

# Promoting social inclusion through Unified Sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: a five-nation study

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## Abstract

**Background** Although the promotion of social inclusion through sports has received increased attention with other disadvantaged groups, this is not the case for children and adults with intellectual disability who experience marked social isolation. The study evaluated the outcomes from one sports programme with particular reference to the processes that were perceived to enhance social inclusion.

**Method** The Youth Unified Sports programme of Special Olympics combines players with intellectual disabilities (called athletes) and those without intellectual disabilities (called partners) of similar skill level in the same sports teams for training and competition. Alongside the development of sporting skills, the programme offers athletes a platform to socialise with peers and to take part in the life of their community. Unified football and basketball teams from five countries – Germany, Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Ukraine – participated. Individual and group interviews were held with athletes, partners, coaches, parents and community leaders: totalling around 40 informants per country.

**Results** Qualitative data analysis identified four thematic processes that were perceived by informants across all countries and the two sports to facilitate social inclusion of athletes. These were: (1) the personal development of athletes and partners; (2) the creation of inclusive and equal bonds; (3) the promotion of positive perceptions of athletes; and (4) building alliances within local communities.

**Conclusions** Unified Sports does provide a vehicle for promoting the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities that is theoretically credible in terms of social capital scholarship and which contains lessons for advancing social inclusion in other contexts. Nonetheless, certain limitations are identified that require further consideration to enhance athletes' social inclusion in the wider community.

**Keywords** intellectual disability, leisure, social inclusion, sports

## Introduction

The vision of social inclusion for people with disabilities is contained in various Rights Statements such as Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2007) and in the policy documents of many

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Governments including the UK (Department of Health 2009). However, the challenge remains of translating the rhetoric of rights into reality for persons with intellectual disability (ID) who remain among the most marginalised in many societies around the world (Emerson *et al.* 2008). The reasons for this are multifaceted. Many are born into poverty and this compounds the impact of disability on their social exclusion within communities. Even in more affluent countries with their welfare benefits and support services, many people with IDs have low levels of social engagement and a dearth of friendships (Verdonschot *et al.* 2009). Also the stigma associated with their disability has often resulted in their active isolation from society (Akrami *et al.* 2006) as in their exclusion from formal systems such as education and employment. This in turn reduces their opportunities for community interactions and friendships (Lippold & Burns 2009). Arguably, the provision of specialised services from early childhood onwards has further isolated people from their peers (McConkey 2011).

Although there has been increased emphasis in recent years on the inclusion of people with disabilities in formal systems such as education, to date the results in terms of social acceptance have been uneven (Ferguson 2008) with similar conclusions emerging from supported employment initiatives (Jahoda *et al.* 2008). In terms of leisure and recreation activities, the outcomes have been somewhat more hopeful especially for children (Siperstein *et al.* 2009), although significant barriers can be encountered for adult persons such as the segregated nature of their living arrangements, the economic status of participants, their level of adaptive functioning and the availability of transport along with a lack of other supports to facilitate engagement (McConkey *et al.* 2007; Abells *et al.* 2008).

Participation of people with ID in sports seems a fruitful arena in which to promote social inclusion and this has received increasing attention in mainstream sports studies for other disadvantaged populations such as disaffected youth and immigrants (Coalter 2010). A limitation though is inequality of access to sport by people with disabilities (Liu 2009). For example, the European Commission's White Paper on Sport (European Commission

2007) identified problems with access to sports premises as spectators as well as to sport facilities and activities as players. One response has been the development of specialised sports organisations of which Special Olympics is the foremost example internationally for persons with IDs. In 2010, they claimed to reach 3.7 million athletes in over 170 countries (Special Olympics 2011). Moreover, past research has documented the benefits for participating athletes primarily in terms of gains in physical and mental well-being, sport skills and in self-esteem (Dykens *et al.* 1998; Weiss *et al.* 2003; Siperstein *et al.* 2005).

Nevertheless, Special Olympics has been criticised by some for encouraging segregation from mainstream sports and perpetuating negative stereotypes of persons with IDs (Storey 2008). However, its Unified Sports® initiative may be conceived as an attempt to promote the social inclusion of young people with IDs with their peers in local communities (Dowling *et al.* 2012). This programme combines players with IDs of higher sporting abilities (referred to as athletes) with non-disabled partners of average or lower ability level, in the same sports teams for training and competition. Thus, teams are formed by athletes and partners of similar level of sports skills, which generally means the more able athletes are taking their place alongside non-disabled partners whose sports skills are weaker than those of their peers. The teams train regularly and compete with other Unified Teams in local as well as national and international competitions. The programme's intention is to enable athletes to develop their sporting skills while offering a platform to socialise with peers and the opportunity to develop new friendships, to experience inclusion and to take part in the life of their community. Unified Sports programmes are initiated through schools as well as through Special Olympics clubs and local mainstream sports clubs. In 2010, Unified Sports® was the fastest growing segment of the overall Special Olympics athlete population with nearly 0.5 million participants worldwide (Special Olympics 2011).

Unified Sports® mirrors similar sports initiatives with other marginalised groups underpinned by national and international policies that have lauded the contribution of sport to social cohesion and the generation of social capital (United Nations 2005).

However, as Coalter (2010) observed there is 'widespread lack of evidence for the effectiveness of some of the core claims' (p. 1374). In addition, Hoye *et al.* (2009) noted that 'social capital is not present or reflected in the membership per se but the ways in which the membership is used to secure benefit for the individual or group' (p. 2). To date there has been limited research into the mechanisms by which sporting initiatives have increased or could increase the social inclusion of athletes. Such information would serve to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of initiatives such as Unified Sports to achieve their core aims as well as providing insights as to how greater inclusion may result for people with ID in other contexts such as education and employment.

### Aims of the study

This research was commissioned by Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia under a competitive tendering process. However, the specific aims of this study were developed in consultation with an Advisory Group established for the project and in light of pilot studies undertaken. They were:

- To describe the contributing factors that promote social inclusion within the context of Youth Unified Sports<sup>®</sup> as perceived by five main groups of stakeholders: namely athletes, partners, coaches, family carers and community representatives;
- To determine the extent to which these factors are present across two different sports and five different countries; and
- To identify the implications for the further development of Unified Sports<sup>®</sup>.

### Research design

A qualitative approach was used in gathering information as this enabled informants to share their personal experiences and insights with respect to Unified Sports<sup>®</sup> and the impact it has on social inclusion. Each country was considered initially as a single entity with triangulation of responses possible across the different groups of informants. However, the findings could then be compared across the five countries to determine the extent of replication especially of the dominant themes identified in the data analyses.

### The study population

Youth Unified Sports<sup>®</sup> is an evolving programme that now operates in 28 countries in Europe/Eurasia. In 2009 an estimated 16 000 players aged 12–25 years were involved. It was agreed to focus resources for this study on a number of selected countries within the region where the programme was better established and to focus on its two main sports: seven-a-side association football and basketball.

The inclusion criteria for the selection of countries were:

- 1 The national Youth Unified Sports<sup>®</sup> programme and its teams had been in existence for more than 1 year.
- 2 There were sufficient Youth Unified teams who meet regularly for training and competition to allow for sampling of teams within countries.
- 3 There was a geographical spread between Eastern, Western and Central Europe.

Initially, eight countries were considered to have met the criteria and five were approached, all of whom agreed to take part, namely Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Hungary. Across these five countries over 200 teams were known to the national co-ordinators of Special Olympics involving over 1600 athletes, 1200 partners and 250 coaches. Overall, male athletes exceed female athletes (81% male) as do male partners (87% male), but the gender ratio is slightly less with coaches (75% male).

For purposes of this study, within each country local competitions were arranged for varying numbers of Youth Unified teams in two or more locations. In all 55 teams were represented across the five countries involving 156 athletes, 106 partners and 65 coaches. Information about all the players was provided by the team coaches using a standard pro forma.

The gender balance across the 55 teams was broadly similar to that of the wider population throughout Europe/Eurasia. However, for the chosen sample of teams, partners tended to be younger than the athletes: 44% compared to 21% were aged 12 to 15 years. Also athletes had been involved in Unified Teams for longer than partners. Over two-thirds of athletes had been involved for 3 or more years, whereas this was the case for only

12% of partners. This suggests that the turnover of partners may be greater with most staying for 1 to 2 years. This could be a reflection of partners leaving school and going on to further education or taking up employment.

Another marked difference between the athletes and partners was in terms of the school they attended. All but one of the partners attended mainstream schools, whereas athletes mostly came from special schools (92% in all). Moreover, around one-third of the athletes lived in institutions/boarding schools, whereas nearly all the partners lived with families.

An estimate was made by informants of the economic status of participants' families. Over three-quarters of athletes (78%) were rated as coming from low socio-economic families, whereas this was the case for 11% of partners, 89% of whom were from middle-income families.

### Sample

In line with the aims of the study, in each of the five countries individual interviews were conducted with five athletes, with five or six partners and five coaches as well as group interviews with on average four teams in each country. In addition, around five parents of athletes and partners were individually interviewed as were four or five community representatives such as head teachers of schools and local politicians. The latter two groups had been invited by the local organisers for Unified Sports to attend at our request. Each sample included people of varying ages and backgrounds. In addition, background information was provided by the five National Co-ordinators for Special Olympics in the five participating countries.

### Method

Information was gathered through face-to-face interviews based on a standard topic guide with suggested trigger questions developed from the aims of the study, past research and a pilot study undertaken with Youth Unified Sports® teams in England. The focus of the interview was on gaining an insight into the participants' experience of Unified Sports, their perceptions of the extent of

social inclusion, the factors that assisted or hindered this and the improvements they would propose. Throughout a conversational style was encouraged and interviewers were responsive to the interests of participants and points raised by them.

In each country, two or more researchers from local universities were recruited with experience of sports or disability research and who were fluent in written and spoken English. They were responsible for translating all the written materials into local languages and for translating the interview data into English. Face-to-face training was provided in-country on qualitative interviewing by a member of core staff (S. D.). Video recordings of simulated interviews were used along with role plays for practising techniques. At least one member of the core staff was present at all locations for data gathering.

The data gathering was fitted around a 1-day competition among the participating teams in the chosen locality. This provided an opportunity for researchers to observe the sports in action as well as giving the teams a valid reason for attending and providing an enjoyable experience. Prior to the competition event, information sheets and consent forms were circulated by local Special Olympics staff to all potential participants. These described the study, outlined what was required from participants who agreed to take part, emphasised that the anonymity of participants would be ensured and non-participation in the study would not affect their membership of Unified Teams. Signed consent forms were completed by all participants, and for those under 16, their parents consented to their participation.

Interviews were conducted as people became available while waiting for their next game. Team interviews were generally undertaken first followed by individual interviews with athletes and partners who either volunteered or who were invited to be interviewed. Interviews with coaches generally came towards the end of the day, but those with parents and community representatives took place throughout and according to their availability. The interviews were conducted in a separate room or in a quiet area inside or outside the stadium. They usually lasted around 15 min.

All the interviews were audio-recorded using digital recorders. These were then translated orally into English by local researchers and these audio-

recordings were sent to the core staff member (S. D.) who transcribed them verbatim. Names and identifying details were removed from the data so as to protect the anonymity of participants with codes used to identify the country and informant. In the quotes below, the country is identified first (G – Germany, H – Hungary, P – Poland, S – Serbia, UK – Ukraine), followed by the informant grouping (A – Athlete, C – Coach, CR – Community Representative, P – Partner, Par – Parent, T – Team) and then the allocated number within that grouping.

### Data analysis

The approach used to analyse the data was informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith *et al.* 2009). Initially, the data were analysed for each of the five countries. Interview transcripts for all informants were read and reread to enable a deep familiarity with the text. It was then coded according to the main themes and subthemes which were evident in the data. A second round of coding was then undertaken to compare the themes across the five countries and to check for variations by sport and informants. The identified common themes were then revised and grouped. It was evident then that data saturation had been reached in that no new themes emerged from the later stages of data gathering. Selected transcripts were read and coded by more than one member of the core team to facilitate checking of themes. A similar process was used to identify

themes across the countries. Also as a further validation check, a summary of the main findings was sent to our University partners as well as to an invited group of National Co-ordinators for Unified Sports® from countries who did and did not take part in the project.

### Findings

All the informants confirmed that Unified Sports had resulted in greater social inclusion of the athletes, foremost through their regular engagement with the coaches and partners for training and competitions but also in terms of shared activities away from the sports field. However, our main emphasis was on their perceptions as to how this had come about.

Figure 1 summarises the four main themes and subthemes to emerge from the data relating to the perceived success of Unified Sports in promoting the social inclusion of the athletes. Although there were some variations across different groups of informants and across countries, the similarities in responses were much more striking. These four themes are described separately in the interests of clarity but each are related to the others.

#### Personal development of the athletes and partners

The personal development of both sets of participants was seen in terms of sporting skills, interpersonal skills and opportunities offered to them



**Figure 1** The main themes and subthemes perceived to promote social inclusion with Unified Sports.

through Unified Sports, all of which contributed to participating fully in the teams. Both the athletes and the partners variously report improvements in their skills on the sports field, in relation to improved stamina and technical skills which were endorsed by coaches and parents.

We used to have to take it easy in training with the athletes as they got tired very quickly, now they want to go on and on, even after we partners have had enough. (UK-Po2)

I think I play football much better than before, my technique is much better, like ball control – passing and shooting and being in contact with other players on the field. (S-Ao5)

Having improved abilities in sport led to an increase in their status among peers at school and in their communities.

. . . the athletes who are involved become more popular after taking part in Unified Sports, they are like celebrities in school when they come back with medals from a competition, and that they hang around with kids from the mainstream school gives them higher status here in the special school. (S-CRo1)

All informants commented on the improved interpersonal skills of the players. These include a growth in self-belief and self-esteem and the development of confidence as well as improved communication skills.

I am a more confident person now. I am not shy to talk to people. I will hold my head up and speak out loud. I got more used to people in playing on my team and I am not afraid of people that I don't know. (H-Ao1)

One house-parent from an institution where some of the athletes lived also remarked on how their self-esteem has grown:

The boys I know, I can see the difference when they are at home, they are calmer, they do not have to prove themselves in arguing or something like that, they are able to be more sure of themselves. (H-CRo2)

Developments in communication skills were not restricted to athletes; partners also described new learning:

At first (when he first joined the team) it was a bit difficult because I didn't know all these people and I couldn't communicate with them in the same way that I did with my friends, but in just a few days this problem disappeared and it was very easy to communicate with these people. (UK-Po1)

A third subtheme with respect to personal development was the broadening of opportunities that Unified Sports athletes had of experiencing community life through their involvement in activities which took them out of special facilities and into typical meeting places in their communities and beyond. Through these opportunities there is also an increased visibility of people with disabilities in the community.

My son went to Romania and to Portugal, we had to look Portugal up on the map! He learnt a lot of things and he told us about what he had seen there, this experience changed him, he saw something of the world, he came back with his head high, his mother and I were proud of him too. (S-Po1)

We have a good relationship with the head teacher here in this school (mainstream) and we are able to train here and hold some competitions here too. The kids at this school see our athletes here and they get used to seeing them. (P-Co1)

Some participants also talked about the places they go socially with one another after training and matches. Although this was not the experience of all athletes, some did experience hanging out in places typically frequented by teenagers.

We go to the town square and talk, or to the games arcade, or we go for a drink in a café, the guys from the team know places to go and we go after training if we all have time. (S-Ao2)

In sum, Unified Sports provided opportunities for the young people to develop the skills needed to become more socially included first within the teams but then within other social contexts. As one mother commented:

Through Unified Sports my son has learnt that he is a worthwhile person and that he can meet with the kids without disabilities and have fun with them. He listens to what they say, that he is

equal and important on the team and he comes home very happy. Unified Sports has taught my son that he can be included and he doesn't have to hide anymore. (S-Paro2)

### Inclusive and equal bonds

A second domain related to the bonds developed between athletes and partners in the teams that were rooted in respect and equality. The focus on teamwork was central to this with coaches having a particularly crucial role. The growth of friendships among the players was also noteworthy.

We are all needed on the team, there are no star players, we are a great team and the team is the star. (H-Ao2)

There are no differences here between athletes and partners, we are all the same, the coach treats us the same and we treat each other the same. (G-Po1)

I treat everybody equally right from the start, it is important for players and athletes to see that they are the same in the team. I am also careful to talk to them in a pleasant way, and to joke with them, I do not give athletes special treatment and I do not give partners special treatment and they all see this and it affects how they treat each other, they too are willing to behave as an group of equals. In a Unified team we are all the same. (UK-Co3)

Young people reported how the approach that coaches take to training impacted on their experience of Unified Sports. Some compared this to past experiences they had had in mainstream sports clubs:

The training we have here is much better and much nicer than I had before in my table tennis (mainstream) club. I enjoy it much more here. If you cannot do something then you are advised by the coaches calmly of it, how you can do work to make – for instance if you are a goalkeeper you are advised of how you can guard your goal better. (S-Po1)

Parents also report in the inclusive culture of Unified Sports and often attribute this to leaders and coaches; one parent stated:

I want to talk about the healthy attitude of partners, because their attitude is very good, there is no negative attitude to children with disabilities, they do not go ahead with the ball, they give athletes every opportunity to show their skills so that everyone is involved in the game. This is how the coaches teach them and this is really working well. (UK-Paro1)

Coaches mentioned the selection of partners and the need to work with partners as much as athletes to create a Unified Team.

I do not select kids just for their sporting ability, I want to know what they are like on the inside, that they are open and kind. (S-Co3)

Now they (the partners) are calm, helpful and patient, at the beginning they didn't co-operate much with athletes, now it has changed. (P-Co1)

The growth of friendships among the players was commonly reported and some coaches deliberately encouraged this.

Friendship is the most important thing about being a member of a unified team. We are all friends both on and off the field. We also have a good connection with our coaches who I think I can say are our friends. (S-Po2)

We all like sport and we ask each other have you seen the game last night, and do you know the latest results and things like that. Sometimes there is a girl that one of us likes and we talk to each other about the best way that one of us can ask her out, we share some of that type of information, personal information with each other. It wasn't like that from the beginning, but it is now because we have been playing together for more than a year and we have become good friends. (S-Ao1)

We in the club push people together to do different activities, not just sports activities, we want them to hang around together after school, go to dances, go to discos, go to towns, and we also organise for nature walks, and we invite everyone to participate in this. So we have lots of different non-sports activities that connect people and this helps them to spend more time together. (S-Co5)

For some teams, the relationships between the players were less equal as evident in the language used by partners to describe the athletes and how they viewed their role as one of assisting people who were less able. In these teams, the extent of mutual engagement off the playing field was also not so apparent. This might derive from the attitudes of certain coaches.

I have always felt sorry for these people, and I always thought it was a good idea to help them and for them to meet with each other. (UK-Po1)

They [the athletes] have the chance to improve their social interactions, to learn how to behave with other people who are not disabled; they can watch partners and in this way improve themselves. (UK-Po3)

I see them talking together at training and so on, and it is clear that they are friends, but as for meeting up outside, I don't think they are ready for this yet. (P-Co2)

However, other practical reasons were given for lack of contact outside the sports.

I hang around after training only with those who live close to me, because lots of us live on a different side of the city and it is not so easy for us to hang out after training – we have to catch a bus or train to get home and that is what makes it difficult. (S-Ao3)

Unfortunately, as I have to help my father quite a lot at the house because we have to live off the farm work that he and the other members of my family do, after training I have to go straight home because I have to help. (S-Ao2)

In sum then, Unified Sports offered the opportunity for inclusive and equal bonds to be forged among the two sets of participants that extended into friendships beyond the playing field. When these bonds were absent, there was less evidence of mutual participation in community settings.

#### Positive perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities

The third major contribution that Unified Teams was perceived to make to the promotion of social

inclusion was by challenging the prevailing negative attitudes towards ID that was commonly reported by all the informants but notably parents and partners.

. . . people must stop being ashamed of these kids, people in our society still have strange reactions to disabled people, sometimes they are ashamed, sometimes they are scared. But we have to talk with these people more, we have to inform them, disability has been taboo for many years, it is changing right now, but it is not enough, people need to have free access to information on this subject. (P-Paro5)

I am ashamed to say that I used to laugh at these people (people with intellectual disabilities), now I will tell anybody to stop laughing if I see it and I will stand up for people if I can. It is wrong to laugh at these people, but I didn't know much before I just did what everyone else did. (H-Po4)

The idea was expressed by various informants that Unified Sports created a kind of ripple effect that reached more people.

The great merit of Unified Sports is that they increase the number of people who understand the needs of people with disabilities, so yesterday for example there were 10 people, today there is 100 people and tomorrow there will be 1000 of us and then there will be the whole country who understands the needs of people with disabilities and then the society will be able to organise normal conditions for them. (UK-Paro1)

Partners spoke of how their attitudes have changed.

I think the biggest change in my inner world is the change of my attitude to people with intellectual disability because working and training with these people I try to compare people with disabilities and healthy people and I can say that athletes may be sometimes even more sincere and open and kind than healthy people you meet everyday. (U-Po4)

Some parents talked about how the partner's change in attitudes and how this had influenced his/her wider family and friends:

He has taught us all really. He tells us, his family and also his friends at school about what he is



learning about people with intellectual disabilities, about being good at football, about being good friends, and so we have all learnt so much. Some of his friends have joined the team and I have become a volunteer when I can at events they have. His getting involved changed something for us all. (S-Paro2)

The data also asserted the importance of the Unified Sports programme in raising awareness of the athlete's talents. This was achieved through media coverage of Unified competitions and celebration of achievements of the Unified team. One young person recognised the direct impact of this on his life:

Lots of people say they saw me on TV because of winning the competition, and these are nice people taking to me about being a good footballer. This is because I am the goalie on the Unified team and I am really a good goalie. (S-Ao1)

Participants strongly endorsed Unified Sports role in advocacy for people with IDs in their communities. One parent stated:

This project is a good way of informing people and we should have more of them and we should inform society about the existence of such a project and the existence of people with disabilities via television, radio programmes and so on. (UK-Po1)

This was supported by a coach who said:

To get more people involved we have to tell people about what we do here, it is our obligation to do this. (H-Co2)

National and international competitions provide opportunities for doing this.

Athletes are really proud when they come back home with medals; we try to show them to society either in the press or the local TV. Some years ago at the beginning of the movement it was hard but now the media are more interested in what we do and achieve. (P-Co3)

The outcomes can be personal as this athlete described:

When I walk around town lots of different people say hello to me, people that I did not know

before but now I do because I met them through this team or have played against them in some other competitions. (S-Ao3)

In summary, by challenging many of the stereotypes associated with disability, Unified Sports builds new perceptions of people labelled as intellectually disabled but does this through personal contacts at the team level which then ripple through into the wider community. It may be a slow process, but it is one that is the basis for greater acceptance of people with IDs into local communities.

### Building alliances

Finally, the data from coaches, parents and community informants identified the importance of building alliances as a prelude to greater social inclusion of the players. Primarily, this was with mainstream schools as they were the source of recruitment of partners and coaches.

For the third year our Unified Sports programme has a collaboration agreement with a mainstream school. Not only do we recruit many of our partners from this school they also let us use their 25 seat bus and their playing fields. (H-Co2)

Alliances with players' families were also important in assisting the athletes and partners to attend training and covering some of the expenses involved in their participation. In some cases siblings came as partners and for parents too, their involvement went deeper as alliances were forged among themselves.

We are a group of parents and now a group of friends. Some of our children are partners and some are athletes but we do not make a difference in that just like we tell our children there is no difference. We try to help each other; we give each other's children a lift or help at an event. Unified Sports is a big part of our lives too. (S-Po1)

We have set up a union of parents and children in Special Olympics and it is very important because we as parents can understand each other. We can fight for what is right for our children and we can support each other in our decisions. (UK-Po3)

The teams had also forged links with various community and sporting organisations in their local communities. They offered 'in-kind' support to the programme in terms of access to facilities and supplying equipment, but also provided opportunities for publicising Unified Sports. In some instances local funding was also available through these community alliances.

As both a member of the local community and someone who is able to finance different programmes, organisation, institutions, I am able to give finances to different projects with people with intellectual disabilities. We give support to programmes to this Unified project. I hope the money they receive is even bigger next year because lots of people can benefit from the sports activities in this school. (S-CR01)

For a small number of athletes interviewed, taking part in the Unified programme had directly led to them securing employment with mainstream businesses. These were achieved through introductions made on behalf of athletes by coaches and through employers seeing young people play and then deciding to offer them an opportunity in employment. Athletes reported that they were supported in their employment by the mentoring of coaches from their Unified team.

I work in a restaurant in the village, this is a full time job, it is what I wanted to achieve, so I work outside the institution. This was with the help of my coach that I got this job. I tried hard to get a job and in the end I got a permanent job. (G-P02)

Finally, as Unified Sports is part of the wider Special Olympics movement, this gave access to national and international Sports Federations as well as Government Ministries, but this aspect was mentioned by National Co-ordinators rather than local informants.

## Discussion

The study has a number of limitations. The informants were drawn solely from participants who were actively involved with Unified Sports and did not include those who may have dropped out. It is

possible too that the teams chosen and the inclusion criteria used for their selection biased the sample towards the best examples, rather than typical examples, of the impact of Unified Sports. However, the aim was not so much to assess the overall impact of the programme but rather to gain an insight into the processes inherent in Unified Sports that were perceived to further the social inclusion of the athletes within teams and communities. Identifying the pertinent processes is a step towards increasing the efficiency of the Unified Sports programme in achieving its objectives and for guiding inclusion initiatives in other contexts such as employment and education. In this respect the study has a number of unique strengths: it included participants from five different countries and cultures; it covered two different sports and triangulated the opinions across five different groups of informants.

The four themes identified endorse the concepts inherent in theories of social capital and in particular that of 'bonding': that is building networks based on strong social ties between similar people which maintains a strong group loyalty and reinforces specific identities (Coalter 2010). Such bonding is especially crucial for athletes with IDs whose poorer sporting competence and social skills, coupled with the negative stereotypes associated with the disability label or their attendance at special schooling, often lead to their exclusion from sports. Significantly, Unified Sports provides a shared experience for both sets of players to develop their sporting skills along with offering both parties access to valued opportunities, such as travel to competitions. This mutuality of benefit or reciprocity is often absent in other attempts to promote inclusion for people with ID based as they often are around the altruism of the more able person as helper or supporter to the disadvantaged group. Rather as Coleman (1988) argued, the continuing investment by others in bonded relationships requires that they too receive a dividend.

A related issue in this respect is the deliberate selection of persons to be partners, in this instance non-disabled youth with an enthusiasm for sport but lacking the skills to advance in more competitive mainstream sports. This not only reduced the discrepancies in terms of sporting competences but also could be seen to introduce elements of peer

tutoring that have been shown to be efficacious in other sport-based intervention programmes, particularly the perceived similarities between the tutor and the learner (Payne *et al.* 2003).

Allied to these bonding processes but possibly growing out of them, is a challenge that Unified Sports makes to the negative perceptions that surround ID in many countries (World Health Organisation 2007). As other studies have identified, personal contact is a major factor in attitudinal shifts across many cultures as non-disabled people discover that the stigmatised group is more like themselves than they are different (Yazbeck *et al.* 2004). In addition, the emphasis on developing athletes' talents in social as well as sporting skills and celebrating their achievements through media publicity further distances them from the usual stereotypes of disabled persons that were reportedly present in all the participating countries and which are often reinforced in newspapers through the negative images and words used when reporting on people with disabilities (Brittain 2004). Locally sourced, good news stories generated through Unified Sports are possibly more likely to reshape a community's perceptions of disability than national campaigns. Also the gains in terms of young people's personal development could enable them to participate more fully in further education and employment: an aspect that future research could explore (Beyer & Robinson 2009).

The role of the coaches in facilitating team bonding is especially noteworthy. Their role is much broader than that of imparting sport skills (Hassan *et al.* 2012). Unified Sports coaches have responsibilities for recruitment, for furthering the personal and social development of both sets of players, for forging teamwork among them, for managing practical arrangements and facilitating social contacts outside the playing field. As others have noted, the social and personal development activities which accompany the sport are probably more important in realising the wider goals than are the sporting activities *per se* (Orsmond *et al.* 2004; Spaaij 2009). Parallels can be drawn with the contribution of teachers to the success of pupils with special needs within mainstream schools (Avramidis & Norwich 2002), but comparable facilitators of inclusion are absent in other aspects of life such as employment where the so-called 'job-coach' often has

responsibility solely for the person with disability (Jahoda *et al.* 2008).

Woolcock & Narayan (2000) identify a further form of social capital: namely 'linking' social capital that connects bonded groups to people and resources in the wider community thereby offering access to larger social networks and the leveraging of additional resources. There was only limited evidence of such linking occurring within this study and that was mostly with local schools, families and community associations. Indeed, a surprising omission in the data obtained from informants was their lack of linkages with mainstream sporting organisations, as at a local level, it would be conceivable that some of the teams or players might progress into mainstream competitions. As social capital theorists have noted, overly strong bonds can have negative consequences that may discourage contacts with the wider communities and limit opportunities (Forrest & Kearns 1999) or even act as a form of social control and regulation (Spaaij 2009). 'Linking' social capital can help to balance the more negative bonding effects. Future research using survey-based methods could usefully explore this issue further, especially with respect to the social contacts athletes have within the wider community beyond the sports field.

It is likely too that being linked into the infrastructure of the Special Olympics organisation nationally and internationally was another source of social capital for Unified Sports to draw upon. At a practical level, this provided opportunities for local competitions based on shared rules and gave access to funds for equipment as well as providing an infrastructure for recruiting coaches and athletes (Dowling *et al.* 2012). Nationally, Special Olympics assisted with governmental and media contacts in a way that locally created sports groups could not draw upon (Seippel 2006) and the international competitions were possible through the regional and world games organised by Special Olympics biannually. The linking social capital emanating from Unified Sports and Special Olympics, however, should be mutually beneficial, in that the success of Unified Sports will further stimulate change in the host organisation (Hughes & McDonald 2008).

In sum, Unified Sports does provide a vehicle for promoting the social inclusion of people with IDs that is theoretically credible and with empirical

evidence in support of it. Nonetheless, there are four possible limitations that require further consideration. First, the recruitment of coaches with appropriate skills and attitudes is central to this endeavour allied with the extent of training, supervision and support they receive (Spaaij 2009). There is an urgent need for more empirical research relating to the role of personnel as promoters of social inclusion (McConkey & Collins 2010).

Second, the main beneficiaries thus far of Youth Unified Sports are more able athletes whose sporting skills are more on par with those of the partners in the chosen sports. However, those with greater needs arising from their disabilities are arguably at a higher risk of social exclusion and hence might benefit even more from participating in Unified Sports. It is not immediately clear how this might come about as the careful matching of the athletes with partners is key to the programme's success. One approach may be to focus on the engagement of partners with athletes who have higher needs in the context of different and less demanding sports that feature in traditional Special Olympics and to focus more on non-competitive activities (Harada & Siperstein 2009).

Third, as in mainstream sporting activities, attention should be given to the development of strategies to encourage more female players to participate. In part this is affected by the choice of sports, in that in the countries where basketball was played by Unified teams, a higher ratio of female players was found. Hence, a wider range of sports is one strategy to encourage the greater participation of women (DePauw & Gavron 2005), although further research could usefully elucidate the factors for the differential recruitment by gender into sports activities.

Fourth, participation in sporting organisations no matter how excellent cannot eliminate the social inequalities experienced by young people with IDs in terms of family circumstances, financial pressures, education and the local labour market that were evident in this data. Ideally, a multi-sectoral approach is needed to generate the necessary political and economic capital to overcome these inequalities and although these will be difficult to achieve, the creation of social capital that is individually tailored to local circumstances may be a critical first step and one in which sport can claim to be an important contributor.

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