



Evaluation of Special Olympics Unified Sports® programme:

“ Doing Unified”: Report of a Pilot Study Unified Sports in a Region of England

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The Special Olympics Unified Sports® programme provides an opportunity for young men and women with and without intellectual disabilities to play competitive sports together in mixed teams. As unified athletes (people with intellectual disabilities) and partners (non-disabled players) they train and play competitively together, they have the chance to improve their fitness, their sporting skills and to challenge stereotypes about intellectual disability through direct contact, the development of friendships as well as through the competition and camaraderie of the sports field. Past evaluations suggest that involvement in Unified Sports® promotes growth in athletes' self-confidence, social and communication skills enabling them to challenge inequality and discrimination as well as increasing their participation in social relationships¹.

Researchers at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland are working in partnership with Special Olympics Europe and Eurasia, Unified Sports®, to evaluate the extent to which participation in Unified Sports® enhances the social inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities. This report provides an account of pilot work

¹ Inclusion of young people with intellectual disabilities in Europe through Special Olympics Unified Sports®: An evaluation of a Unified Sports® Football Pilot Project (Available from SOEE).

which was undertaken with Unified Sports® teams located in the N.W England during May'09². The methods used are detailed followed by a description of the findings drawn from data collected during the pilot work.

Methods

A Unified Sports® competition was organised in Merseyside, England by the local co-ordinator and team coach. Five teams from one location (Halton N=25) and two from another club affiliated to SO (Bolton: N=10) made up solely of athletes³ took part in the event which was held at a community sports centre in Halton, near Liverpool. Information sheets and consent forms were distributed to participants prior to the event.

Teams played a five-a-side tournament and during the day, the three evaluators from the University of Ulster interviewed⁴ a range of stake-holders either individually or in small groups (e.g. teams or parents). Interviews with players and coaches were conducted between games and parents were interviewed during the tournament. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In all we interviewed:

- 10 Athletes
- 10 Partners
- 7 Leaders/Coaches and national co-ordinator
- 4 Parents
- 1 Manager of Leisure Centre (community contact)

Analysis

Qualitative data was transcribed from the audio-recordings and a thematic analysis was carried out using a grounded theory approach. Initial coding of the data was reviewed and recurrent themes identified and grouped together. The central theme emerging from the data was augmented and clarified through four further sub-themes. A detailed account of the findings is given below.

Another important aspect of conducting this pilot study was to test the feasibility of holding an event such as this for the purposes of data collection, and whether interviews could be held with sufficient numbers and range of individuals over the course of a training/playing gathering. The outcome of this trial of proposed methods is also reported below.

Findings

Viability of the method

The event demonstrated that the selected mode of data collection is viable. Participants were engaged and enthusiastic, and were responsive during individual and group interviews. Conducting interviews between games proved entirely possible and with flexibility on both the part of the Unified Sports® personnel and the research team, the data collection event proved to be pragmatically successful

² We are indebted to Andy and Julie Shard (local coaches) and Jason Cornwell (National co-ordinator for England) for facilitating our involvement in this event.

³ Details of the membership are given in an Appendix

⁴ A topic guide to interviews is included in an Appendix

although this venue – a community Leisure and Sports Centre - did offer space to meet away from the competition which assisted in having a quieter environment and made the transcription of the tapes easier.

Qualitative findings



Figure 1. Findings from pilot study showing the central metaphor and three constituent themes emerging from interview data.

The central metaphor emerging from this grounded theory analysis is **THE GOAL** – namely the goal of community integration and social inclusion along with the elements needed for this goal to be realised. The goal of integration and inclusion is evident repeatedly in the interview data and from a range of interviewees – coaches, partners, young people and organisers, and it is apparent that ideas of inclusion and integration are important in the thinking and attitudes of those who take part, as one coach said:

'our club is all about integration and the unified football teams totally encompass what we are all about.' (C04)

Figure 1. depicts the central theme as well as the three constitutive themes which constitute the main findings drawn from pilot data. These are described and illustrated below using quotations from interviews.

Constituent themes

Three themes arose from the data and together they constitute the **goal** of inclusion and integration. These are:

- the **skills** required, which can be thought of as foundational to inclusion. This theme also includes the development of these skills through the **training** of individuals who learn and adapt through taking part as players and as coaches, or through their contact with Unified Sports® as parents or members of the wider community.
- the **teamwork** as the club builds towards a sustainable future for the sport.

- **the game** which identifies the barriers towards inclusion present within the community structures and social attitudes and the role that Unified Sports® plays in challenging attitudes and constructing the bridges that make inclusion and integration a possibility.

Each of these three themes are described below in more detail; illustrated with quotations drawn from the interviews.

1. SKILLS AND TRAINING



Interviews revealed how young participants gained a range of skills and personal attributes which likely enhance their opportunities for inclusion and integration in wider society.

Sports skills

All of the young participants shared a love of football and relished the opportunity to train and compete together. Improving levels of skill and gamesmanship were crucial aspects of young people's involvement and progress in their skill levels was noted by coaches:

'skill levels are high, Unified raises the game of the disabled players.' (C03)

Partners commented on the skill level of the players with disabilities:

'... it's hard, they have all got talent and they are good players and they all get stuck in.' (Pac02)

For the athletes with disabilities gaining and improving their football skills was important in its own right –

'it helps with your football skills and keeps you fit and active.' (T02a)...

but also as personal boost, a link between them and their non-disabled peers:

'my skills have got better and now we are a team, we play together as a team and that's what is important, not who is special needs and who isn't.' (A01)

Life skills – Confidence, self-esteem, communication...

Personal development in a number of areas is reported as something that young people gain through their involvement in the club. Many young people report that their confidence has grown through participation:

'... the confidence it has brought out in me, because before I came here I had literally no confidence whatsoever, now 'cause everyone is doing all right your confidence just builds.' (A01)

As confidence grows self-esteem also develops and young people express their pride in the club of which they are a member:

'I tell my friends that this is the best club in the world that I have ever been to and that we are always in the papers and stuff and that we are well known.' (Pac02)

Success within the club also boosts confidence and self-esteem as one young player describes in his selection for the squad going to an international tournament in Istanbul:

'you have to be picked, he watches you, how you train and how you play, and then he picks you, and they picked me! I was over the moon when that happened!' (A04)

Participants reported improvements in their communication skills, their ability to interact with others and in their understanding of working together as a team in which everyone has a part to play, one young person remarked:

'Team work, team building really, working together as a team, its not one player makes a team it is everyone together, I have learnt that.' (A03)

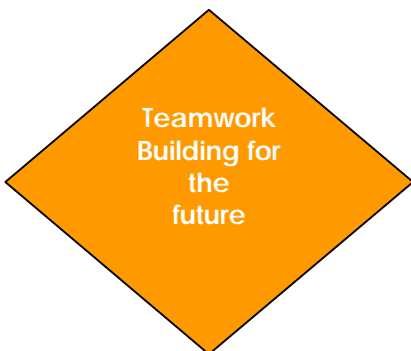
Whilst another stated:

'... doing this has helped me with my people skills. I want to get into doing sports work with people so that will help me with that.' (A04)

The wide-ranging impact of the training available through taking part in this Unified Sports® programme was well summed up by one young person who stated:

'I think everyone should be doing unified because it brings everyone together and its really good to get everyone included and it helps people to get their confidence and like if they get half the opportunities I have they would be so happy. No one gets that watching TV or hanging about on street corners. It helps you to get fit and stay out of trouble.' (A02)

TEAMWORK – building for the future



Sustainability is a key test in assessing how Unified Sports® programmes can durably promote social inclusion and develop social capital. Data gathered during pilot interviews revealed that plans are in place to assist with the long term future of the Special Olympics club and the Unified Sports® programme it hosts. This is in the form of training young players as coaches in the hope that they will take on the mantle of responsibility for the club as time goes on.

Also the continued recruitment of volunteers and retention of them was regarded as an important aspect in engendering a viable future for the club. Opportunities for coaches to extend their skills with the support of Special Olympics training and seminars were welcomed.

Attention to the expansion and growth of the club was made with plans to recruit further players – both partners and athletes, and through publicity to encourage the emergence of additional Unified Sports® programmes. In addition coaches reported on the important and valuable relationship between the Unified Sports® programme and the local Sports Development organisation. This benefits the club through the provision of free hours by agreement in the local leisure centre, as well as other support. Plans for the future, take into account the whole team – both internally through work to develop future leaders and coaches and externally through links in the wider community.

Champions

Leaders and coaches were clearly committed to the principles of Special Olympics and the practice of Unified Sports® and this was a driver to their effort on behalf of the club and young players, as one coach said:

'The ethos of Special Olympics I love, I wear on me heart, I love Special Olympics and basically I do it seven days a week all voluntary.' (C05)

The commitment is clearly apparent, however there is a danger of over-stretching individuals and the importance of ensuring that the club depends on a range of individuals, rather than over-depending on a small group of people, was noted as an important principle in supporting the club's future. However, many coaches asserted that commitment to the young players and to the philosophy of inclusion, which underpins their involvement in Unified Sports® would ensure a future for the club even if key individuals were no longer able to continue in their leadership role.

'I feel a commitment to the athletes, you need and want something to be here. So the unified -the young people with disabilities and the unified partners, they need us to be here, so I feel that as long as I can I will do it'. (C02)

THE GAME

Attitudes to disability

A core ingredient for inclusion and integration of people with intellectual disabilities is founded in individual and wider cultural attitudes to disability. A positive attitude to intellectual disability was apparent in interviews with the range of club members who took part – athletes, partners and coaches. Coaches demonstrated how they engender a positive attitude through their leadership style:

'I treat everyone the same, I give them all respect and I get respect back, that way it works.' (C05)

Partners described how they had learnt more about intellectual disability and how this had affected their attitudes:

'I think I have built up more understanding and respect between disabilities and mainstream.' (T02)

Athletes talked of the impact on them of being part of an inclusive club and at times contrasted this to their experiences in wider society:

'You get treated as an equal, its not like you're better or worse, you just get taken for who you are and its really inclusive, in school you would have gangs that were popular but in Special Olympics everyone is popular.' (A02)

Whilst these positive attitudes were apparent in the expressions of club members, they also often drew a contrast between their attitudes and those of wider society outside of the club.



'... as soon as you mention people with disability, people just don't want to know, people just think – what's the point, but if they actually see what we are doing they know what its about.' (T02).

The idea that changes to attitudes could be engendered through experience and contact with those outside the club was further borne out in the thoughts of the community representative who took part. This participant is the manager of the leisure centre in which the unified football team regularly train, and is aware of how attitudes of her staff towards people with intellectual disabilities has developed through contact with the unified players.

'... there are no barriers more than anything, they [the staff] see them coming into the centre, they have a laugh and enjoy themselves, we don't see them as having a disability, we don't treat them any different.' (CR01)

However, whilst the positivity of attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities was broadly apparent and the assertion of equal treatment regularly made, there was also an attitude of patronage – that is of those without disabilities *helping* those with ... a charitable activity,

'it gives you a sense of pride to help people. Like as well as unified we are coaching also and its like helping people, like the less able ones to be better, and it just gives you a warm feeling inside to know that you are helping people.' (P01)

This in part reflects a further aspect of wider cultural approaches to disability, which although not intending to exclude, are underpinned by a pejorative outlook which may support inclusion but may not engender equality. This attitude could potentially be meaningfully challenged from within Unified Sports® programmes.

Friendships and relationships

Friendships were forged through participation in unified teams. Interviews revealed that friendships were made between those with and without disabilities and that these were not confined to training and competitions but continued outside of club events and within individuals regular social activities. Both partners and athletes commented on the development of friendships and how these friendships have become part of their typical activities:

'we just do what everyone does, play on games consoles, go round the houses, sleep over, watch a film, just normal stuff, cause we treat them as our mates, not people with disabilities and partners, they are just our mates'.(P01)

Parents too commented on the positive benefits of their sons and daughters with ID being able to mix and play sports and make friends with their non-disabled peers.

'it's [unified sports] a good thing because it helps our children, particularly the ones with autism who aren't very good at socialising but also it helps the mainstream children to learn to socialise with our children and not be afraid of them and how to interact with them. Its good for both sides when you get the mainstream kids and special needs kids working together and playing together, it benefits both.' (Par01)

Sibling relationships too benefited from the unified approach as one young person commented:

'... being part of a unified team lets me play with my brother, he's not special needs, like he is normal.' (A01)

The wider benefits of making friends and cementing relationships through playing sport together was thought to have a wider impact in engendering change and reshaping approaches to people with intellectual disabilities within society:

'I definitely believe in the younger mainstream interacting with people with disabilities. I do believe it will actually change society eventually, if you get them young, that's how you bring change.' (C02)

Building a profile- changing attitudes

Both players and coaches were aware of the importance of their visibility as a club in the local community as well as further a-field in creating bridges to the inclusion and integration of people with intellectual disabilities in wider society. Several participants remarked on how well known the club has become through publicity and word of mouth and made the link between a high profile and the impact that this would likely have on altering attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities. The inference being that positive attitudes would naturally lead to a more inclusive society. As one young partner stated:

If there were more positive images of people with special needs there would be more positive thoughts about them and then they could be better included and part of things instead of left out.' (T02)

Small steps to inclusion and integration

Aspects of involvement in Unified Sports® were identified by interviewees as steps towards the greater inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. Ideas of inclusion were discussed as more complex than simply –

'putting someone with a disability into a group of people without a disability and letting them get on with it'...

rather they were thought of as lots of little steps...

'developing other things that there are in groups, like friendships, and connections and breaking down social barriers and changing attitudes.' (C07).

Opportunities

Many of the young people mentioned the opportunities afforded them through their membership of a Unified Sports® team. The opportunity to travel to competitions both nationally and internationally was attractive and appreciated by many and the benefits of this travel in terms of learning and developing personally was recognised, as one parent pointed out:

'the club goes all over the world, it widens their horizons going to different countries, it broadens their minds.' (Pa01)

One young athlete talked of his parents' responses to his being included in a team to play abroad:

'I got picked to go to represent England in Leicester and in Istanbul, me mum and dad are over the moon about it, they said they are really proud of me.' (A04)

This is a situation to be appreciated in the context of having a child with a disability who perhaps has not achieved to the same contexts as their non-disabled peers. The opportunity for parents to feel this pride and for young people to enjoy the sense of their parents being proud of them is likely to be a valuable personal boost for all involved.

Team members were encouraged by the opportunities to develop their skills as coaches as well as players and many were taking advantage of this by attending courses and beginning to run practice and warm-up sessions with the team. This opportunity was available to athletes as well as partners, although more often to partners. Training young players as coaches formed part of a strategic plan for the sustainability of the club, in that there would be young people trained and able to take over responsibility as the current coaching team moved towards retirement.

The Halton Club also runs a mentoring group for young players. This assists young people in the development of social and educational skills as well as helping them to prepare for college or work ambitions. This group is accessed by both athletes and players and is described as

... 'more of a social group which looks at the whole person... we have an individual education programme within the club for our athletes and there are separate sections that they can go to for help with their varying support, or even signposting to other things they want to do outside.' (C06).

The opportunity to be part of this group is welcomed by the young team members. Many report that they believe being part of the club will help them with future job or college applications as they can be seen to be committed and ambitious individuals who are keen to take part in activities, who are loyal to a club and can work well within a team structure:

'because of your commitment to the club they [employers] are more likely to take you on, its shows that you have determination to carry something through' (A02)



Conclusions

Although this was a relatively small-scale evaluation of one Unified Sports® programme, a number of key themes have emerged that elaborate what it means to be “Doing Unified”, in the words of a participant. This will help to shape the priorities in gathering information from the five countries participating in the evaluation and extend the work begun in the previous evaluation (Norins-Bardon et al. 2008). These are:

- The emphasis that is placed on promoting social inclusion between athletes and partners within and beyond the teams. This will be evident in various ways such as organisation of training, opportunities for personal and social development.
- The provision of high quality sports training and competition that stretches both groups of participants and forges a spirit of team-work and a genuine and shared sense of achievement.
- The appreciation of the need to promote positive perceptions of people with disabilities; to encourage enjoyable social interactions and to assist in skills development beyond the chosen sport.
- Strategies are in place to overcome the fragility of teams that are dependent on volunteer coaches and in building bridges and bonds with families, siblings and local communities in order to build sustainability.

Underpinning all of these are the personal qualities of the athletes, partners and coaches that Unified Sports® harnesses to produce a dynamic that offers much promise in improving the quality of life of young people with an intellectual disability.

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Reference

Norins-Bardon.J, Harada.C, Parker.R and Brecklinghaus.S., (2008) *Evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot-Project: Findings from Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia*. Special Olympics Europe Eurasia, Research report.

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