The role of Special Olympics in promoting social inclusion: An examination of stakeholder perceptions

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increase in research examining social inclusion for individuals with an intellectual disability (ID). Sport is one context that has been recognized as promising for the promotion of social inclusion. The principal provider of sport programming for individuals with ID is Special Olympics (SO). SO is a global organization with approximately 4.2 million athletes in over 180 countries. SO provides a variety of programs that range from local community-level programming to world-level competition. However, little research has been conducted to examine perceptions of how sport programs such as SO can facilitate social inclusion for individuals with ID. The purpose of this study was to use a mixed-methods design to: (1) understand how various stakeholders (chapter representatives, coaches/volunteers, parents) define social inclusion, and (2) examine whether these stakeholders perceive SO as contributing to social inclusion. The qualitative analysis revealed that stakeholders have various definitions of social inclusion but perceive SO as facilitating social inclusion within and beyond the context of sport. The quantitative data also indicated that stakeholders perceive SO as fostering social inclusion for individuals with ID.

Background

It is estimated that individuals with an intellectual disability (ID) account for 200 million around the world. [1, 2] ID is generally diagnosed before the age of 18 and occurs when there is an impairment of general mental abilities in three different domains including the conceptual domain (e.g., language, reading, math, memory), the social domain (e.g., empathy, interpersonal communication), and the practical domain (e.g. personal care, school and work tasks).[3,4] In addition, an additional criterion is someone possessing an IQ score of 70 or below. It should be noted that IQ score was removed from the definition used by the American Psychiatric Association to ensure that it was not overemphasized, but IQ score remains a part of the description of intellectual disability.[4]

An area of study that has grown in recent years related to the lived experiences of individuals living with an ID is that of social inclusion. Presently, various conceptualizations of social inclusion appear in the literature. For example, some researchers[5,6] argue that social inclusion surfaced with the emergence of social exclusion and is thus considered the antithesis of social exclusion,[7] while other researchers[8,9] argue that it arose as a value-based concept. Those who view social inclusion as a value-based concept assert that it involves more than eliminating physical boundaries or barriers; rather, it is about facilitating and empowering individuals to participate in society by minimizing both physical and social distances that exist between people. As such, these researchers view social inclusion as a proactive approach to human development and social well-being.[8,9]

A number of efforts have been made to promote social inclusion for individuals living with a disability throughout various institutions of society, particularly in education and the workplace. However, research has shown that the success of such initiatives in these institutions has been mixed.[10-14]

More recently, researchers have recognized that the context of sport and recreation may be a more promising context for the promotion of social inclusion for individuals with ID.[15, 16] Bailey[17] conducted a review of existing social inclusion literature and identified four dimensions of social inclusion in sport, physical education and physical activity: 1) spatial (minimizing various distances); 2) relational (increasing a sense of belonging and acceptance); 3) functional (opportunities to develop knowledge and improve skills); and 4) power (change in locus of control).

The principal provider of sport programming for individuals with an ID, or individuals with an ID and physical impairment, is Special Olympics (SO; 3). SO is a global organization with approximately 4.2 million athletes in over 180 countries.[4] Moreover, SO provides a variety of programs that range from local community-level programming to world-level competition. However, there has been limited research on the impact of participation in SO. Moreover, the research that exists focuses on the perceived impact of participation as opposed to research related to social inclusion. For example, one study found that participation led to the increased parental understanding of their child's abilities, participants' perceived increases in confidence, physical skills, physical activity levels as well as having a positive impact on social relationships outside of the family.[18] Research that has examined aspects of social inclusion has found that attitudinal barriers against social inclusion exist worldwide.[19, 20] However, research has also shown that such attitudes can change through the public's increased interaction with individuals who have intellectual disabilities. Widaman and Siperstein[21] found that as people became involved with SO, support for inclusion of students with ID in regular classrooms increased from 2% to 55%. Similar findings also emerged in a study examining the impact of Unified Sports, a special initiative of SO.[22] Unified Sports provides opportunities for individuals with and without ID of similar age and ability to come together to train and compete as equals. The results of the study that examined the impact of this initiative show that Unified Sports is perceived as facilitating social inclusion. However, the researchers noted that further work is needed to expand social inclusion beyond the Unified Sports programme and into the wider community.[15] It is also important to recognize that some critiques of SO are that the structure of the organization itself leads to segregation, and thus exclusion, from mainstream sport and perpetuates negative stereotypes in individuals with an ID.[23, 24] Therefore, there is a need for more research to understand whether and how SO may be a change agent for individuals with ID.

Bailey[17] also asserted that there is a need for more empirical research on social inclusion, particularly within the context of sport, in order to justify that social inclusion is more than a simple theoretical aspiration. To facilitate such research, Bailey offered the following definition of social inclusion, specifically for sport, which includes the four dimensions outlined by Bailey above.

[B]ringing individuals from a variety of social and economic backgrounds together in a shared interest in activities that are inherently valuable (spatial); offering a sense of belonging, to a team, a club, a programme (relational); providing opportunities for the development of valued capabilities and competencies (functional); and increasing 'community capital', by extending social networks, increased community cohesion and civic pride (power).[17]

This was the definition of social inclusion employed for this study, despite the contentions around defining social inclusion and how it emerged. The rationale for using this definition is that it incorporates all aspects of social inclusion that are currently recognized, in addition to being sport-specific.

In sum, there is a need for further research within the context of sport to understand whether and how a context such as SO could foster social inclusion for individuals with an ID. The focus of this research is Special Olympics Canada (SOC). To date no research has examined the role that SOC may play in social inclusion despite one of the goals of SOC being "a change agent for social inclusion - advocating for and providing all athletes with opportunities for integration through sport."[25] Therefore, the purpose of this study was to: (1) understand how various SOC stakeholders (chapter representatives, coaches/volunteers, parents and athletes) define social inclusion, and (2) examine whether these stakeholders perceive SOC as contributing to social inclusion.

Method

Design

This research used a mixed methods approach as it "combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration."[26] More specifically, of the six mixed methods designs proposed by Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, and Hanson,[27] the concurrent nested strategy was employed. With this strategy, researchers use

multiple methods to gain a broader perspective.[28] Priority can be given to either method, which in this study is given to the qualitative method. The method that is given less priority (i.e. quantitative) is embedded or nested within the predominant method,[29] and serves to seek information from different groups and perspectives. The two data sets are then integrated at the analysis phase.[27, 30] This method was chosen as the researchers wanted to gain primarily an in-depth understanding of various stakeholders' detailed experiences with SOC through semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the researchers wanted to examine whether such perceptions were representative of stakeholders across the country, which was accomplished through an online survey that had open-ended questions as well as closed questions (likert scale). It should also be noted that this study was part of a larger project that examined perceptions of participation in SOC on the development of the athletes.

Participants & Procedure

A total 305 stakeholders participated in this study. Thirty-one of the 305 participants completed an interview and 274 completed an online survey. The interviews were conducted with thirteen athletes and fourteen parents (once on site for the interviews, one of the athletes declined the interview), and four chapter representatives. It was believed that interviewing athletes and parents would provide a solid understanding of the perceived impact of participation in SOC on social inclusion. Furthermore, interviewing chapter representatives was important because they have the most knowledge of the various sport programs being offered in their respective areas and how those programs are structured. The researchers purposefully selected chapter representatives from the largest city within 4 provinces (Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia) that span the country of Canada. The largest city within these provinces was chosen because these cities provide the greatest number of opportunities for involvement in SOC within each province.

The average age of the athletes was 16. Only one athlete had already graduated from high school while the others still attend either special education schools or inclusion/integration schools. Their diagnoses varied from Down syndrome, autism, micro deletion 22Q11, and/or learning, developmental, or intellectual disability. The athletes' experiences in competition ranged from local community participation to participation at the world games. Many of the athletes participate in more than one sport; some even participate in three to four SO sports per season. Only two of the athletes also participate in generic sports (non-SO sport programmes) along with peers without ID.

Participants for the online survey included parents of athletes (N=135) and coaches/volunteers (N=139). Athletes and chapter representatives were intentionally not included in the survey. The rationale for not including the athletes in the survey is that we wanted to ensure that the data collected from athletes was truly from the athletes and not from parents helping the athlete. We did not include chapter representatives because the research study was part of a larger project that focused on examining the perceived impact on the development of the athletes (e.g., life skills and social inclusion). Consequently, the researchers felt that the parents and coaches/volunteers, who interact with the athletes on a consistent basis, would be in the best position to complete the online survey. Inclusion criteria for coaches/volunteers were set to ensure that the data received came from participants who were of age to provide consent and had a minimum level of experience within SOC. The inclusion criteria included: 1) 18 years or older, 2) coaching/volunteering for at least one year, and 3) regular contact (i.e., at least monthly) with the athletes. In addition, coaches/volunteers being recruited were those who participated in the regularly offered SOC official sport programmes (e.g., athletics, swimming, floor hockey, figure skating, and alpine skiing). Therefore, one-time event volunteers such as regional, provincial, national games and/or fundraising volunteers were not eligible for the study.

For coaches/volunteers, sixty-four (46%) of the respondents were male, while 75 (54%) were female. Their age range was 18 to 78 years (Median=47). Fifty-eight of the respondents also identified themselves as a parent of an SOC athlete. For parents, 33 (24%) of the respondents were male and 102 (76%) were female, and their ages ranged from 33 to 80 years (Median=51). Some parents also identified themselves as a coach ($n = 51$) or volunteer ($n = 81$). In addition, there were eight parents who had more than one child with ID participating in SOC as an athlete. The type of ID of that their child/children included: Down syndrome/trisomy 21 ($n = 49$); autism/PDD/PDD-NOS ($n = 24$); developmental delay (n = 21); and other ($n = 41$) such as, but not limited to ADHD, epilepsy, Phalen-McDermid syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome, Aspergers syndrome, and Fragile X syndrome. While their child/children participated in a variety of sports, the top three sports were aquatics ($n = 64$), 5 & 10-pin bowling ($n = 63$), and athletics/track & field ($n = 52$). These three sports are also the top three sports based on participation numbers within SOC (SOC personal communication, April 27th 2011).

All procedures for this research were approved by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the University of Ottawa. The semi-structured interviews and the online surveys were conducted concurrently. For the interviews, SOC was initially contacted to recommend chapter representatives from the four provinces outlined above, who were most familiar with the athletes and programmes in their own chapter. The selected chapter representatives were then contacted via e-mail by the researcher. Then, with the help of the chapter representative, the researcher recruited parents and athletes with varying levels of experience in SOC. All of the interviews with parents and athletes were conducted in person. Two of the interviews with chapter representatives were conducted in person and two via telephone. Although the interviews were originally planned to be in-person, changes to the chapter representative's schedule did not permit an in-person interview. All of the interviews were conducted by the first author; the French and bilingual interviews were conducted with the assistance of a bilingual staff member from Special Olympics Quebec to ensure participants felt comfortable and that the interview utilized the correct terminology. All interviews were audio-recorded.

For the online survey, chapter representatives across Canada (one from each province/territory) were contacted through an e-mail, which explained the details of the research and included the links to the online surveys. In this email, the chapter representatives were also asked to distribute the information and links to the survey to potential participants in whatever way each chapter felt was the most appropriate (e.g. e-mail, newsletter, and/or website). Responses were collected over a three-month period.

Measures

Interviews. The interviews conducted were semi-structured in nature. Three interview guides were developed: one for the athletes, one for the parents and one for the chapter representatives. The questions pertaining to this study on the interview guide for the athletes included those related to how they defined social inclusion, what they felt it meant to be included as well as whether and how they believed their participation in SOC facilitated social inclusion. The questions pertaining to this study on the interview guides for the parents and chapter representatives included those related to general experience with SOC, non-SOC sport experience, and perceptions of whether and how SOC was facilitating social inclusion. In addition, the interview guide for the parents also included questions pertaining to their experiences of their child in various contexts (school, sport, community) as well as specific experiences with their child

regarding social inclusion. The interview guide for the chapter representatives also included questions pertaining to their perceptions of the role of SOC in social inclusion and how they currently approach social inclusion. The interviews with the athletes lasted between 20-40 minutes, while the interviews with the parents lasted between 30 minutes to 2 hours, and with the chapter representatives between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.

Online survey. Two surveys were created on Survey Monkey; one for parents, and one for coaches/volunteers. Both surveys were offered in both Canadian official languages (i.e., English and French). As mentioned above, this study was part of a larger study. For this larger study there were six sections on the parent survey and three on the coach/volunteer survey.

However, for this study, only the sections on demographics, SOC involvement, and questions pertaining to the perceptions of social inclusion were used from the survey. With regards to social inclusion, 1 survey question asked participants whether they perceive SOC as contributing to social inclusion in which they responded on a 5-point Likert scale (totally disagree to totally agree). Following this question was an open-ended section with two questions. The first asked participants to explain their rationale for selecting the answer to the first question (e.g., disagree or agree) and the second asked them to provide an example, if any, which related to their experiences with SOC regarding social inclusion.

Data Analysis

To analyze qualitative data, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then subjected to an inductive thematic analysis.[31] Through this thematic analysis, the data were broken into smaller meaning units and organised by themes and categories.[31] Braun and Clarke[31] argued that using a thematic analysis allows for flexibility when analyzing the data, because it allows for the triangulation of several participants' perceptions. First, the transcribed data was read and re-read several times. During this step initial thoughts and ideas were noted. Second, codes were generated that identified pertinent features that supported the overall purpose of the research. Third, common codes were combined into themes, which were labeled and defined. Fourth, relevant quotations that supported the emerging themes were identified and inserted under the relevant theme. The trustworthiness of the data was assured through a collaborative approach to analysis.[32] The development and labelling of themes as well as the identification of pertinent quotes was completed by both authors.

Any small discrepancies between researchers in the analysis process were identified (e.g., under which theme some of the quotes fit best) and discussed until an agreement was reached.

To organize data and help in the identification of quotes that supported the emergent themes, NVivo 7.0 was used. Participant identification codes are provided for each quote (A=Athlete, P=Parent, CR= Chapter Representative, CV= Coach/Volunteer, I= Interview, S=Survey) along with numbers to identify the order in which the participants were interviewed or online responses were submitted. For example, a third parent interviewed was coded PI3.

Quantitative data from the online survey were analyzed using SPSS 18.0. More specifically, descriptive statistics were conducted to examine the mean scores of stakeholders' perceptions regarding the impact SOC has on social inclusion. A Between Groups ANOVA was conducted to examine if there were any significant differences between the mean scores between stakeholders who identified as parents only, coaches only or those who identified as both a parent and a coach.

Results

Four themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: (1) Individuals have varying definitions of SI, (2) Stakeholders perceive SO as contributing to social inclusion while recognizing that the programme is largely exclusive, (3) Participation in SO provides opportunities to participate in generic sports, and (4) Participation in SO has a positive impact on inclusion at school and in the broader community. The quantitative results are incorporated into the qualitative findings, in particular under the second theme, in order to provide a more integrated summary of the findings.

Individuals have varying definitions of social inclusion. The interviews with the athletes, parents and chapter representatives, showed that there were variations among the responses regarding the definition of social inclusion. The athletes focused primarily on the social aspect of social inclusion. It was observed that when the athletes were asked about what social inclusion meant to them, they responded by talking about what inclusion feels like. For example one athlete stated: "When people invite me over to activities is probably when I feel included… then I feel happy." (AI1) Another athlete stated:

If someone mentions that they are going somewhere and ask if I'd like to go or stuff like that. I find that's a big way that I know I'm included in a group, not being left out. That's the way I really notice that people are really liking me or

trying to include me. (AI6)

Although the parents had similar ideas to the athletes, there appeared to be greater variations because they spoke about the social aspect "to feel a part of a network that is like a family unit and comfortable to them," (PI1) "Total acceptance of any disability" (PI2) but also talked about being able to function independently within society: "be able to get work with other people, to have an apartment, to be autonomous." (PI3) Still other parents shared that to them social inclusion was "being as close to normal as possible" (PI4) and "to be accepted at the level that you are able to be included in the society." (PI5)

Interestingly, one parent noted that social inclusion is often defined differently for each individual: "Social inclusion for some athletes from what I can see, it would be very different from what it would be for my daughter." (PI1)

While some parents struggled to provide one definition social inclusion, all parents agreed that social inclusion goes beyond providing physical opportunities. The following quote demonstrates many of the thoughts shared by the parents interviewed:

As an ID child, you don't get invited to birthday parties, after school events, sleepovers. They're not included. So even though there's full inclusion [talking about the school physically included children with ID in the classroom] and they may have friends, it doesn't mean they want to come over for a play date…I guess social inclusion is being socially accepted regardless of your disability, whatever it may be. That would be a perfect world, wouldn't it? (PI2)

Similar to parents, the chapter representatives did not appear to have one agreed-upon definition of social inclusion: "Well, I don't think we have a formal definition" (CRI2) but did recognize that it goes beyond physical inclusion:

When we talk about social inclusion, we see it not specific to SOC... So we look at inclusion as inclusion in society, so that there is nothing essentially their "disability" that prevents them from whatever they want to do. So it's a broad broad broad…and so our focus isn't inclusion is this, inclusion is being on a generic team. We just want them to be active, be involved. Do whatever they want to do. (CRI4)

Stakeholders perceive SOC as contributing to social inclusion while recognizing that the programme is largely exclusive. The majority of stakeholders in both the interviews and online surveys perceived SO as helping to facilitate social inclusion.

The quantitative data from the online surveys indicated that overall participants perceived SO as contributing to social inclusion. The overall mean score for parents and coaches/ volunteers combined was 4.26 (SD = .92) on a 5-point Likert scale. When looking at the frequency distribution of scores it showed that 6% of respondents either strongly disagreed (2%) or disagreed (4%) that SO contributed to social inclusion while 73% agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (36%) that SO contributed to social inclusion. Eleven percent of the respondents were neutral. In addition, the results of the ANOVA examining differences between stakeholders who identified as parents only (M=4.17, SD=0.92), coach/volunteer only (M=4.38, SD=0.71) or those who identified as both a parent and a coach/volunteer (M=4.22; SD=1.01) was not significant (F=1.40, p=0.2537).

The quantitative findings were strongly supported by the qualitative findings. As one stakeholder shared:

I have been involved with many organizations in the last 20 years that support or advocate or provide services for people with intellectual challenges. I can unequivocally say that I have not met another organization that comes close to meeting SO success in contributing to social inclusion of the athletes. (CVS99)

In addition to simply stating that SOC was contributing to social inclusion, the participants provided numerous examples of how SOC contributes to social inclusion by providing opportunities for individuals with an ID to show others (individuals without an ID) their abilities. As one of the parent shared, "Without SOC, my child would not have had the chance to show people, so called 'normal', his sport and social abilities." (PS6) A coach/volunteer explained how participating in SO programmes provides athletes with concrete experiences that they can share with others "[a]s athletes go about meeting people in the public, participate in competition, they have something they can talk about with others in the community. They can share their knowledge of sport, talk about their accomplishments as an athlete." (CVS72) Similarly, a chapter representative explained that social inclusion may be fostered because SOC increases "the awareness of the fact that our athletes are contributing individuals in the society and that they can compete in the highest levels with the generic sporting environment or the SO environment and be competitive." (CRI4) Perhaps this parent summed it up best when she shared her dreams for society and how SOC is contributing to that dream: "I would like to see a world where people saw the person, not the disability. SO helps the community do this." (PS46)

Although the participants in this study valued SOC for opportunities that helped increase social inclusion, it is important to point out that the participants recognized SOC as an exclusive organization. As one parent explained,"[SOC] doesn't include people from all aspects of society but only those with special needs." (PS58) Another parent had a different view in that although the organization provides programming to individuals with ID, many others who are involved do not have an ID. The parent stated, "Although SO appears to be segregated, the more I gain experience, the more I see that it includes the intellectually delayed population as well as the "generic" population through coaches, volunteers, supporters and other family members." (PS64)

In addition, the participants recognized that SOC only involving individuals with an ID has both positive and potentially negative impacts. One coach/volunteer stated:

I think that SO provides athletes with the opportunity to develop socially with their fellow athletes and coaches but also segregates them from the mainstream athletic and social world. There is good and bad to this as the SO programme provides them with a safe and supportive environment of like individuals which definitely supports development of social skills but it also labels them as "special" and separate from "regular" programmes and people. (CVS31)

Similarly, a parent shared the following:
Although SO segregates people with developmental disabilities, it provides exposure to activities that the normal population enjoy, opportunities to work with 'normal' people, e.g. coaches, supporters, siblings, etc. and other people see our children in an environment they also enjoy...and others can recognize the skills and attributes of our children. (PS76)

The largest positive perception of SOC being exclusive was that it allowed for all youth with an ID to have a place in which to participate in sport, which would not be possible in the current structures of mainstream sport. A chapter representative summarizes this nicely with the following quote: "Having a programme that is not as inclusive, for us, we were able to take any athlete no matter what their level of ability no matter how autonomous they were." (CRI2) Similarly, a parent stated:

I love that aspect of it that everybody is included, whether they are someone who walks the 400 or my daughter who runs it. They all have an equal chance…where as…

mainstream, everybody's bunched into one…That's one thing I love about SO, the way everybody gets a chance. Not just the top guys. (PI8)

The athletes support the previous statement, and the following quote indicates how these athletes feel about having a program that is just for them:

I feel that [SOC] are just wonderful. They really fit to everyone's needs. They don't just say here's certain amounts of athletes that can do our programs, the rest of you I'm sorry … you're not going to feel excluded from the rest of the group. You can still do the same thing you are doing.... I find that's been very good to me in the SO programs. (AI3)

Furthermore, many parents, expressed problems with contexts, such as school, which focus solely on inclusion. For example, one parent expressed frustration with only having the inclusion option at school: "The regular kids, they just don't integrate them no matter how much you try. The school doesn't do anything for them, and this [SOC] is the venue for them." (PI1) Similarly, another parent shared: "a lot of kids that don't have disabilities can be very cruel, so [her daughter] had a lot of problems with that in some of the school areas." (PI10) As a result, parents discussed that full inclusion is not always positive and they value SOC because it is an 'exclusive' programme designed just for their children with ID. Another parent summarized the situation well by stating, "exclusion with a bit of inclusion enhances that inclusion." (PI5)

Participation in SOC provides opportunities to participate in generic sport. Apart from discussing that SOC fosters social inclusion for individuals with ID, participants consistently discussed the opportunities provided by SOC to participate in generic sport as an important mechanism for increasing social inclusion. To provide a little context, the following quote from one of the chapter representatives explains how SOC can help athletes participate in generic sport programmes with non-ID youth:

The skills they've learned in the SO environment transgress into the generic sport environment. So they're socially accepted in that environment because they've learned proper communication skills, they've learned the respect, they've learned how to communicate with whether it be SO athletes or non-SO athletes. (CRI4)

This explanation was supported by numerous examples from the athletes, parents and coach/volunteers of how participation in SOC programming has led to opportunities

for inclusion in generic sport. As one athlete shared:

I joined the school swimming team because I'm good at swimming, and I'm part of SO, so might as well join the swim team. I made it to OFSAA (Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations) and came in 6th for my race, so considering I was against that doesn't have disability, I did pretty well. (AI3)

Similarly, a parent expressed:

My daughter was picked to participate in the Provincial Summer Games. These athletes were made to feel and believe that they are just as valuable as any other person...SO is proof that they are valuable and matter. She feels she has possibilities and dreams that can take her beyond and further with SO. (PS89)

Another parent expressed how her daughter "has achieved inclusion in her skating club with the help of her coach and the belief of the parent committee that my daughter has as much to contribute to their children as their children have to give to my daughter." (PS72)

The coaches/volunteers also provided a number of examples of how SO programmes are now integrated with generic programming which they also believed facilitated social inclusion. As one coach/volunteer explained "SO curling athletes are welcomed in the curling club as equal members. Athletes participate in regular curling draws and bonspiels and are asked to volunteer in the club as are other members. Socializing after games with opponents is commonplace." (CVS26) Similarly, a coach/volunteer provided an example in her skating programme:

Our SO athletes are included in the 'generic' skating sessions and do the same programme as the generic skaters at the same level and/or above their skating and abilities...and in turn gives them confidence to handle most social situations outside the sport area. (CVS14)

Participation in SOC has a positive impact on inclusion at school and in the broader community. The participants shared their experiences of how participation in SOC has had a positive impact on social inclusion at school and in the broader community. The athletes discussed how participation in SOC has led to greater recognition by non-ID peers at school. As one athlete explained "In school, they had my picture in school in the bulletin board, they saw my picture and now they know I'm a speed skater and that's

why I'm a fast speed skater in school." (AI5) Similarly another athlete stated "It impresses people that I became…I have been at the Canada Games. I told them then it's ah, cool." (AI10)

Other athletes discussed how participating in sports allowed them to have [sports] in common to talk to and make friends with non-ID peers at school. One athlete explained "I think it helped me out a lot in school to break out, to look out for more friends." (AI6) A second athlete shared a similar experience and reports that "I think I was a little shy before [participating in SOC], but I'm actually talking more, talking to more people." (AI8)

Similar to the athletes, the parents extensively discussed how before their children participated in SOC they were not as valued or respected by teachers and/or peers. As one parent explained:

Because my son is functionally disabled with an IQ of less than the 1st percentile. He was treated by many teachers and a principal as having no value. Unteachable and a waste of their time. Through his successful acquisition of sport skills and the learned ability to work cooperatively with teammates and coaches he showed many educators that we are all teachable…He landed himself on the honor roll in high-school for A`s in PE and Art… Today because of SO my son has shown that he is teachable he can learn and he can take those skills and use them in other areas of his life. (PS77)

Another parent shared:

My daughter was not allowed to participate in extracurricular sports during most of her elementary school until she was validated by winning some medals at SO winter games. After she showed her medals, it opened some minds up and she was allowed to participate in the end of year talent show. Although her classmates didn't want to perform with her at first, she had the confidence to perform a dance solo with a resulting genuine standing ovation. I think it was the first time some people recognized that she also had some talents. In following talent shows, some of the more 'popular' non-disabled students wanted to perform with our daughter. Afterwards she was permitted to try out for the volleyball, basketball and soccer teams. When our daughter scored a goal at one of the interscholastic games, the team and audience were so beside themselves with pride. This opened up many other parents', students' eyes as well. (PS64)

Another parent also shared how as a result of students volunteering with SOC, her son has developed long lasting friendships:

Several students that attended the same high school as our son decided to come out and volunteer at the provincial games…over the course of the games…friendships developed and social barriers went by the wayside. During the remainder of our son's high school years he was invited to dances, movies and community events. He is now 22 and when his friends return home from university they look him up and they get together. (PS52)

SOC was also perceived by stakeholders as having an impact on social inclusion in the broader community. For example, a chapter representative explained how a recent publicity campaign that took place in one province resulted in praises from other organizations and that SOC is now "being used as an example by [a provincial association for community living] as opposed to being completely almost rejected back 12 years ago." (CRI2)

A number of parents maintain that SOC has encouraged community acknowledgement of their children's accomplishments, which indicates that SOC has an impact beyond the individual. As one parent expressed "My daughter was chosen by her community to light the cauldron at the 2010 Olympic torch run." (PS74) Another parent expressed an award her son received through SOC led to significant recognition in the community:

My son suddenly was noticed in our community as an athlete not just as a special needs person. His involvement seemed to teach all around us that the SO athletes are the same as any other athlete - must train; take disappointments as well as all the good things; he received a lot of press which goes far for inclusion in my opinion. (PS54)

In addition to being recognized publicly, stakeholders also provided examples of how skills learned through participation in SOC have led to more involvement in the community. One parent stated "[My daughter] works part-time and I feel her involvement in Special Olympics has assisted in her verbal skills to succeed at her job." (PS14) Similarly, a coach/volunteer shared "I have seen athletes develop self-confidence in other areas of their personal life after being involved in SOC, getting jobs in the community, public speaking, travel, interpersonal relationships." (CVS10)

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine from the perspectives of various stakeholders, the perceived impact and role of SOC in social inclusion for individuals with an ID. The results from both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that stakeholders perceive SOC as contributing to social inclusion. Although the quantitative data is a relatively small piece of the overall data collected in this study, it is an important piece that reflects the voices of numerous parents and coaches/volunteers from across Canada who did not have an opportunity to be interviewed. In particular, these findings demonstrate that the belief that SOC contributes to social inclusion is not only a belief that exists among the small sample of the interviewed chapter representatives, parents, and athletes but that this belief is held by numerous parents and coaches/volunteers across Canada.

The qualitative results indicated that social inclusion was not an easy concept to define because the definitions from athletes, parents, coaches/volunteers and chapter representatives varied. Definitions ranged from feeling or being included in social events, to being able to function independently in the world, to full integration into society at multiple levels. Research by Frazee[9] also revealed varying definitions of social inclusion among youth with physical disabilities. Therefore, it appears that the definition of social inclusion is often self-perceptive and self-determined. However, researchers assert that social inclusion is about the citizenship of the individual and being respected as a valued contributor who has rights, knowledge and power.[9, 33] More research is needed to examine factors that lead to variations in the definitions of social inclusion and the possible consequences on how social inclusion is fostered within our institutions when individuals within a society define and perceive social inclusion a certain way. Research has examined the barriers that lead to social inclusion for individuals with ID,[19, 34] which recognizes that attitudes play an important role in the perceptions of inclusion. Siperstein et al[19] found that people worldwide rated individuals with ID rather low on a variety of capabilities in general and even lower for capabilities within mainstream society. For example, people rated individuals with ID as much more capable of playing sport with other individuals with ID but very low in terms of capability to participate in sport with individuals without ID. Moreover, people around the world also believed that within societal institutions such as school and work, individuals with ID would cause more accidents, have low productivity, cause disciplinary problems and have a negative impact on individuals without

an ID within these institutions. It is hypothesized that such negative perceptions of individuals with an ID stem from the lack of services, support, and opportunities afforded to individuals with ID to be able to show society their true capabilities. Hall[34] discusses that although progress has been made with regards to the physical inclusion of individuals with ID (e.g., providing employment, independent living), such experiences have not been positive for the majority of individuals with an ID as the focus has been primarily on physical integration and not true 'social' integration, which entails a sense of belonging. Hall[34] asserts that it is only through continued efforts of actively involving and supporting individuals with ID in our institutions that true social inclusion will occur.

The majority of stakeholders in this study did perceive SOC as positively contributing to social inclusion. However, the results also revealed that some, albeit a very small minority (6%), disagreed. Comments from the interviews and online surveys showed that in these cases individuals saw SOC as an organization that segregates individuals with ID from those without ID. When examining the results in more detail, it became more apparent that although it is recognized by stakeholders that SOC does segregate and can have negative implications, this segregation was mostly perceived as valuable. Participants explained that SOC provides individuals with ID an opportunity to be in an environment that is open to all, supportive, increases confidence, and fosters the development of positive peer relationships. SOC was also perceived as valuable because in other societal institutions such as school, social inclusion was not working as planned. Many of the parents discussed how at school their children are integrated physically into regular classrooms, but there are no other support systems in place to foster social inclusion. As a result, the school system negatively impacted children with ID, because there is little interaction, friendship and/or recognition by non-ID peers. On the other hand, the safe and supportive environments that SOC provides are greatly needed. These findings are supported by a recent paper by Graham and Harwood,[35] which discusses the ongoing difficulties that schools often experience with fostering inclusion. Their research supports that effective policies promoting inclusion have to be innovative and involve enhancing the capabilities of the students and teachers, rather than just a decision to be inclusive. Thus, in this study, SO was perceived as a stronger and safer place for individuals with ID to be and was perceived as providing opportunities that are not available to individuals with ID within the context of school.

Moreover, many of the stakeholders perceive that participation in SOC facilitated social inclusion for SOC participants both within and beyond the context of sport. Going back to the definition used for this study by Bailey,[17] the results support all four dimensions of social inclusion. Although individuals with ID participated primarily in SO programmes, such participation led to opportunities and experiences in non-SO or non-disability specific sport programs (sometimes referred to as generic sport) that was perceived as minimizing the variety of distances that exist between individuals with an ID and those without an ID (spatial dimension). Parents also expressed that participation in SO programming allowed their children to showcase their skills to others, which ultimately led to increased interaction and acceptance among non-ID peers, particularly at school (relation dimension). Further, stakeholders discussed how participation in SO led to the development of various life and sport skills that could be transferred to non-SO (generic) sport and work (functional dimension). Finally, stakeholders shared their perceptions of how participation in SO programming helped individuals with an ID extend their social network in the community through opportunities to be recognized for the awards and medals they received that led to an increase in civic pride (power dimension).

Therefore, it appears that SOC may play an important role in social inclusion even though the majority of their day-to-day programming focuses only on individuals with ID. This may in part be explained by Thomas,[33] who discusses the duality of restrictive forces on individuals with disabilities. Thomas explains that on the one hand, persons with disabilities can face numerous barriers and restrictions that can impact their active participation in the social world. This aspect has thus far been the center of attention in promoting social inclusion which involves providing access by eliminating physical, structural, and systematic barriers. In addition, persons with disabilities may also face restrictions in feeling secure and feeling self-worthy, which is why researchers have also advocated for access to respect, access to identity and being oneself. As mentioned above, various definitions of social inclusion include aspects with regards to being respected as a valued contributor who has rights, knowledge, and power.[29] It appears that schools, a context in which individuals with ID spend a lot of time, still need to work towards breaking down barriers related to respecting and valuing those with ID and not just physical integration into classrooms. Siperstein et al[19] have proposed a number of recommendations for breaking down the existing barriers to social inclusion. Within schools, one recommendation was to expand school-based SOC programming. This form of

action is also supported by the research of Widaman and Siperstein[21] that showed substantial increases for support of social inclusion with greater numbers of individuals involved in SO. A second recommendation put forth was to have more professional development opportunities to prepare staff within schools to effectively foster inclusion beyond physical integration. A third recommendation encourages teachers to integrate curriculum to increase students awareness of the abilities of individuals with ID by showing videos, sharing materials related to SO or having students volunteer for SO or join a SO Unified Sports team. Recommendations for the broader community with regards to how they can take action to promote social inclusion included opening up community recreation centres and sporting venues to individuals with ID, integrating SO programmes into existing sporting activities or events, encouraging community members to get involved with SO or promoting businesses to sponsor SO or hire individuals with ID, and providing public recognition for achievements of individuals with ID.

Although the results of the study indicated that SOC is perceived as contributing to social inclusion, a number of limitations exist for the present study. First, the data collected are participants' perceptions rather than an objective evaluation of whether SOC is contributing to social inclusion. Second, it is possible that the study's participants are biased regarding how well SO contributes to social inclusion, given that they are and continue to be active participants in SOC. Therefore, several future research recommendations can be made. First, as generic sport opportunities were said to be one initiative that many chapters set out to provide for their athletes, research should be conducted to examine the number and impact of such initiatives within community sport. This may be particularly relevant given the recent research that has shown positive outcomes for the Unified Sports initiative that brings athletes with ID together with athletes without ID.[15, 36] Second, future research using a greater variety of methods (e.g., observations) to understand the success of social inclusion through SO is warranted. Third, longitudinal research should also be conducted to examine how SOC can influence athlete experiences of social inclusion over time.

Conclusion

Despite years of aggressively promoting social inclusion, especially in the education sector, the reality is that social inclusion is complex. This study is one of the first studies to examine whether stakeholders involved in SOC perceive the organization as fostering social inclusion. Although there is still much to be done to foster social inclusion[9, 19, 33-35] the

SOC stakeholders involved in this study perceive SOC as fostering social inclusion both within and beyond the context of sport by providing opportunities to develop and transfer skills outside of SOC programs, occasions to participate in mainstream sport, increased and enhanced relationships with peers and adults without ID, and greater participation in the broader community. As research has found such opportunities[19, 34] are key to changing attitudes towards individuals with ID so that they are viewed as true citizens who are respected and valued for their contributions to society.

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