

## **Views of Adolescents with Cognitive Disabilities and their Parents on Using Sports as Means for Social Inclusion in Dubai**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines views of adolescents with cognitive disabilities and their parents on the inclusion of such adolescents in various sport programmes through their educational institutions in Dubai. Following the adoption of a new national policy known as ‘The National Policy for People of Determination 2017’, learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who are often referred to as students of determination in the UAE, are expected to live fulfilled lives and be included in mainstream education and make the most of their potentials. Most educational institutions use sports and physical activities as means of the social inclusion of adolescents with disabilities. This paper focuses on adolescents with cognitive disabilities aged 13 to 18 that are enrolled in educational institutions (schools or centres). The study investigates the impact of enrolling adolescents with cognitive disabilities in sport programmes on their social inclusion. Such impact includes forming and sustaining friendships, motivation and self-esteem development. A qualitative approach was adopted for the research. Purposeful sampling of adolescents and their parents from several schools and centres that cater for adolescents (aged 13-18) with cognitive disabilities was undertaken. Semi structured interviews were held with parents while focus groups discussions were used to gather data from the adolescents themselves (boys and girls). Issues, challenges and recommendations are presented to inform policy, decision makers and future studies in the field.

**Key words:** Parents’ views; Adolescents with cognitive disabilities; Inclusion; Sports; People of Determination – Dubai

## **1. Introduction**

Inclusion is considered as a recent developmental trend in some parts of the world, but it is still a controversial issue, although it has been pushed internationally (Boyle et al, 2020). Shahzadi (2000) emphasized that ‘Inclusion has become the most effective approach to address the learning needs of all pupils in regular schools’. This implies that inclusive education is about fitting schools to meet the needs of all learners.

Peoples’ attitudes towards other individuals and particularly children with disabilities are usually shaped by the traditional cultural issues and values in a society. Such attitudes grow from their values (Alcott, 2002). Therefore, if people value children as individuals, then their values aim to provide all children with equal opportunity as a right and they will develop positive attitudes towards them. The importance of this has been stressed by Gaad (2004) who claimed that ‘careful consideration should be made for the individuality of children with intellectual disabilities’. In fact, the results of several research studies conducted by Gaad (2004, 2009, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2019) revealed that the educational system and the provision of educational services offered to meet the needs of children with cognitive disabilities are largely affected by the knowledge, traditions, cultural values, fixed ideas and beliefs of people in the UAE. Bradshaw et al (2004) in a study back then claim ‘the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (now Ministry of Community Development) was drafting a new law which will require private sector companies to reserve three per cent of jobs for people with special needs. Almost twenty

years on since the 2004 study, one could see noticeable shift in adopting inclusive education in Emirati schools. Dubai, as the commercial capital, pays great attention to implement an effective inclusion for the purposes of empowerment of people with disabilities known in UAE as People of Determination (PoDs).

Dubai, like all other Emirates hurried to offer compliance with the newly adopted National Policy to empower People of Determination that was released in 2017 as the key legislation that governs and organizes services offered to all people with disabilities known in the UAE as people of determination. The policy is considered as a revolutionary step towards their empowerment. It aims at creating an integrated community, free from barriers, which empowers people of determination and guarantees their right to a dignified life (Ministry of Community Development, 2017: 10). As public, cultural and sport life is one of the main six pillars, this paper looks at the current role of sports in the lives of students with conative disabilities that are enrolled in schools and centres in Dubai. Dubai also launched its own local legislation, ‘My Community’ initiative to support people with disability through its governmental authority (The Executive Council) in 2015. The initiative supports such people with five goals in mind: quality health and rehabilitation services, inclusive education, equal employment opportunities, sustainable social protection system and universal accessibility. Sport is seen as one of the key pillars to achieve such goals. The paper investigates the views of parents and adolescents in that age group on the role of

sports and how it impacts their lives. The main purpose of this research is to examine role of sports on the lives of participants particularly with regards to social inclusion.

## **2. Methods**

A qualitative approach was adopted to gather data. Mertens (1998: 159) defines the purpose of qualitative methods in research as providing “an in-depth description of a specific program, practice or setting”. Purposeful sampling of adolescents and their parents from several schools and centres that cater for adolescents (age 13-18) with cognitive disabilities was chosen. A timeline was agreed taking into account school holidays, exams, etc. Semi-structured interviews were held with parents while focus group discussion was conducted to gather data from the adolescents themselves (boys and girls). Prior to data collection permission was sought and obtained from the participants and assurances given that anonymity would be maintained while protection of personal privacy would be respected and strived for. In this regard, actual names were altered and pseudonyms names used with specific locations not included (Robson 2002:501-2). In order to respect participants’ rights and maintain ethical standards, every effort was made to adhere to all other ethical considerations (Mertens and McLaughlin 2004:151). The findings were presented in a final report with optional access for comment made available to all participants. Six participants were selected purposefully following consultation with schools and centres. Three (3) boys and three (3) girls were involved in one focus group discussion while 9 parents were

interviewed (6 mothers and 3 fathers). The focus group approach was designed in a way that allowed the main questions, to be mainly open-ended to allow for expression of opinion, some dead ended questions were also included for verification. They were designed to allow participants to answer in any way they saw fit. Open-ended questions do not impose answers on people. They allow expression. Dead ended questions can simply confirm a doubt. A technique known as the four-question sequence consists typically of four parts was applied to insure validity. Given that all participants had cognitive disabilities and language may be of an issue, simple straight forward questions were selected.

The 4 questions were as follows:

- Main question (usually open-ended), eg. Tell me about the sport activities you do in school or outside?
- Follow-up questions, so do you enjoy sports?
- Probing questions, and why is that?
- Prompted questions, any probing of effectiveness of sport in the lives of such teenagers.

This is a sketch that shows a classic focus group setting that was sent to parents seeking their consent. All are Arabic speaking parents.



In an effort to control reliability of data collected, data was corroborated via cross referencing where possible (Robson 2002:101) with information collected from other sources. It is worth mentioning that majority of the interviews were done over the phone and/or online using platforms like zoom and Microsoft teams due to COVID-19 restrictions. Before the commencement of the focus group interviews, participants and their parents were briefed as to the general purpose of the study and permission sought. Permission was obtained from participants' parents to publish the study. In terms of focus group, a number of disadvantages were apparent, such as the difficulty involved in capturing individual responses (Godwin and Happle 2009:62). The use of a tracking sheet did allow the researcher to identify individual responses, and thus produce separate transcripts for each participant, which could be forwarded for verification as parents were given that option given the difficulties in language among participants with cognitive disabilities. or discussion. Every effort was made to ensure that participants are not adversely affected.

### **3. Results**

Parents were asked a main question:

- *What is the impact of sport activities on the lives of your child?*

The followings are extracts of some of the direct answers or responses from parents:

A mother of a 14-year old girl with Down Syndrome who attends a centre for rehabilitation in Dubai said:

*“When [Amal] enrolled in some of the sports activities when she first joined the centre at the age of 5, I was so worried. I found her happier though when she had an activity. She got excited every time she put her sport gear in the bag. I could see her happier when she took part in sport tournaments organized by the centre”.*

A father of a 14-year old child with Global Developmental Delay stated:

*‘My son is happy with the activities, he made friends through taking part in such sport events. As a teenager with cognitive disabilities his friendship choices are limited so I am glad to see him having sports and games as something in common with others’.*

Another father of a teenage girl with cognitive disabilities stressed that his daughter finds the sporting activities as a ‘gateway’ to mingling with others. She attends a mainstream school but in a special unit. He feels that being included in sport activities with everyone else is a ‘bless’. He commented:

*‘Well, being in the mainstream school is an advantage as there are more inclusion opportunities, however sporting and other activities is what is keeping my daughter truly included. I feel that by taking part in such activities she’s making new friends and being involved as she could be through taking part in such sporting activities. She goes to a special unit you know most of the day, and getting out of the classroom, blending with others is good. School makes sure that they do sport with other classrooms not just those 8 kids alone! I am happy with that’.*

I was intrigued by comments from one mother of a boy with down syndrome age 13. She revealed:

*‘[Hasan] social skills have been always poor. I would describe him as on the lazy side when it comes to forming friendship. Last year the social worker in the mainstream school during the annual review meetings, you know he goes to normal school, recommended enrolling him in a club. I was worried as I will not have control over issues like harassment and you hear a lot of stories about how vulnerable they can be in such clubs. Sports activities require a lot of physical contacts and I was not happy with that, I thought well, my son is not ready, although age wise and physically he seems ok but mentally he is such a child and for his protection, I refused. Then another mother said she enrolled her son in the local team for people of determination, so I was encouraged at least he would have a buddy. At first I used to sit and watch the whole time, then I eased up now I just send him with the driver twice a week. I could see how that transformed him. My son is now more social and*

*certainly more disciplined. Now COVID stopped us from doing this so he is sad. They said we can go back once a week but until he is vaccinated I will not gamble with his health. I am grateful for the idea and I know he can't wait to go back'.*

Sultan, is a boy with Down Syndrome who has been to a mainstream school all along. His mother had strong views about the role of the sports in his life:

*'You see Miss, Sultan is a different story than his brothers and sisters. School is his life and a big part of the school is him taking part in various activities. I cannot imagine how he would be excluded from such activities. I was concerned when his school club took part in the Special Olympics couple of years ago as he had several operations so someone had to keep an eye on him, but school did an amazing job in keeping him safe. He loved it and was looking forward to going every day. He kept all his certificates from sport events in a little book. He knows these are his sport achievements and he is so proud.'*

A focus group approach was used to gather thoughts from teenagers with cognitive disabilities. A mixture of centre based and mainstream based students were involved. Luckily, gathering data took place when physical, but socially distance activities were permitted following the first wave of COVID. Researchers took advantage of having the mixed group, boys, girls, mainstream and special school participants all enrolled in a social club for people of determination. All the focus group participants had an intellectual disability with dual or multiple difficulties like language delay etc. It was sometimes

inevitable that an interpretation through the supervisor became necessary as most had language delay. The following table shows the actor codes, age and nature of disabilities of participants in the focus group. That was indeed a challenge especially with moderate to sometimes severe intellectual disabilities questions should be clearer and not overlapping.

#	Name	Age	Nature of disability
1	A (boy)	13	Cognitive disability <b>(Down Syndrome)</b>
2	B (boy)	14	Intellectual disability + Global developmental delay
3	C (girl)	14	Cognitive disability <b>(Down Syndrome)</b>
4	D (boy)	15	Intellectual disability + some physical disability
5	E (boy)	13	Cognitive disability <b>(Down Syndrome)</b>
6	F (boy)	18	Dual disability (hearing + Intellectual disability)

The followings are extracts of individual response to a straight forward question that follows ‘Do you like sport at school or centre?’ and if answer is yes that was followed with “why?”

Almost all of them said yes, nodded their head or used gesture to confirm that they do like sport activities. The ‘why’ questions had several answers, the followings are samples of such answers:

*‘love games. I Learn how to play stuff. I am happy with that’*

*‘sport is cool, I have friends, I play with my friends’*

*‘I like the Games, the big Games (referring to Special Olympics World Games that was*

help in Abu Dhabi in 2018). *I got a trophy, I like that”*

*‘coach is tough but OK I still like the PE day, it’s fun*

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Despite the small size sample, reflection of the process and questions for the focus group as well as interview show a clear agreement among participants and their parents on importance of sport in the lives of those young people with cognitive disabilities. Sports and games were more than activities to keep them healthy as part of a school routine, sports simply opened a lifeline, or rather a gateway to socialization with other with and without disabilities.

Parents tended to mix between what to expect and what they want out of sport activities, however, they all agreed that it was a life changer for their young ones despite fear of issues like abuse and manipulation. Once the young person with an apparent gap between chronological age and mental one, it is out and about whether playing for social interaction, or competing on behalf of his or her country! Perhaps a question might be asked here about goals of enrolling in such activities by parents and the young adolescents themselves. While the youngsters saw sport and games as a mean of socialization and playing, parents saw more than this in such activities. Responses showed their beliefs that such activities also help in securing friendships, and support social inclusion besides ‘something to do’

and to look forward to.

In terms of recommendations any ideas to improve the level and completeness of the sport education those young people would receive are welcomed. That could be achieved through increasing their accessibility to social inclusion, hence, improving their motivation and self-esteem. Findings showed the important role that sports play in the lives and development of adolescents with disabilities in Dubai. Responses of parents and adolescents with disabilities showed that there are yet pressing issues that must be explored and dealt with before any plans for suspending or shortening sport activities for adolescents with disabilities. The impact of such activities goes beyond keeping fit and healthy, it secures an important element in their well-being and that is social inclusion. It also offers somehow a sense of belonging to a group which is important for their balance and stability (Gaad 2012). Another current call is for more community partnerships with mainstream schools, centers, and city for humanitarian services as well as non-governmental organizations like Emirates Down Syndrome Association (EDSA) to overcome the major problem and growing trend in the habit of working solo. A united comprehensive effort needs to be put in place to support the social inclusion of adolescents with cognitive disabilities as a mean of increasing social inclusion and acceptance in society.

Peoples' attitudes towards other individuals and particularly children with disabilities are

usually shaped by the traditional cultural issues and values in a society. Such attitudes grow from their values (Alcott, 2002). Therefore, if people value children as individuals, then their values aim to provide all children with equal opportunity as a right and they will develop positive attitudes towards them. The importance of this has been stressed by Gaad's (2004) claim that careful consideration should be made for the individuality of children with intellectual disabilities. Dubai and the UAE is not different from other cultures. Those young people are as in need of recognition and social inclusion as everyone else in order to maximize positive cultural attitudes towards them and sport is an important factor in supporting such positive attitudes. By and large, while there are some strong positive trends and attitudes towards social inclusion for adolescents with disabilities in Dubai and across the UAE as a country, there is always a room for more efforts to support people especially adolescents with cognitive disabilities through sport activities within and outside of educational settings.

In terms of limitations, the small sized sample, as well as the language difficulties among young participants with cognitive disabilities were among the factors that might have affected validity. However, giving the rarity and importance of examining such a virgin area of research, achieving preliminary results that sport activities are important in raising inclusivity of such people especially adolescents, researchers felt the research could be a step to pave the way for further research in the field. Perhaps follow up studies with larger

samples, and different age groups could be also useful nationally, regionally and for possible cross cultural studies.

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