receive assistance in order to be able to participate; in one of the athletes' words: 'If you have a disability, you must be helped out, not be left alone'. Second, the athletes talked about giving assistance to others, and to each-other, once they were already included themselves. The athletes' personal understanding of what it feels like to be excluded also acted as an incentive for their eagerness to help others. As one participant said: 'If someone is discriminated, I would go and help them.' Regarding the need for assistance, different important forms of assistance and different significant assisting persons were identified. The different forms of assistance which were needed and

had been provided most often, can be divided into four categories: (1) concrete physical assistance; (2) psychological and mental assistance; (3) financial aid; and (4) assistance in arrangements such as travel and sponsorship deals. Examples of concrete physical assistance include giving assistance when somebody falls or preventing people from getting lost. Psychological and mental assistance included talking about problems, support, and cheering on. A figure skater's description gives an example of this form of assistance: 'My cousins and relatives have included me and cheered me. Now that I'm here in the games, they keep their fingers crossed for me, friends and everybody.' The need for financial aid was presented mainly in negative statements, where the lack of money was a barrier for participation and full inclusion. The parents' economic status appeared as an important factor for the ability to participate. If there was inadequate financial support from parents, assistance was needed from their sport club or sport federation and possible sponsors. Getting sponsorships was seen as an exclusive aspect, as a snowshoeing athlete expressed it: 'It's kind of like they consider people with disability as odd.'

The athletes perceived their family and relatives, the coaches, other authorities and professionals, peers, and the respective sport clubs as significant persons providing and promoting inclusion. Equally, lack of assistance from these parties was considered as hindrance to social inclusion. Parents and other close relatives appeared as the most important enablers of successful participation, providing different forms of necessary assistance, for instance mental support and financial assistance. The coach, both in SO and local club settings, was clearly seen very important in the context of sports, having for instance a significant effect on the athletes' experiences of respect and sense of belonging. Successful coaching leads to warm feelings of togetherness, as a figure skater said about her SO coach: 'Our coach is really attentive to us, she says that we are her sweeties.' (The coach clearly knew the team so that she could use words that increased the sense of belonging). The other authorities and professionals that were mentioned in the focus groups included personal assistants, teachers, doctors, and school psychologists. The athletes' local sport club was also perceived to play a significant role in enabling participation, as stressed by a cross country skier: 'My sport club [...] has been the bedrock of my hobby, organizing, supporting, sponsoring and stuff like that.' The need for assistance was commonly acknowledged. Nevertheless, informants were said that reliance on assistance could limit the possibilities for making one's own

choices regarding participation. Valuing autonomy in making choices was strongly stated in the following quote in which the need for independence was directly connected to and contrasted with reliance on financial aid: 'If something costs a bit more, then the parents, many of them, get cross with you. You have to pay so much, a hobby costs money. Fortunately, nowadays you have the right to go for hobbies, so that your parents' permission is not necessarily needed. That has also been a step toward one's own life. A big step. An infinitely long step, you could say' (Cross country skier). It is worth stressing that athletes talked about providing assistance to other disabled players. Hence, they could count as significant others in the inclusion process for people with disabilities. The ability to assist new members of the team is a sign of experiencing the status of an included person, as this quote illustrates: 'We could tell about Special Olympics and what kind of experiences we ourselves have gotten and encourage them to join in, and at the beginning be supporters to help them feel included and encouraged, and be like an example' (Floorball player).

Inclusion as participation in teamwork. Another central theme, participation in teamwork, was present especially in accounts about sports and SO. There, the athletes formed social units in which everyone played a significant role and forged a strong sense of belonging and connectedness with the other team members. The athletes appeared to feel included as important actors in a team which was working toward a shared goal. Their expressions when talking about their SO team were rich in highlighting experiences of unity and feelings of joy and proudness of the team and of oneself as a part of the team. The following are four examples: 'I think it's fun, working in a group is the best thing'; 'I am proud of myself to be included in this group, just like [a team mate], I'm not going to quit!'; 'Whoever we are, we have to, like all of us, work as a group and as friends, so that no one will become excluded'; and 'In a skating group we try to take care of each other, so that no one gets lost, we are alike one big pack.' Cheering on one's team members and other teams, as well as representing one's own country, were important forms of expressing team spirit. In the following quote, a figure skater tells confidently about this kind of participation in teamwork: 'Yesterday we cheered them [...] in floorball, "Go Finland!", we clapped our hands. That's what we did, cheered them. They won because of us.'

Having a significant role incurs responsibility, which for the athletes was something to

be proud of. In addition to feeling included in sports, some participants connected the importance of experiencing responsibility to their jobs in the local community. The participants clearly separated 'real' work places in the community from activity centres for the disabled: 'I've also been included in a real job, not in the activity center. In the activity center it's, like, trivial', said a cross country skier. This view of work indicates that gaining a responsible role in the wider society outside the communities of the people with disabilities is an important step in the process of inclusion.

Teamwork appears as even more significant, when it is perceived as a component of quality of life in general. In the following quote an athlete applies the term 'team play' to life outside of sports: 'I feel at least myself that life is team play. You need to try and get inside teams so that it's easier for you to live your life. Life will be pretty long and gloomy if you're by yourself. It is such a big richness when you have good people around you' (Floorball player).

SO as a means to enhance social inclusion

The results show that SO promotes inclusion from the point of view of providing experiences of inclusion in peer groups. Furthermore, in some aspects SO also promotes wider inclusion in society. We discuss, first, the athletes' perceptions on the outcomes they perceived of participating in SO, and, second, the specific means by which SO promotes inclusion. The inclusion related outcomes of participating in SO identified in the data focused on relatedness, visibility, and respect. Enhanced relatedness with other athletes with ID was a dominant outcome from participating in SO. The fact that athletes made new friends in the context of SO, combined with the strong meaning of teamwork, indicates that SO had significant impact on the athletes' sense of belonging. Another central outcome was increased visibility in the local community. This was achieved by performing sports in an event that is big enough to be covered in the local media. Media representations appeared to be important for the athletes. This is clearly stated in the following figure skater's quote, connecting strong positive emotion to being represented in the media: 'The [hometown] news has included me, too. I was about to start crying when I saw that newspaper, really.' Through their participation in an international sports event and success in the games, the athletes perceived themselves to be valued in their local communities. The athletes described

that they gained respect in their school, sport club, or wider community contexts by being chosen for the team and by being depicted in the media as a successful athlete. The outcome was especially clear when set in comparison with the past experiences of exclusion. There were evident changes from isolation and invisibility to stardom and celebrity, and from being bullied to being cheered on. An alpine skier illustrated this by saying: 'The publicity helped a lot. They realized that, oh, you are the real star then.' A figure skater described her experience of support from a wider community: 'They cheer for me quite a lot at school because I got to go abroad. The regular [education] students cheer me really, too.'

The means for promoting inclusion connected with SO varied from providing tangible objects to promoting possibilities for choice. Among the tangible objects were team clothes and medals as visible symbols of participation and belonging. In a figure skater's words: 'I feel like I belong here, we also get these really nice clothes when going on these trips.' The possibility to choose to participate and to choose the form of participation were valued but were also seen as aspects which needed further development in SO. Although SO had increased the choice of sports in both the international winter and summer competitions, more choice is considered needed. Moreover, in the athletes' view, opportunities to participate in functions organized by SO should be available for more people and there should be more regular activities and events. Examples included changing the rules of floorball in the SO to enable bigger teams and organizing more training camps—although it was acknowledged that this would require more financial aid. However, inequality was a common experience connected with financing, and thus efforts to promote sponsorships were in turn considered to promote inclusion. Those efforts would enhance the experience of fairness and of being respected as an athlete. 'It is my opinion that as well for the Special Olympics athletes, the federation could pay their travel expenses, as for the ordinary athletes. And they even get daily allowances, and we do not get anything and with our own little money we need to pay a thousand Euros in order to get to play and represent Finland. In my opinion that does not sound fair' (Floorball player). Another negative comment was mentioned in relation to costs of participation:

'Those Paralympic people get it easier than we do [...] because people don't probably know us really, media doesn't usually take us into account, and if it does it's just small-scale thing and it's not the same, for example no one of us has been invited to The Castle Ball

[where the President of Finland invites around 2,000 guests to celebrate the Finnish Independence Day], but for that you have to wait for many, many years [...] and it hasn't progressed with that 'Sportsperson Of the Year' thing either, so [...] [there's] quite a lot discriminatory things.'

Discussion

This paper provided insights from an original empirical study of social inclusion of young adults with ID in Finland. It took up the recommendation of Overmars-Marx et al. (2014), to include the perspectives of people with ID in research on social inclusion (255). Three main themes were confirmed: inclusion as contrast to past discrimination; inclusion as receiving and providing assistance; and inclusion as participation in teamwork. The study provides a fuller understanding of the meanings of social inclusion from the point of view of athletes with ID, which to date has been rarely studied in the international research literature (Merrells et al. 2018; Abbot and McConkey 2006). Also by focusing on informants who have journeyed on the path from exclusion to inclusion in sports, insights could be gained as to how people with ID might move forward to wider societal inclusion. The results emphasize the importance of considering inclusion as a personal and contextual experience. The individuals' understandings and experiences of inclusion are related to their previous experiences and to the different communities surrounding them in their past and present. This confirms previous research findings—e.g. the understanding of social inclusion comprising of the two domains 'interpersonal relationships and community participation' (see Simpican et al. 2015, 27)—and further emphasizes the need to view social inclusion as a dynamic, evolving process that varies across individuals. In addition, there is a need to both examine the universal experience and culturally specific experiences for people with ID (Louw et al. 2020). Dominant in the Finnish athletes' experiences was a contrast between past discrimination and present inclusion in the SO. Their life histories included extreme exclusion in different forms, which was contrasted with the present phase where they were participating in sports, receiving assistance and helping others, and enjoying responsible roles in their teams. Since the athletes were born in different decades from the 1950s to the 2000s, their experiences also reflect societal change in Finland. They reflect the shift in terms of both attitudes toward people with ID and opportunities for greater social inclusion.

The change from segregating people with ID to valuing their social inclusion is visible in the older athletes' accounts. Accordingly, as inclusion is seen as an important societal issue, people with ID themselves also become more aware of their right to inclusion. An example of this in the data is the noticing of unfairness in the financing of sports participation. Therefore, the results tell not only about the meanings that individual athletes attribute to social inclusion but also about social and cultural change and the past and present state of values in the society surrounding them (see also Saxton 2018). When aiming at promoting greater inclusion, societal efforts should be informed by both life histories and societal history as well as the present state of meanings and values ascribed to social inclusion by those who are marginalized within a society.

Getting and giving assistance was seen as a means and a sign of inclusion. Recent research has emphasized the need, particularly recognized by parents, for persons to receive assistance (see e.g. Midjo and Aune 2018). However, we confirmed the importance of giving assistance to others was also a contributor to inclusion and to feelings of belonging (Carter 2021). Many athletes emphasized the importance of seeing that their own actions have a significant effect. Responsibility was welcomed and something to be proud of (compare Cobigo et al. 2012). Wilson et al. (2017, 848) noted that: 'without well-developed and supported social networks, goals of inclusion for people with intellectual disability may remain exclusive'. Lack of assistance hinders participation in sports and feelings of being included, equal and respected. However, this requires a careful balance between the reliance on other people's assistance in order to be able to participate, and independence in terms of one's own choice, own action, and agency, which the informants considered important elements of inclusion. This is in accordance with Merrells et al.'s finding, that 'the impact of physical and social independence' is one of the '[f]our key themes [that] became apparent in the literature' (2017, 381). By contrast, the reliance on financial aid was presented mainly in negative statements, where the lack of money was a barrier for participation and fuller inclusion. The parents' economic status appeared as an important definer of the ability to participate, as has been stated also in the study by Armila et al. (2018). Alternative sources of financial support from sports clubs, sports federations, or possible sponsors, was not readily forthcoming. These social and environmental barriers have been confirmed also in several other countries (see Bodde and Seo 2009). To a certain degree, our informants felt

that participation and success in sports may bring about inclusion in the wider community, although this remains to be investigated further. In accordance with Cobigo and colleagues, it is beneficial to see social inclusion 'from a developmental perspective where one's social inclusion improves with increased opportunities to interact with others and participate in activities' (2012, 75). One considerable component in wider social inclusion would be changes in perceptions in the community. Research suggests that the publicity generated by national and international competitions organized by SO can affect societal attitudes to disability (McConkey et al. 2009). Our data indicate that participation and success were valued in the local communities. In Finnish society, sporting abilities and success in sports are highly valued, and therefore success in the international SO competitions is likely to generate respect. Enhancing visibility was identified as a means for promoting social inclusion. It is beneficial to make the individuals, their activities and memberships visible in their local communities, for instance by positive media publicity.

Parents appeared as significant persons in the process of social inclusion for their relatives. More than half of the Finnish SO team participating in this study still lived with their parents, which suggests that parents have both a strong influence in the process and also can be insightful informants. Reliance on the parents' ability to support the athlete in several ways, including financially, was evident. Future studies should therefore focus also on the parents' views on social inclusion of people with ID, as noted also by Louw et al. (2020).

This study had limitations which should be noted. First, the group of athletes were interviewed during the Winter Games for which they had been selected to compete in. This may have raised more positive feelings about social inclusion than if they had been interviewed in their everyday environment. Secondly, the level of ID could affect the athletes' perceptions on social inclusion. According to a meta-analysis, higher severity of ID is related to less physical activity (Dairo et al. 2016). In our data the athletes had mild to moderate ID, and the results could be different for people with more severe ID. Finally, none of the athletes represented Unified Sports® for mixed teams of disabled and non-disabled players which could have presented another perspective on social inclusion (McConkey et al. 2019).

Conclusion

Our findings highlight the importance of an appropriate social context for efforts to increase

the social inclusion of people with ID. The results confirmed that participating in sports among disabled peers can serve as an arena where it is possible to experience inclusion (e.g. D'Eloia and Price 2018). The need for friendships and a sense of belonging are basic human needs, and thus have a significant impact on a person's quality of life. Yet, efforts to promote inclusion in sport settings with non-disabled peers and competitors may trigger feelings of exclusion, especially when conducted without grounded knowledge of disability access needs (Saxton 2018). Our results indicate that it seems important to offer alternative social arenas like the activities and events organized by SO. These sporting arenas enable people with ID to experience appreciation and equality and a sense of belonging and also to be able to take responsible roles in the collective activity. It is important to offer the athletes instances where they can recognize their own responsible role in working toward a shared goal in sports as well as in the local community. The strong role of the municipal sector in Finland in providing sport and health services for people with ID (Ala-Vähälä 2018) may be an important contextual factor when considering the role of SO. Future research might replicate the study with athletes who attend local clubs or those who have left SO or other sports. Our data may not apply to other sports clubs outside of SO. Future research could also take a closer look at how important social inclusion is as a determinant of health (see Louw et al. 2020, 793). A comparative study with SO athletes in other countries would also improve the potential generalizability of the findings across the globe as the data from this selected group of Finnish athletes may not reflect athletes' experiences in other countries with differing social service systems, cultural capital and socio-economic status (Armila et al. 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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