

Sports for learners with physical disabilities in ordinary public primary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

In the Western Cape, learners with physical disabilities are accepted into ordinary schools (a school that is not a special school) as a part of the inclusive education initiative. This article reports on a survey designed to determine the types of sports that are available for learners with physical disabilities in ordinary public primary schools and the factors influencing their participation in sport. The study sample included 31 learners with physical disabilities (learners with movement or mobility difficulties or who used an assistive device) attending seven ordinary public primary schools, one teacher from each school and one teacher from each of eight conveniently selected special schools. Three questionnaires were used, one for the learners, another for the teachers at the ordinary schools and the third for the teachers at the special schools. Analysis was done using SPSS Version 15. The main findings of the study were that 32% (n=10) of learners participated in sports. They were expected to participate in the type of sports that were already offered at the school. No adapted sport was offered specifically for these learners. Most learners wanted to participate in swimming. Fewer types of sports were offered in ordinary schools than in special schools. Barriers to participation included poor teacher preparation and inadequate financial support. The shortage of support from school staff, occupational therapists and physiotherapists in addition to inadequate financial support needs to be addressed by the Department of Basic Education and Department of Sport and Recreation to enable the learners to participate in sports at ordinary schools.

Key words: Sports, learners, disabilities, ordinary schools, barriers to participation.

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Introduction

The opportunities, or lack thereof, for children with disabilities to participate in sport is an indication of the value a society places on their social inclusion. In South Africa, the prevalence of childhood disability is reported by Statistics South Africa (2005) as 2.1% for the 0-9 year age group and 3.0% for the 10-19 years age group. These children need opportunities to participate in recreational and competitive sport.

The development of an inclusive education system in South Africa gives learners with disabilities the right to attend their local school, even if it is not a special school (Department of Education, 2001). While it is recognised that not all learners with disabilities can, for example, participate in a sport such as rugby, it is also reasonable to assume that, in a society with a constitution that promotes the rights of people with disabilities, learners with disabilities attending ordinary^a public schools will have the opportunity to participate in an accessible sport. Theoretically, schools in South Africa offer all children the opportunity to participate in sports through the Life Orientation curriculum. Physical activity and sports, such as rugby, netball and athletics have been promoted within Life Orientation. Additionally, in some schools, these sports are offered as extramural activities.

The benefits of participation in sports for the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of both able-bodied and disabled learners have been identified. Participation in sports improves self-image (Huang & Brittain, 2006) and cardiovascular fitness, prevents chronic diseases of lifestyle, increases productivity, facilitates rehabilitation (Chawla, 1994), provides social support and is a vehicle for social inclusion (Chawla, 1994; Kristen, Patriksson & Fridlund, 2002).

Three factors that have been identified as facilitating the participation of learners with physical disabilities in sports are support from sports organisations (Rutsate, 2006), financial support (DISSA, 2007) and support from therapists (Elkins, van Kraayenoord & Jobling, 2003). In South Africa disabled sports organisations under the umbrella bodies of Disability Sport South Africa (DISSA) and Special Olympics give support to people participating in sport outside school (DISSA, 2007). Limited financial support is available for learners with disabilities to be included in sports activities in ordinary schools from the government and private organisations (Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, 2006; DISSA, 2007). Thirdly, occupational therapists and physiotherapists can give support to teachers of learners with disabilities (Elkins et al., 2003). Few teachers are trained to assist learners with disabilities to participate in sports and need advice on what types of sports particular learners with disabilities can participate in (Dart, 2006; Forlin, 2004).

A number of barriers to participation in sports by people with disabilities have been identified internationally. These include the inaccessibility of facilities (Forlin, 2004; Mihaylov et al., 2004), and a lack of the following: adequate

^a In South Africa the Department of Education defines an ordinary school as “a school that is not a special school” (Department of Education, 2010). The term mainstream school is used in some countries.

training of teachers or coaches (Kearney & Kane, 2006), information on types of sports for people with disabilities, opportunities to participate, specialised sports coaches, appropriate transport, special adaptive aids, adult supervision, support and finance as well as the fear of rejection (Chawla, 1994; Forlin, 2004; Hale, 2004; Kearney & Kane, 2006).

The aim of this study in the Western Cape, South Africa was to determine the types of sports that were available at ordinary primary schools, and the factors which militate against or facilitate participation in sports for the learners with physical disabilities in ordinary schools.

Methods

Research design

In a study based in ordinary primary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa, a cross-sectional survey design was used for data collection which consisted of three parts targeted at different audiences.

Study population and sample

The population for the first part of the survey were the learners with physical disabilities in ordinary primary schools. The Western Cape Education Department (WCED) provided a list of all ordinary public primary schools that had accepted learners with “special educational needs”. This included only 11 schools (out of 1452), seven of which indicated they had accepted learners who had a physical disability (learners with movement or mobility difficulties or who used an assistive device). All 43 learners from these schools were included in the study sample. The second part of the survey involved one teacher, selected by the principal to answer the questionnaire, at each of these seven ordinary schools. The third part of the survey involved teachers at special schools. A list of all the special schools in the Western Cape was obtained from the WCED. Eight special schools known to have a preponderance of learners with physical disabilities were purposively selected from the list.

Questionnaires

The learners with physical disabilities attending ordinary schools were surveyed using the Sport for Learners with Physical Disabilities: Learner’s Questionnaire (SLPDQ-L). This was to determine the learners’ past and current participation in sport and their perceptions of the barriers to participation. The teachers from ordinary schools were surveyed using the Sport for Learners with Physical Disabilities: Principals/Teachers’ Questionnaire (SLPDQ-PT) to determine

which sports were offered in the school, whether any sport was offered specifically for the learners with physical disabilities, adequacy of teacher training related to disability, and their perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of sport participation. The teachers from special needs schools were surveyed using the Special School Telephonic Questionnaire (SSTQ) to determine the sports offered in their schools. The questionnaires were specifically designed for this survey and based on an extensive literature search. The list of sports was based on the list of recognised Paralympic sports which was obtained from the DISSA website (DISSA, 2007) with the addition of Jukskei since it is a sport that is indigenous to South Africa. Constraints included physical, psychological and social barriers (Chawla, 1994; Forlin, 2004; Hale, 2004; Kearney & Kane, 2006; Mihaylov et al., 2004).

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was addressed by discussing the questionnaires with an external researcher and with two teachers who had experience of learners with disabilities to ensure the meaning within the concept was clear. A planned test-retest study to determine reliability was cancelled as the researcher was not allowed into the schools in Term 4 of the school year, and subsequently not done.

Language

The questionnaires used in the survey were translated from English into Afrikaans and Xhosa. The English questionnaires were translated into Afrikaans by the researcher, whose home language is Afrikaans. These were edited by an English-Afrikaans translator. The Xhosa translation was done by a Xhosa speaking nurse and back translated by a Xhosa speaking physiotherapy student. Participants were informed that they could answer the questionnaires in their home language; however, the Xhosa questionnaires were not used.

Procedure

Seven of the ten ordinary schools identified were visited by the researcher in person. Questionnaires were posted three distant schools, two of whom schools responded. Thus nine ordinary schools were included in the final sample. The SLPDQ-L were completed by the learners and, where necessary, with the assistance of the parents or guardians. The teachers completed the SLPDQ-PT. Telephonic interviews using the SSTQ were conducted with one teacher from each of the special schools.

Data analysis

Analysis was done using SPSS Version 15. Since the sample size was very small, it was inappropriate to carry out inferential statistics.

Ethics

Ethical considerations included obtaining ethical approval from the University of the Western Cape where the researchers were based, permission from the WCED, the school principals, and informed signed consent from the parents/guardians of the learners and assent from the learners.

Results

Twelve parents/guardians of the 43 identified learners refused consent to participate in the study thus giving an overall return rate of 72%. Thus the study sample included only 31 learners. They comprised 22 learners attending schools in urban areas, eight learners in schools in semi-urban areas and one learner in a school in a rural area. There were 18 boys and 11 girls aged 7-15 years (mean age 11 years). Two learners did not indicate their sex and eight learners did not indicate their ages. The disabilities of the learners were not determined. Although the parents were asked to indicate the disability on the consent form, none provided this information. Ten (32%) of the learners were participating in some form of sport at school at the time of data collection. They included five boys (28% of all the boys), four girls (36% of all the girls) and one unknown. All the learners participated in athletics, two learners indicated that they participated in swimming, three learners played rugby, and one learner reported participating in horse riding, soccer or netball. Eight (25%) of the learners had previously attended a special school. Only one (12.5%) of these eight learners was participating in a sport in the ordinary school while eight (35%) out of 23 learners who never attended a special school were participating in a sport at school. The sports offered by the ordinary and special schools are shown in Table 1. Some special schools also offered wheelchair ballroom dancing and gymnastics.

Table 1: Sports offered by special schools and ordinary schools

Sports*	Special school (N=8)	Ordinary school (N=7)	Sports*	Special school (N=8)	Ordinary school (N=7)
Archery	2	0	Horse riding	6	3
Athletics	8	7	Netball	7	5
Basketball	4	0	Rugby	0	4
Boccia	5	0	Swimming	6	2
Cricket	5	7	Soccer	6	2
Cycling	3	0	Table tennis	7	0
Golf	2	0	Tennis	2	1
Jukskei	1	0	Volleyball	1	0
Hokker	6	0			

* None of the schools offered the following Paralympics sports: badminton, goalball, lawnbowls, powerlifting, sailing, shooting

Learners indicated which sports they would like to participate in if they were offered. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

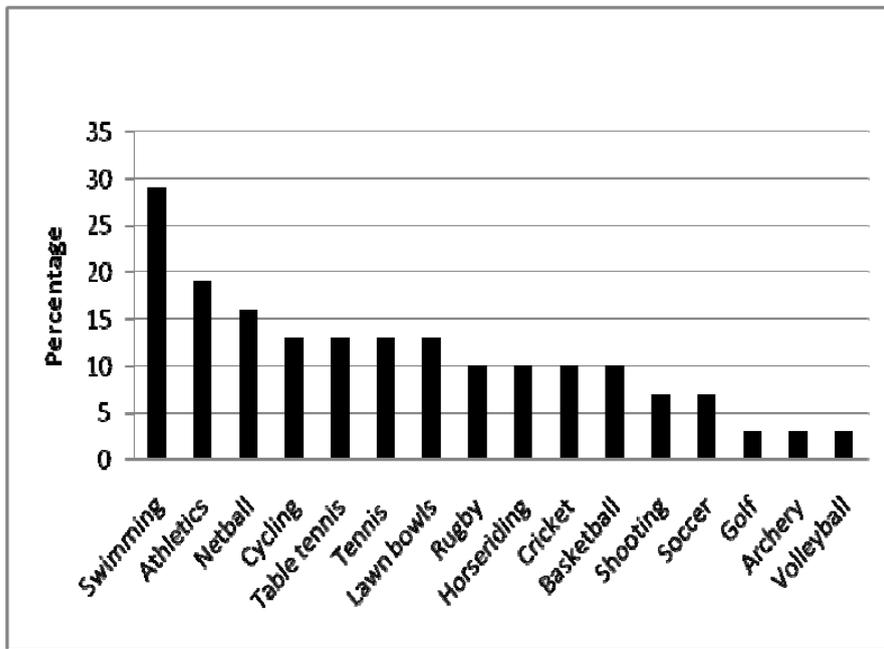


Figure 1: Percentage of learners who would like to participate in sports (N=31)

Facilitators

Six out of seven teachers at the ordinary schools felt that more funds and more staff would facilitate the participation of learners with disabilities in sports.

When considering environmental factors, five out of seven teachers indicated that more sports fields would facilitate increased participation in sports amongst learners with physical disabilities. Five out of the seven teachers indicated that more support from physiotherapists and occupational therapists was needed to facilitate participation in sports

Barriers

The barriers identified by the learners and teachers are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of perceived physical, psychological and social barriers to learners with disabilities participating in sports at ordinary schools

Barriers	Teachers (n=7)		Learners (n=31)		Missing data
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Physical barriers					
Insufficient opportunities	2	5	4	22	5
Special sports equipment	5	2	5	21	5
Lack of sports fields	2	5	17	9	5
No access to transport	3	4	12	14	5
Poor level of fitness	2	5	9	17	5
Psychological barriers					
Being made fun of	4	3	7	19	5
Lack of self-confidence	5	2	14	12	5
Poor health	1	6	4	22	5
Social barriers					
Insufficient time	0	7	0	26	5
Inadequate funding	4	3	10	16	5
Lack of parental support	3	4	7	19	5
Too few coaches	4	3	21	5	5
Lack of support by therapists	5	2	21	5	5

Discussion

The special schools in this study offered a larger variety of sporting opportunities to learners with disabilities than ordinary schools. Currently, the learner with a physical disability in the Western Cape has a wider opportunity to participate in a variety of sports in a special school setting than in an ordinary school. This finding is inconsistent with international trends. For example, in the UK the same types of sports are offered in special and ordinary schools (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2004).

The findings of this study support those reported in the literature, which suggest that limited numbers of learners with disabilities participate in sport (Hale, 2004). In ordinary schools in the Western Cape, only 32% (n=10) of learners with physical disabilities participated in sports at schools.

On average these learners participated in 1-2 different types of sports. In a survey conducted in 2000 in the UK, learners with disabilities participated in an average of six types of sports (Sport England, 2001).

All of the ordinary schools in the study in the Western Cape offered athletics and cricket. However, swimming was the sport most learners would have liked to participate in but only two schools had swimming facilities. Apart from therapeutic horse riding, no other sports were specifically offered for learners with physical disabilities. This is contrary to the spirit of inclusion where the environment needs to be adapted to suit the learners' needs (Department of Education, 2001). Currently learners are expected to participate in the sport codes that are available in the schools even if not physically able to do so.

The shortage of resources in ordinary public schools is a key factor reducing participation in sport. Ordinary schools that accommodate learners with disabilities do not receive any additional financial support to assist the learners despite expenses they have to incur in adapting the environment or for providing expert coaches. A number of schools indicated that "more sports fields" would encourage the learners' participation in sports. This finding must be considered critically since all seven of the ordinary schools offered athletics and cricket and are therefore expected to have at least one or two sports fields. Learners with disabilities, who wanted to play soccer for instance, could possibly have been accommodated on these fields at different times if the human resources or sports coaches and equipment were available.

Another key factor reducing participation is poor teacher preparation as very few are specifically trained to teach learners with physical disabilities. They are often not sure if certain types of sports are beneficial to the learners or if the learners are capable of participating in them. If more teachers at ordinary schools had support from occupational therapists and physiotherapists it would be easier for them to encourage the learners to participate in sports. Teachers at most of the schools indicated that learners with physical disabilities were "unable" to participate in sport. Teachers' negative attitude could be due to their inadequate knowledge about disabilities since many teachers have not had formal training related to supporting learners with disabilities. These concerns were expressed in the *White Paper 6: Special Needs Education; Building an inclusive education and training system* published in 2001 (Department of Education, 2001). A number of strategies were proposed in the Paper in the section *Strategic areas of change* to address issues relating to funding, further training in special educational needs for teachers and district support teams (including therapy support), and support for ordinary schools from resource centres. These strategies still need to be implemented. Schools are still in need of funding to facilitate inclusion and participation in sports. Teachers still need further

training. The development of special schools into resource centres that provide support for ordinary schools has been very slow.

Limitations

It is very likely that many learners with physical disabilities attending ordinary public primary schools were not on the WCED data base at the time of the study, thus the results should be interpreted cautiously. The findings are not generalisable to private schools or public secondary schools. The reliability of the questionnaires remains to be done. This is a limitation of the study and affects the usefulness of the questionnaires for other researchers. The use of quantitative methods with this small sample size would have been strengthened with the addition of a qualitative component.

Conclusion

Some learners with physical disabilities attend ordinary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. The proportion of learners who participate in sport is small. Adapted sports are not provided. Learners only have access to the sports that are offered to learners without disabilities in the particular schools. The special schools in the province offer a greater range of sports than the ordinary schools. For learners with disabilities to be fully included in the sports activities, increased support for teachers at ordinary schools from therapists, special schools or sporting organisations for people with disabilities is needed. Teachers need opportunities to learn more about sporting opportunities for learners with disabilities. The Department of Basic Education and Department of Sport and Recreation need to work together to ensure that learners with disabilities can participate in appropriate sport.

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