

Research Paper

A qualitative study: effect of sport participation on general mental health of athletes with intellectual disabilities from special Olympics Bharat

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This qualitative study aims at exploring the effect of sports participation on the general mental health of athletes with intellectual disabilities from Special Olympics Bharat. **Method:** In-depth interviews conducted with 20 athletes with intellectual disabilities from various states of India and thematic analysis of the data has been carried out. **Results:** Thematic analysis revealed seven themes which assessed the athlete's perceptions related to their sport in various domains of mental health. Athletes stated a surge in their level of confidence since they started participating in the sport which further enhanced their communication and team work skills. Athletes also feel that their social skills have improved, leading to more bonding and belonging in their relationships. Athletes also feel more independent and have developed positive qualities such as leadership through their sport. Lastly, their sport has also helped them overcome various barriers by providing them with facilitators such as increased opportunities and guidance from experts. **Conclusion:** The analysis and findings conclude that participating in sports help enhance an athlete's confidence, their relationships and helps them become more independent. Athletes face some personal and environmental barriers while playing their sport, but they are able to overcome them through numerous facilitators in their life. All in all, being an athlete of Special Olympics Bharat and regularly getting the opportunities to participate in sports and related events improves an athlete's general mental health.

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Sports are not just seen as a way to remain healthy, rather, it has a direct link with the socio-economic development of a country. The benefits of sports are endless. It's the way to foster true wellness and rejuvenate society.

According to the **International Journal of Sport, Exercise, and Health Research (2018)**, detailed publications on the benefits of sports are as follows-

- Improved physical health and decreased risk of contracting major chronic diseases such as heart problems, strokes, and cancers.
- Improved mental and emotional well-being especially in preventing and alleviating depression, anxiety, and coping with stress
- Increased social networks and relationships;
- Enhanced cognitive functioning and learning;
- Heightened self-esteem and confidence.

A History of Sports in India

There has been an exponential growth in sports and physical fitness in the lives of Indians in the past 20 years. Prior to the 1980s, sports wasn't considered a necessity, and not much emphasis was given to inculcate it into our lives. In 1982, India hosted the 'Asian Games' for the 1st time (Uppal, 2006). Since India's 65% of the population is under 35 years of age, this led to more awareness and participation of youth, as well as more funding from the government in terms of facilities. Further, the 2010 Commonwealth Games, Hockey World Cup 2011, Grand Prix, Cricket World cup, 2011 also boosted this enthusiasm of engaging in sports. (Singh, 2013).

This led to a surge in Sports-related private as well as government organisations. Sports Authority of India was established in 1984 with the aim of promoting and developing sports activities. Further, the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award established in 1992 was also one motivating factor for the youth to take up a sport as a career. In order to make sports inclusive for the rural population, PYKKA (Panchayat Yuva Krida aur Khel Abhiyan) was launched in 2009 which created basic sports infrastructure in villages and small towns.

Currently, the 'Department of Sports', under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has launched various schemes for the Sports Authority of India (SAI). The Khelo India Scheme was introduced in 2018 to revive the sports culture in India at the grass-root level by building a robust framework for all sports played in our country and establish India as an extraordinary sporting nation.

What is Disability?

According to the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)**

"Person with a disability" means an individual with long term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others.

**This act covers 21 disabilities, ranging from-
Physical Disabilities**

- Locomotor Disability

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- Visual Impairment
- Hearing Impairment
- Speech and Language Disability

Intellectual Disability

- Specific Learning Disabilities
- Autism Spectrum Disorder

Mental Behaviour

Disabilities caused due to Neurological Conditions and Blood Disorders

Multiple Disabilities

This research will primarily focus on athletes with intellectual disabilities.

Intellectual Disabilities

According to the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual, given by *the American Psychiatric Association (2013)*-

“Intellectual disability is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by intellectual difficulties as well as difficulties in conceptual, social, and practical areas of living.”

Intellectual disability is divided into various subtypes, according to its severity.

Table No. 1 Classifications of Intellectual Disability Severity (Boat, 2015)

Severity Category	Approximate Percent Distribution of Cases by Severity	DSM-IV Criteria (based only on IQ categories)	DSM-5 Criteria (severity classified on the basis of daily skills)	AAIDD Criteria (severity classified on the basis of the intensity of support needed)
Mild	85%	Approximate IQ range 50–69	Can live independently with minimum levels of support.	Intermittent support needed during transitions or periods of uncertainty.
Moderate	10%	Approximate IQ range 36–49	Independent living may be achieved with moderate levels of support, such as those available in group homes.	Limited support needed in daily situations.
Severe	3.5%	Approximate IQ range 20–35	Requires daily assistance with self-care activities and safety supervision.	Extensive support needed for daily activities.
Profound	1.5%	IQ <20	Requires 24-hour care.	Pervasive support needed for every aspect of daily routines.

Psychological Effects of Sports for an individual with Intellectual Disabilities

Sports have the ability to integrate diverse groups of communities that were ostracized earlier, such as women and religious minorities (Lumpkin, Stoll & Beller,2003).

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Just like any other athlete, an athlete with an intellectual disability also has numerous physical and psychological benefits from sports. Physical benefits include prevention from cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes, and increased stamina (Harada, 2011).

Athletes with intellectual disabilities also derive several positive psychosocial benefits, including improved mental health, enhanced self-esteem and confidence, better relationships, and community participation. (Groff, 2009; Vilet, 2013; Antle, Mills, Steele, Kalnins, and Rossen, 2007). Nevertheless, athletes also face various barriers and facilitators while indulging in sports (Jaarsma, 2019).

Sport Authorities in India for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

Disability sport is defined as a sport that's directly practiced by persons with disabilities, wherein, they are called the 'athletes'. These are specifically organized on the basic premise of providing equality with respect to ability and disability for all. This means that athletes compete with each other having a similar set of skills. The three largest international organisations which work for athletes with disabilities are-

- 1. Deaflympics**
- 2. Paralympics**
- 3. Special Olympics**

Special Olympics Bharat

Special Olympics Bharat was founded in 1988 under the National Sports Federation, recognized by Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India under the Priority Category, for development of Sports for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, and is a designated Nodal Agency for all disabilities on account of its national presence and experience, especially in rural areas which account for approximately 75 percent of the disabled population in India.

It trains both, male and female athletes in 25 summer and winter disciplines and has more than 8 Lakh athletes registered from 29 states.

In 2019, India scripted history by returning with 368 medals in Special Olympics Sports Games, UAE. Medals were won across all sports - athletics, golf, volleyball, aquatics, cycling, judo, powerlifting, table tennis, roller skating, badminton, etc. with the maximum medals in powerlifting. (Scroll,2019). Owing to these statistics, there is an increasing curiosity to understand how participating in sport enhances an athlete's mental health.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The longstanding review suggests that participating in sports and other forms of physical exercise are directly or indirectly linked with one's mental health (Ohrnberger, 2017). For a child with special needs, indulging in physical activity results in physical, emotional, and social benefits. Despite what some may believe, children with special needs can be seen displaying strength gains, increased flexibility, improved bone health, and better endurance and cardiovascular fitness (Kendra, 2017).

Physical activity also can improve general mood and wellness. Regular fitness is often linked to improved self-esteem, social awareness, and self-confidence, which aid in empowering the lives of youngsters with special needs. It can also improve cognitive

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performance, self-esteem, and reduce anxiety and symptoms related to attention deficit disorder (Wooley, 2009, Scarpa, 2011).

Self-Concept and Sports

Athletes with intellectual disabilities who are a part of a large sports-related organisation such as Special Olympics have been shown to have a higher quality of life. A study by Groff (2009) studied athletes with cerebral palsy participating in CP World Games and found that the majority of the sample strongly agreed that adaptive sport positively influenced their overall health (84.9%) quality of life (80.8%), quality of family life (53.4%), and quality of social life (56.1%). These athletes tend to develop an 'athletic identity'. Moradi (2019) found a significant positive relationship between self-identity and participation in sports activities in Iranian physically disabled athletes. Vilet (2013) found that Flemish Paralympic athletes with disabilities possess a strong athletic identity and subsequent self-perceptions, in which they identify themselves with being 'real athletes'. Similar results were seen in the study by Piatt (2018) & Wilski (2012).

Another important facet that sports help is enhancing a person's self-concept. Weiss (2003) conducted a study with 97 Special Olympic athletes and found that length of time affiliated to the organization, number of competitions attended, of hours spent in training, of sports, and of medals obtained is directly proportional to the athlete's self-concept. Crawford (2015) found similar findings for self-esteem which directly enhances their group membership and general well-being.

Social Support and Sports

Martin (1996) described social support mechanisms of swimmers with disabilities and examined relationships among social support, self-efficacy, and athletic satisfaction. Correlational results suggested that athletes who were supported by being listened to and by being challenged to become better athletes and other people have also reported strong self-efficacy. He found that *parents, especially mothers*, provide strong levels of encouragement and are particularly important in helping their children engage in sports. Parents recognize the obstacles their children face in trying to engage in healthy lifestyles and make great efforts in trying to promote their health. (Antle, Mills, Steele, Kalnins & Rossen, 2007) Athletes who received more parental support have shown a higher commitment to sport as compared to athletes who receive less support.

Friends are primarily supportive in listening and providing emotional support to the athlete. Sport also provides athletes with vast opportunities to make friends on the team. Athletes reported that their teammates supported, encouraged, and looked out for them. This allows the athletes to express themselves and reduces loneliness. (Taub and Greer, 2000)

Coaches and fathers also provide essential support in the area of sport-related knowledge and expertise. Pines et al (1981) found that coaches provided technical appreciation and were useful for emotionally and technically challenging the athlete. In addition, Bandura (1990) found that coaches are perceived as respectable and credible sources of information by the athlete, and are vital for boosting the athlete's self-confidence and persuading them they are successful.

Hence, athletes receive various forms of social support from parents, coaches, teammates, and friends which leads to four themes, namely- (1) the personal development of athletes

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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.

Barriers and Facilitators of Sports

Jaarsama (2014) conducted an extensive study called ‘*Sports Participation After Rehabilitation: Barriers and Facilitators*’ in the Netherlands on 1223 athletes of Paralympics to analyse barriers to, and facilitators of, sports participation among people with physical disabilities after rehabilitation.

Results showed two types of barriers mainly-

Personal Barriers including visual/auditory/motor Impairment, need for dependence on others, fatigue/lack of energy, pain experienced, injuries, ashamed of disabilities, discomfort among others, and taking too much time.

Environmental Barriers such as costs and lack of a sports buddy, unavailability of fitting sport, lack of information about sports facilities, lack of sufficient transport facilities, lack of sports facilities in the neighbourhood, lack of acceptance of other people, lack of sufficient supervision, Lack of support/help from the environment, courses are not (sufficiently) adjusted, equipment is not (sufficiently) adjusted/ available accommodation is not (sufficiently) adjusted, lack of possibilities to sport with peers.

Similarly, facilitators were also divided into 2 parts-

Personal Facilitators found were health, fun, increasing physical strength, social contacts, coping with disability, lose weight, increase in self-confidence, acceptance of disability by self, release energy, gaining independence, winning/competition, and learning a new skill.

Environmental Facilitators were found to be advised by rehabilitation professionals and supported by family, spouse, and/or children, friends, colleagues, and/or peers.

Results from this study indicated that while barriers faced are mostly environmental, facilitators are usually personal factors. Facilitators outweigh the barriers for most athletes and motivate them to maintain their participation in sports.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To study the extent of improvement in a special athlete’s mental health and productivity, including their Self Confidence, Self-identity since they started participating in the sport.
- To study the extent of the positive impact that sport has on the relationships and social skills of the athlete with intellectual disabilities.
- To examine the various barriers faced by the athlete with intellectual disabilities while performing the sport and what factors facilitate their success in the sport.

Participants

- A sample of 20 (N) athlete leaders from Special Olympics Bharat were taken from different states from all over India.
- Apart from being an athlete in Special Olympics Bharat, it was ensured that the participant met the following 3 criteria-

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- They were an athlete diagnosed with MILD to MODERATE intellectual disabilities before the age of 18 years.
- They have been a part of Special Olympics Bharat for at least a year.
- They have spoken command over either English or Hindi language or both.
- The demographics consisted of 13 males (n1=13) and 7 females (n2=7). The age range was between 17 to 34 years (Mean Age= 25.5 years). The sampling technique used was a mixture of various non-probability sampling techniques, including purposive and snowball sampling.

Study Design

The current study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. An interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter was adopted. The naturalistic approach is grounded in studying people in their natural settings and further attempting to make sense of the phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Further, in this qualitative research, the data was represented in narrative and verbal forms that were further transcribed in verbatim, and notes were made accordingly.

Tools and Data Collection

In order to understand the subjective experiences of athlete leaders with intellectual disabilities on how sports affects their general mental health and relationships, a semi-structured interview schedule was drafted. The questions were pre-decided, however, this interview format allowed flexibility and in terms of when the questions may be posed to the participants as well as helped in further probing them for richer content.

The questions were based on the 3 objectives of the study which were developed through an extensive review of literature conducted on different Paralympics and Special Olympics athletes from all over the world on the effect of sport participation on their mental health.

The broad domain of questions focused on mainly 3 areas-

- Whether participating in the sport helps improve the athlete's confidence and self-identity?
- If sports participation helps the athlete belong with other people and improve their relationships by enhancing their social skills?
- What type of barriers did they initially face while starting the sport and how have they overcome those barriers?

The questions were kept open-ended so that participants could openly express themselves and we could gauge a better understanding of their experiences. The questions were pilot-tested in English and Hindi language (local language) before actual conduction. It was also ensured that the questions were not leading. Additional questions /probes were asked when needed as per the interviewer's discretion.

METHODOLOGY

The athlete leaders were paired with a youth leader (Non-Intellectually Disabled). During the first step, the athlete-youth pair were contacted simultaneously over telephonic calls, wherein, the purpose of the study was explained to each of them. They were told that the study aimed at assessing the effect of sport participation on the mental health of athlete leaders, and that the participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the research

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process without any fear of consequences. They were ensured that their responses would be kept confidential and would not be revealed to any coach or sporting authority. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts and experiences freely as there were no 'right' and 'wrong' answers. Their queries, if any, were also addressed. An introductory document as well as a consent form was circulated to ensure that the leaders get clarity regarding the research. After this, a video call interview was scheduled with the athlete and youth leader.

In the second step, due to the restrictions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted over video-calls (Zoom App). The youth leader's presence ensured that the athlete is comfortable in answering all the questions and encouraged an explanation of content from both ends. All the interviews were recorded with their consent, with each interview lasting from 30 minutes to 1 hour approximately. Each interview was brought to a close by thanking the participants for sharing their experiences and ensuring them that they were entitled to know the results of the study.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using the method of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as: "A method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data." Thematic analysis has been widely used to analyse a variety of qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, & qualitative surveys. The steps outlined by Clark and Braun (2013) were used systematically in the present study to draw out the themes from the data.

The methodology of grounded theory was used, wherein the construction of hypotheses and theories occur through the collecting and analysis of data (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory avoids making assumptions and instead adopts a more neutral view of human action in a social context, hence it's more beneficial.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

The current study provides a glimpse into how participation in sports helps athletes with intellectual disabilities in enhancing their self-confidence, relationships, and help them overcome barriers and succeed in life. After careful examination of the experiences shared by the participants during their interviews, **seven major themes emerged:**

Reasons for engagement in sports

Sports has always played an important & irreplaceable role in the biological, social, emotional, and psychological development of young people. In the current research, athletes reported various reasons for liking their sports acting as a push for further engagement with the sports, responses given by the athletes have been further categorized as external or internal factors. Athletes most frequently reported that their motivations for participation were physical energy, fitness & exercise (50%), followed by enjoyment/fun (20%), winning the tournaments and games (15%) learning about sports, feeling good about oneself, getting others support & making friends (10%) and lastly teamwork (5%). Their responses are as follows, "*I make friends through playing sports, and it gives me an opportunity to socialize with others and give a good friend circle.*". Another contrasting response is as follows, "*I feel good after playing. Running, energy, fitness and stamina make me feel healthy and positive*". Previous researches have also shed the light that fun, friendship, improved sports skills, health/fitness, and achievement are some of the primary reasons for participation in sports (Feltz & Ewing, 1987; Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983; Gould, Feltz, & Weiss,

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1985). Previous researches have also shown that athletes with ID are like any other athletes, therefore, there is alignment between the perceptions of the reasons for liking the sport and engaging with it, having various positive personal benefits, including improved mental health, self-concept, perceptions of competence, and socialization (Dykens & Cohen, 1996; Dykens, Rosner, & Butterbaugh, 1998; Gibbons & Bushakra, 1989; Khosla, Malhotra, & Dutt, 1988; Weiss et al., 2003).

Self-Awareness and Self-Identity

One's self identity is a combination of various personality traits that we use to define ourselves, our physical features, values, interests and hobbies. It is what makes us unique and separates us from others. In the study, the athletes too, had different ways of defining themselves. Some athletes defined themselves through their work or their studies (9%), while others defined themselves as their smile or physique (9%). Many athletes also see their identity as the hobbies they carry out such as dancing, cooking, music, etc. (22%) The following response shows the same, *"I like cycling, working out & playing badminton. I also love music and dancing; I am a Zumba player"*. A portion of athletes directly saw their sport as a highlight in sharing their identity (7%). However, the maximum percentage of athletes defined their self-identity through various traits and qualities possessed by them (52.7%). Athletes, through their sport, learnt to be organized, dependable and disciplined. Other positive identity features described by them were that they are friendly, hardworking, dedicated, helpful and possess good communication and leadership skills. The same can be seen from responses such as, *"I am very honest, hardworking, dedicated, I don't procrastinate, I want others to thrive and strive for excellence as well. I never say no to any work, I am punctual & patient."* All these skills inculcated by them could be a positive indirect effect from their sport participation and deserve special mention in the theme. The same can be seen from responses such as, *"I love watching myself playing in Special Olympics Bharat. I am a national athlete, I love that. I love that I teach other athletes and make them understand. I am an input- counsellor member"*.

Change in confidence levels

The athletes with ID interviewed in this study mentioned that sports had helped them gain the confidence to express themselves and actually do things and play sports brilliantly they never thought they could. Most of the athletes believed that joining Special Olympics Bharat had opened up a new phase in their lives, there has been a drastic change in the confidence levels, before joining the sports they were shy & quiet, society discriminated against them & always demotivated them to do anything in their life, but sports has provided them opportunities to break boundaries and stereotypes imposed on persons with disability as can be seen from one of the responses, *"Yes sports give you a lot of confidence, you have been assigned a lot of projects, you give guidance and holds the responsibility. I have become more aware and got to interact with a lot of people, recognition from society, acknowledgement, appreciation."* As mentioned, athletes gained confidence through getting recognition & support from the family, friends, coaches, and society, through meeting new people and socializing & communicating with them, by becoming more adaptable & independent, by getting opportunities to play across India at various places, by getting a lot of responsibilities of guiding others, etc and lastly through their achievements, winning medals, certificates and trophies as well. One of the athletes expressed, *"After winning the medals and trophies I feel good, sense of pride and all encouragement, guidance, and motivation give you confidence. I want to be a mentor and guide people."* These results can be backed by various studies all throughout the world by Moradi (2019) who found a

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significant positive relationship between self-identity and participation in sports activities in Iranian physically disabled athletes and Vilet (2013) who found that Flemish Paralympic athletes with disabilities possess a strong athletic identity and subsequent self-perceptions, in which they identify themselves with being 'real athletes'. Similar results were also seen in a study by Piatt (2018) & Wilski (2012).

Applicability of the Sport in Adaptive and Daily Living Skills

When asked about how sports has helped them in their daily lives, athletes mentioned various skills that they have gained through sports that have helped them in their daily lives. These skills can be further divided into internal adaptive skills and external adaptive skills.

External adaptive skills include those skills that are overtly shown through their behaviour which help them interact with people around them and be productive members of the society. Many athletes, through their sport, have become increasingly independent while travelling (16.6%). A response which confirms this is as follows, *"I can travel alone, I go to school on my own, I can do everything. I can cook as well. Painting and many creative things. I don't need anybody's help"*. Further, a significant percentage of athletes have learnt daily chores (30%) such as cooking, washing their clothes and utensils, getting groceries, cleanliness etc. because their sport makes them independent and gives them the direction to do everyday tasks. Athletes have adopted a disciplined and organized lifestyle through their sport and pay close attention to their health through nutrition, exercise and working out regularly (28.3%). Lastly, they have also learnt how to communicate with others confidently, possess themselves as a leader by sharing knowledge and skills with others and help their colleagues (25%). This can be seen from a response *"Yes, meeting others, talking to new people. Sharing my knowledge with others, have all been done through Special Olympics Bharat "* and *"I feel good. I am also a leader now so I guide people also and I feel proud, I have also made a good friend circle."*

Internal adaptive skills include those skills which have been developed overtime and caused a positive change in the athlete's personality. These are not outwardly shown, rather, are covert behaviour styles, but they help the athlete in expressing themselves and functioning appropriately. First and foremost, athletes have felt a huge boost in their self-esteem since they have joined special Olympics Bharat (55%). This further reiterates why their level of confidence and communication skills have improved. Along with this, athletes feel that their decision-making and problem-solving skills have improved immensely (8.8%). *"Confidence, will power, motivation to do things and encouragement. Self-esteem has also increased, physical stamina and energy also increased. and I feel content after doing drills and all"*. Some athletes believe that the sport has helped shape up their whole personality (8.8%), while others believe that the sport has helped them in managing their emotions better (3%). A response which shows the same is as follow, *"Yes. Earlier I was a loser. I woke up really late earlier, I wasn't even able to put buttons also, I didn't brush for weeks altogether. Now, I have controlled my anger also through sports. I have learnt routine, cleanliness, etc. I make my own food; I am very clean with my house and like to organize things."* Other miscellaneous internal skills that have been gained by the athletes are empathy (3%), willpower (11.7%), patience (5.8%) and negotiation skills (3%). *"I am very thankful to be a part of Special Olympics Bharat because I have learnt a lot from there. I have learnt how to talk to others, how to overcome disputes with athletes, etc."*; *"I have travelled alone on my own for tournaments, at the age of 12 so I have a lot of confidence that I can do everything on my own, I have the ability, capability and potentiality and even*

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zeal in me to do challenging things. I am stable and I can take spontaneous decisions on my own. Very rarely I need to depend on others”. A study by Scott, M., Harris, B., Gregg, K., & Czech, D. (2016) on the effectiveness of sports-based interventions for teaching life skills to at-risk youth in Georgia, also found that the sports-based intervention was successful in developing life skills including managing emotions, goal setting, relaxation, confidence, mental preparation, and seeking help from others for two out of three participants.

Barriers and Facilitators in Sports

Athletes do come across several barriers and facilitators that directly or indirectly affect the amount and kind of physical activities or sports they do. and the type of PA these children do. Barriers are seen as things that prevent an individual from exercising (Lox, Martin & Petruzzello, 2003). On the other hand, facilitators are factors that by their presence or absence improve functioning and increase the opportunity for a child to participate in physical activity. (WHO, 2007). To enhance participation, it is essential to identify them correctly. In the current study, 50% of athletes mentioned personal barriers like decreased physical strength, low attention span & concentration levels, a sense of feeling discriminated against, need for dependency to travel, and environmental barriers like financial barriers in terms of expensive sports equipment, traveling cost, etc, lack of opportunities and difficulty in understanding the technicalities of the sport sometimes as well. Though 50% of athletes denied experiencing any sort of barrier. Athletes were also asked about the difficulties that they faced while joining the sports, responses were in alignment with what they mentioned for the barriers that they faced while engaging with the sports now with an important exception that personal barriers have reduced a lot, now they feel more confident, emotionally strong, self-controlled and can easily understand the technicalities and instructions. This shows that sports has definitely helped them overcome their fears, apprehensions, and personal difficulties which they had previously. This could be due to the facilitators that they experienced after joining the Special Olympics Bharat, therefore, athletes mentioned environmental facilitators including opportunities, availability of sports equipment, the chance of social interaction and communication, family support and motivation, coach guidance & support as well as institution guidance & support. Athletes also shared some personal facilitators including attributes like self-motivation, self-confidence, dedicated and hardworking nature, and lastly sports routine like practicing every day, good nutrition & diet, regular exercise, and appropriate daily routine that helped them in being organised and healthy. According to N. Shields, A. Synnot & M. Barr, (2012), *“the barriers to participation have been studied more comprehensively than the facilitators and include a lack of knowledge and skills, the child’s preferences, fear, parental behaviour, negative attitudes to disability, inadequate facilities, lack of transport, lack of programmes and staff capacity, and cost. In the case of physical activity, reported facilitators include the child’s desire to be fit and active, skills practice, the involvement of peers, family support, close and accessible facilities, opportunities sensitive to the needs of children with disability, skilled staff and information dissemination”*. The results obtained in this study are the same as the ones reported by their study though the number of athletes reporting barriers is less than the number of athletes reporting facilitators.

Various relationship dynamics

The role of social support and improved relationship with close ones has been investigated extensively and shown to be related to a variety of psychological factors and behaviours such as factors and behaviors such as frustration (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986), burnout (Davis-Sacks, Jayaratne, & Chess, 1985), stress (Major et al., 1990), social skills (Petrie,

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1992), illness (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983) and injury (Sarason, Potter, & Antoni, 1985). Recently, sport psychology investigations have also started to examine social support (Martin, 1996). In the interviews, athletes have shed a light on the various shades of the relationships that they share with their family, friends, SOB teammates, coaches, youth leaders, school teachers, doctors, and society in general, most were positive in nature while some were negative in nature. Athletes shared that mostly the family has always been very supportive irrespective of their achievements by providing social, emotional & financial support. They encourage, motivate, provide positive verbal affirmations, cheer them up when they feel low, proud of their achievements, and boast about it to others though two of the athletes mentioned that their family doesn't support much. Sports has played an active role when it comes to improving the relationship dynamics with family members, in the current research also 75% of the athletes reported that sports has definitely helped in improving family relationships while 25 % of the athletes reported that relationships haven't changed a lot and family was always supportive of us. Sarason et al. (1990) suggested that social support may be positively associated with sport-related cognitions such as self-confidence and satisfaction and friends play a primarily active role in supporting socially & emotionally as well as motivating in achieving goals, this has been confirmed by 13 out of 20 athletes, *"My coaches, family and my special friends also, they always motivate me, whenever I feel a little low, they are the ones who boost my morale and motivate me to go ahead and play."* Additionally, Bandura (1986,1990) indicated that respected and credible sources of information, such as coaches, mentors can enhance athletes' self-efficacy, self-confidence, by persuading them that they are efficacious, capable, and worthy of doing something good, in the interviews also 90% of the athletes have mentioned that coaches provide them with constructive feedback and guidance that helps them in overcome the difficulties, as mentioned by one athlete, *"coaches are more supportive because they know my weaknesses and strengths so they know how to motivate and encourage"*, another athlete mentioned that, *"If I lose some game then my coaches and family always console me and make me relax"*. Therefore, athletes with strong social support systems have a greater ability to deal with the challenges and frustrations of life, including athletics (Bowlby,1969; Sarason et al., 1983), in line with the previous research athletes in the current study also reported that they have got support which has helped them build self-confidence and self-esteem.

Sense of Belonging felt through the Sport

Belongingness is a human emotional need. According to McClelland in his Need Theory of Motivation (1961), we are social beings and have a need to affiliate, bond, and maintain social contact with others. We desire to feel love and accepted. This further motivates us to maintain a positive life-state. The athletes too, through participation in their sport, have felt belongingness in two areas.

Firstly, 90% of athletes have felt a reduction in their loneliness since they became active members of their sport. They believe that their sport has helped them make new friends, be in constant touch with their coaches and mentors as well as increase their bonding with their family members. One response is as follows, *"When I didn't use to play sports, I used to feel lonely because nobody used to play with me. But because of sports my identity has developed and grown a lot. Now everybody knows me, initially, nobody acknowledged me."* Secondly, 90% of athletes have also started feeling a sense of membership and cohesion by being a part of a group. They have a feeling of togetherness, they feel their voices are being heard and they are respected and recognized by society, A noteworthy response is as

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follows, “*Yes very much, I have a different type of groups siblings’ groups, athletes’ groups, states group and I am the admin for some of the groups so I also manage those people so yes I get the sense of belongingness*”. According to Tajfel’s, Social Identity Theory (1979), groups that people belong to, enhance their pride and self-esteem. People categorize others as ‘us’ and ‘them’, which further strengthens their mental health when they are part of something bigger than themselves. This further helps form the athlete’s social identity.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the qualitative nature of the work, this study was limited in size and scope; the intellectually disabled community is a large, diverse group. The results, therefore, may not be generalizable to the dynamic athletes with disabilities. In general, only one participant's subjective experience was being explored, therefore no substantive conclusion can be drawn. Apart from this, the findings are based on just one-time interaction and that too virtually, i.e., over video calls, due to the restrictions posed by the pandemic. Hence, many factors like forming a good rapport with the participant, observation of non-verbal behavior, etc. were not being given equal attention. There can also be a component of social desirability in the participant’s answers as researchers were meeting the participant for the first time. It may also be possible that issues of anonymity and confidentiality may have prevented the participants from expressing certain views, as the issue was undertaken as highly sensitive and personal. Some athletes with intellectual disabilities had problems in understanding the questions as well as expressing their emotions, due to the nature of their disability. As a result, some open-ended questions were responded to with one-word answers and required a lot of probing from the interviewer’s end. As a result, their responses were not as rich in content as expected.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future studies utilizing methodologies like Focus Group Discussions capturing a larger, less bounded sample of the diverse and unique Intellectually Disabled community may reveal more nuanced findings. Future work might investigate, more specifically, the experiences of family members, friends, and coaches of an athlete with intellectual disability to understand their perspective on the athlete’s present and future. In the future, more studies can be conducted by incorporating the experiences of physically disabled (visual/auditory/motor disabled) as well as athletes from different age groups and socio-economic strata. Cross-national studies can also be conducted for a more comprehensive analysis. The results of this study provide empirical evidence as a base for developing interventions that focus on improving the mental health of athletes with intellectual disabilities by giving them more opportunities to participate in sports. Along with sports, this study shows the need to further enhance the athlete’s mental health, which can be done through giving them workshops on leadership, communication skills, confidence, stress reduction and management of their emotions. These workshops and plans can be designed to further reiterate the findings of the study and boost the athlete’s self so that they become productive members of the society. Further, psycho-educating their friends and family through counselling is required. Teaching stress management techniques like mindfulness to the athletes in order to cope up with anxiety and ambiguity can also be done. Teaching appropriate coping strategies to the athletes for dealing with personal and environmental barriers can also be beneficial. Lastly, the study can serve as a basis for taking steps by various stakeholders in motivating athletes with intellectual disabilities to succeed and lead fulfilling lives.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at finding the effect of sport participation on the general mental health of athletes with intellectual disabilities from Special Olympics Bharat. Through a thorough interview analysis and transcription of athletes from various states in India, it can be concluded that their general mental health has been improved significantly since they have joined Special Olympics Bharat. It can be concluded that by participating in the sport, the athlete's level of confidence has been significantly enhanced. This can be seen by their ease of communication, sharing ideas and making new friends. The athlete's adaptive and life skills have been strengthened and they have become more independent as well. They have developed various skills such as willpower, discipline and organisation, which pushes them towards success. Further, it can also be concluded that participating in the sport helps the athlete form meaningful connections with others, whether it's their family, friends, team members or coaches. Through their sport, they feel a sense of belonging and team membership which strengthens their social identity. Their sport helps them feel recognized and respected, especially when their loved one's cheer for them and support them in every step of the way. Lastly, the athletes with intellectual disabilities faced some personal barriers such as lack of physical strength and stamina, low attention span and tiredness when they initially joined the sport. They also faced monetary issues, scepticism from the society and minor difficulties in learning the sport. However, through various facilitators like guidance from their coaches and mentors, their self-motivation, regular exercise, nutrition and support from their caregivers, they have thrived to become extremely successful athletes who possess positive mental health and wellbeing in multiple domains of their lives.

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Conflict of Interest

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