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Sport of people with intellectual disabilities - a road to normalcy **Sport osób niepełnosprawnych intelektualnie - droga ku normalności**

*“Let me win,
but if I cannot win,
let me be brave in the attempt”
(the Special Olympics oath)*

Summary

Sport is for many disabled people, including intellectual impairment, an opportunity to enter into normal social structures. Sporting activity allows a rediscovery of one's own potential, experience many positive emotions and sensations, and creation of objective image of one's self. As agents of particular actions and events disabled people experience their own subjectivity, acquire qualities and skills which enable independent - adequate to their needs and developmental opportunities - functioning among different levels of society. Also, in this way they naturally contribute to overcoming of mental barriers permeating the social environment, reducing stereotypical thinking about their place and role in society. A huge role in the dissemination of physical education and sport for people with intellectual disabilities in Poland is played by social organizations. The purpose of this publication is to present - for example Sport Association of Mentally Handicapped People “Special Olympics Poland”, whose structures entail a sport section called “Cormorants” (one of 564 sections) - how important are grassroots civic initiatives in creating self-awareness of disabled people and in bringing about their social integration.

Key words: sporting activity, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), people with intellectual disabilities, subjectivity, social inclusion

Streszczenie

Dla wielu osób z niepełnosprawnością, w tym intelektualną szansę na wejście w normalne struktury życia społecznego stanowi sport. Aktywność sportowa pozwala im na nowo odkryć własny potencjał, doświadczyć wielu pozytywnych przeżyć i wrażeń, ukształtować obiektywny wizerunek własnej osoby. Jako sprawcy pewnych stanów i zdarzeń doświadczają własnej podmiotowości, nabywają cech i kompetencji umożliwiających samodzielne – adekwatnie do ich potrzeb i możliwości rozwojowych – funkcjonowanie w różnych płaszczyznach życia społecznego. W naturalny sposób przyczyniają się również do przełamywania barier mentalnych tkwiących w środowisku społecznym, stereotypowego myślenia na temat ich miejsca i roli w życiu społecznym. Ogromną rolę w zakresie upowszechniania kultury fizycznej i sportu osób niepełnosprawnych intelektualnie w Polsce odgrywają organizacje społeczne. Celem niniejszej publikacji jest przedstawienie - na przykładzie działalności Stowarzyszenia Sportowego Osób Upośledzonych

Umysłowo „Olimpiady Specjalne Polska”, w strukturach którego funkcjonuje sekcja sportowa „Kormorany” (jedna z 564 sekcji) - jak ogromne znaczenie mają oddolne inicjatywy obywatelskie w kreowaniu samoświadomości niepełnosprawnych i ich integracji społecznej.

Słowa kluczowe: aktywność sportowa, organizacje pozarządowe, osoby niepełnosprawne intelektualnie, podmiotowość, integracja społeczna

Introduction

The Polish Language Dictionary (Doroszewski, 1972) states: “normality / normal - according to the standard, as it should be, proper, adequate, usual, on average”. Popular understanding of the term is found even on the internet in the discussion led on one of the online forums. The bottom line answer to the question “What is normalcy?” suggests the word “mediocrity”: “Normal is someone who does not deviate from accepted standards of the community,” “Norm, i.e. average. The word has a neutral connotation”, “Normal is not standing out, it’s being typical. On the one hand it is positive, however on the other, a negative phenomenon and depends on the point of view”, “Normal may be someone original, but not in violation of general principles” (www.pytamy.pl/title_czym_jest_normalność_pytanie.html).

It is true that people with disabilities are not very different from healthy people; they think, feel, have their own plans, dreams, aspirations, etc., like we all do. Unfortunately, in the public perception they are often stereotypically seen as other, weaker, inferior, worse. They do not fit the accepted standards, they are different because of musculoskeletal dysfunctions, sensory disorders, mental retardation, etc. The truth is that by seeing disabled people solely through the prism of their mental and physical limits, in fact, we manifest our own shortcomings, deficiencies, and weaknesses. In the name of accepted legal and social norms we usurp the right to judge others, giving them a stigmatizing label, “pigeonholing” them into the framework of accepted canons, being unaware of the fact that such attitude proves how far we as a society deviate from normality. We forget that the only common feature in all of us is that we are different indeed. Each of us has different intellectual, health, economic, physical, etc., features. Our natural endowment is important, but much more important is what we do with this potential, and how we use it for our own self-development. People with disabilities do not expect any special privileges, but solely ask for respect of basic rights of every citizen.

There are many examples of people who despite various limitations, be they mental, intellectual, physical, or social, live with passion, pursue a family life, work, achieve success in the field of culture, sport, etc. As one user on the Internet wisely said: “Everyone is unique, means that everyone is normal, normal is a person who is simply him or herself” Harlan Lane, in his book “The Mask Of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community” (1996) gives an example of a deaf teenager who is reproved by his mother for not wearing a cochlear implant prosthesis and blurts out bitterly: “I am deaf. Let me be”. We deal with a person who has a sense of self-identity and expects from others acceptance of his autonomous choices. This is because disabled individuals should not be adapted to existing conditions, but that the environment should be organized so that it can they may fully - to suit their needs and capabilities - participate.

The purpose of this publication is to present - for example Sport Association of Mentally Handicapped People "Special Olympics Poland", whose structures entail a sport section called "Cormorants" (one of 564 sections) - how important are grassroots civic initiatives in creating self-awareness of disabled people and in bringing about their social integration.

Subjectivity and social integration as a goal, and the condition of sport activities among people with intellectual disabilities

Sport as well as every physical activity is one of the most important aspects in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. It is an essential area of rehabilitation in the healthy, psychological, and social dimension. Appropriately selected activity has a positive effect on the physical development as well as psychomotor performance.

Sport has also great therapeutic values: it relieves tension, reduces anxiety, improves internal controls. By way of sporting activities, aggression, anger, and conflict can be released. It is not only an attractive form of leisure, but also an opportunity to overcome one's weaknesses, limitations, and getting to know our own strengths and potential. Thanks to this individuals form an objective image of themselves, gain self-confidence and enhance their self-esteem. With successful sport events they feel a surge of their own agency, learn self-discipline and responsibility. Sporting activities (recreational and competitive) are also an opportunity to visit various places, meet interesting people, make new friends. The individual feels more optimism and willingness to continue to work on their own. Group games also increase a sense of solidarity, create opportunity for integration, enable competition, and create a possibility to get to know one's personality (Puchalski 1985; Kasperczyk 1999; Szeliga 2004; Różański 2006).

By participating in sport people with intellectual disabilities not only overcome their weaknesses and limitations, but also contribute to social change in the image of people with intellectual disabilities. Such attitude shows that their weakness veils great strength, one needs only to see it and let it grow. Such power for many intellectually disabled people lies in sports practiced professionally or recreationally.

Organization of sports activities among people with intellectual disabilities in Poland - non-governmental sector

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by the President of the Republic of Poland in September 2012) in Article 30, Section 5 states:

In order to enable persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in recreational, leisure, and sporting events in the State, Parties shall take appropriate measures to:

- (a) encourage disabled people to participate, as far as possible, in the mainstream sporting activities at all levels and promote their participation,
- (b) ensure that persons with disabilities can organize and develop in the sporting and recreational field, and make opportunities to participate in such activities and by the same token, encourage provision, on an equal basis with others, of appropriate instruction, training and resources,
- (c) ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access to sporting, recreational and tourist places (<http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.>).

In Poland, there are two organizations involved in the promotion of sport for people with intellectual disabilities, which gives them the opportunity to participate in pastimes in the country as well as at well-known major national and international events.

One is a Polish Sport Society “Able Together”, affiliated with the International Sports Federation for Persons with Mental Handicap (INAS – FMH). The aim of the organization is promotion and wide popularization of sports as an important factor in active recreation among children and young people with slight intellectual disabilities.

The main directions of activity of the association are:

- organizing sports activities - recreational and therapeutic in special schools, educational centers, sports clubs working for the disabled and handicap cooperatives,
- publication and promotion of educational and training materials,
- conducting training for coaching staff,
- cooperating with social institutions for joint ventures,
- organization of sport rehabilitation,
- cooperation with the Polish Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Movement – IPC, INAS, FMH,
- organization of competitions at the national and international level (Maszczak, Jaszczur 1996).

Through the structures of the society, which finds players mainly in special schools, training and educational centers, there are local, regional and national competitions, and the Polish national team is involved (successfully) in international competitions (in accordance with the common rules on competitive sport for persons with disabilities). Sports included in the INAS - FMH program are: football, athletics, swimming, basketball, table tennis, cross country, and downhill skiing.

The Sports Association of Mentally Handicapped People ‘Special Olympics Poland’ is another sport organization which belongs to the most significant in our country. It is the official representative of the international organization of Special Olympics Inc. in Poland. It was established in 1990, as a continuation of the official program Special Olympics Poland – accredited since 1985 (in the years 1985 to 1990 being in the structures of the existing Company of Friends of Children ‘T.P.D.’). The main task of the organization is to provide year-round trainings and sport competition cycles (at the local, regional, national, and international level) for people diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, regardless of the degree of developmental dysfunction.

At the core of the Special Olympics is the belief that people with intellectual disabilities can - with right support and assistance - train, enjoy, and reap the benefits of physical, psychological, and social participation in sports adapted to their needs and abilities.

The basic aims of Special Olympics are:

- to ensure that persons with mental retardation have the opportunity to participate in sporting competitions;
- creation of the Olympic atmosphere during competitions;
- to increase public awareness and knowledge about the capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities;

- to provide parents and family members of people with intellectual disabilities a possibility to experience joy and pride of their pupils to participate in sports;
- to broaden the knowledge of coaches and players in the field of competition and sports at Special Olympics (<http://www.olimpiady.eu/?ID=historia&ID2=4>).

The program of Special Olympics provides opportunity to participate in training and competition in 25 summer and 5 winter sports. It is available to all persons with intellectual disability, regardless of the degree of disability who are at least 8 years old. The aim of the organization is to help everyone take part in a competition, to experience one's maximum sport potential, joy, a sense of satisfaction in front of the audience, to establish friendships and motivate to further work on one's own. Therefore it is not an attempt to find a champion, because in light of the tenets each person competing in competitions is already a winner. Therefore, all participants are rewarded: for a place in the "top three" – they receive medals, for the next (from the fourth to eighth place) - ribbons or badges. Players who are disqualified or do not finish the competition are also rewarded in the form of ribbons or badges. Any national program may also include younger children (ages 5 - 7 years) in the training but they do not receive any official prizes (only badges for participation).

As a part of ongoing Special Olympics activity there are series of sports and educational programs aimed for a wider audience, not only the disabled, but also their families, non-disabled peers, teachers and all those who want to be actively involved in sports with disabilities, and as a result to promote social inclusion. The official programs are:

- Unified Sports – promoting sports activities of people with intellectual disabilities (Special Olympics Athletes) and healthy ones (Partners), who are in a similar age and skill level, through joint participation in team sports, training and in competition;
- The Motor Activities Training Program (MATP) – is a rehabilitation program designed for those with the lowest skills who can not take part in official training and sports competitions. This is the only way to integrate them into the Special Olympics as athletes, without the burden of compliance to specific provisions, rules, and rivalry;
- A Partner Section of the Special Olympics Program – its aim is to create a relationship of mutual respect and friendship between the players and partners. Thanks to this the participants are aware of their own self-esteem, social skills, courage, and above all willingness to participate in social life.

In recent times there other initiatives have been also implemented, such as for example:

- A Family Program - addressed to family members of people with intellectual disabilities,
- A program 'So Get Into It' - educational program aimed at teachers and young people with intellectual disabilities and able-bodied aged 6 - 18 years,
- A program 'Healthy Athletes' - it is addressed to doctors of different specialties,
- A program 'Young Athletes' - sports play program for children with intellectual disabilities between the ages 2 - 7 years old for use in a family, kindergarten and early childhood education,
- A Volunteer Program, etc.

The supporting organization in the Special Olympics is The Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics.

The scale and scope of projects undertaken by the Special Olympics of Poland may be estimated from the following information: the organization currently has 18 regional offices, including 564 sections, which employs more than 1500 trainers to prepare more than 17000 players to participate every year in nearly 200 events during summers and winters (www.olimpiadyspecjalne.pl). Sections are created directly nearby special education centers, schools, nursing homes, day care centers, occupational therapy workshops, sheltered workshops, etc. One of them is the sports section, "Cormorants" working at the Special School in Augustów.

Environmental integration through sport - sports activities of the "Cormorants" section

The sports section "Cormorants" functioning in the structures of Special Olympics was founded at the Complex of Special Schools in Augustów initially bringing together 22 players aged 15 to 21 years with mental retardation in the moderate, severe and profound state. In subsequent years the group of participants was enriched by sections of primary school pupils, and then - as a result of changes in the provisions for Special Olympics - young people from 12 years of age. Currently the section has 68 players (53 students and 15 graduate schools), of which about 50 are covered by a systematic sport training during physical education classes and sports wheels.

For more than ten years of activity its sports profile was subject to permanent modifications. Originally providing canoeing, sailing, athletics, and motor activity training. In the following years new disciplines, such as swimming, table tennis, powerlifting, indoor hockey, soccer and boccia were added. With time, some of them have been abandoned, eventually focusing on the conduct of leading sports, two individual (swimming and canoeing), a team play (football), and a winter discipline – hockey hall. Players with lower capabilities are involved in motor activity training, boccia and athletics.

The all year-round schedule of work with children and young people is integrated into a series of systematic trainings, workshops, camps, sports and participation in meetings and events. During the winter break public workshops in swimming are organized for all willing to participate, directed mainly to people starting their adventure with sport in the Special Olympics. However, during the summer vacation students have the opportunity to participate in workshops with tourist canoeing. This is a perfect time for adjustment of already experienced players from the high-performance kayak tourism. Section representatives also raise their skills during sports camps (summer and winter) organized by a Podlasie branch. Players with profound intellectual disabilities develop their skills in individual classroom performances and in revalidation teams. The ability to check the progress made in this field is facilitated by being involved in motor activity training.

Exercise and effort in training athletes is reflected in their sports achievements: there are 154 gold winners, 201 silver, and 184 bronze medals, including the most prestigious, such as global and European Special Olympics Games. Currently, one of the athletes has qualified for the European swimming competition, which will take place in Antwerp in May 2013.

The scope of activities of the “Cormorants”, in addition to working with youth, also includes organization of sporting events at a local, regional, and national level. It is also involved in organizing large-scale international projects (e.g. one of the trainers section belonged to the organizing committee of the European X Games, Special Olympics London 2010, he was a master of the podium ceremony).

Since its inception the section takes care of creating its own traditions and popularization of sports for people with intellectual disabilities in the local community. The expression of the integration efforts of the school community are numerous sporting events involving both section players, as well as other high school students. Regular events, such as “Keen on Swimming” (an event constituting a summary of learning to swim, covering an entire school community), The Augustów Day of motor activity (an event aimed at people with deep mental disabilities (MATP athletes), which is a summary of the results of rehabilitation through sports, in which fitter classmates serve as volunteers). Another event is the “White water rafting route of John Paul II”, which is a summary of sports training and the end of the section, but also a reward for their participation. Students check their skills in water, keep safety in practice, sometimes even compete with each other. The culmination of each canoeing trip is a common bonfire. This is one of the most enjoyable forms of events organized by the school. It has educational and integration values, it also fosters openness and respect for other people. Other sporting events - held at the beginning and end of the year - are primarily informational in nature. They comprise of a variety of mini-games that integrate the whole school community, and the present the best athletes awards.

Another area of sports activity of the “Cormorants” is related to dissemination of physical culture and sports of people with intellectual disabilities in the local community. By organizing many interschool competitions (e.g. Christmas Swimming Cup meeting of Santa Claus) and regional events (e.g. Special Canoe Regatta Olympics, Special Augustów Olympics Football Tournament) and national (canoe races, boccia tournament, meeting in cycling), involving the local community, family, players, their friends, volunteers contribute to social change in the image of people with intellectual disabilities: as those who - in spite of some restrictions in development - can overcome, are worthy to fight, enjoy even the smallest achievements. It is also a great opportunity for parents of players to establish closer mutual contacts, shared experience of sporting struggle among their own children, their joys and successes. The organizers of events (mostly teachers from the Complex of Special Schools) take care of the climate event, their integrative nature, they invite to active participation in their local dance, vocal, groups etc.. The opening and closing ceremonies of the Special Olympics competition have special guests from Augustow authorities, who often also support the organization of events in the financial form. It is worth emphasizing that the activities of the “Cormorants” are social in nature, they constitute an expression of the dedication of the organizers, their dedication to the cause and the people who volunteer their time, work and show a lot of their good will.

Conclusion

For many people with intellectual disability sports are an opportunity to enter into normal social structures. By participating in exercises, training, sporting events, they experience the strength of their own subjectivity - become co-creators of their own development and bring about positive changes in public opinion. Such attitudes, determination, and above all optimism and sensitivity, break stereotypes permeating the society. This is an obvious fact to all those who at least once in their life have an opportunity to participate in sporting events which include people with intellectual disabilities. Unfortunately, lack of sufficient information concerning organized Special Olympics competitions or even synthetic reports from these meetings in public (local, national) media, not to mention broadcast major sporting events such as the Paralympics and Special Olympics, is a sign of the marginalization of this social group. People regret failures of disabled athletes, while denying themselves the opportunity to participate in this beautiful sport of the disabled, accompanied by a lot of positive impressions and emotions. It is surprising that such an important area of life to many people (healthy as well as disabled), namely sports, which as a concept ought to unite people, strengthen social solidarity is not fully exploited as far as breaking social barriers is concerned. In the face of inertia, which is manifested in the public and private media, great respect should be given to all the NGO initiatives, local communities that promote physical culture and sport for the disabled (including intellectually impaired). Thanks to such ventures ideals concerning subjectivity and integration of disabled people become real.

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