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LRF: Inclusion Through Sports

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study on the perspectives of stakeholders from mainstream and specialised sports settings on seven strategies that could boost the impact of sports on social inclusion of people with intellectual disability. These strategies are: 1) developing Unified Sports; 2) conducting activities to raise awareness; 3) providing training to coaches; 4) using shadows; 5) developing a peer-support structure; 6) having a resource person available when needed; 7) facilitating engagement in non-playing roles. The perspectives of 28 stakeholders regarding the advantages, disadvantages and considerations for implementation of the different strategies were gathered in discussion groups. Findings could help diversify opportunities for athletes with intellectual disability and develop programs and policies that contribute to building inclusive communities through sports.

<1>Introduction

People living with intellectual disability and their families face many challenges associated with participating fully in meaningful activities in their communities (Abbott & McConkey, 2006; Office des personnes handicapées du Québec, 2009; Taheri, Perry, & Minnes, 2016). They generally experience higher rates of social isolation (Amado, Stancliffe, McCarron, & McCallion, 2013; Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2015; Taheri et al., 2016). Their social network is often limited to family members, professionals working with them, and a few friends, whom they might not see outside structured activities (Amado et al., 2013; Buttimer & Tierney, 2005; Simplican et al., 2015). Hence, efforts to foster social inclusion of people with intellectual disability of all ages are critically needed. Simplican and colleagues (Simplican et al., 2015) define social inclusion as the interaction between the participation of these individuals in their community and their interpersonal relationships. Others further highlight the importance of developing a sense of belonging (Hall, 2010) inherent to this concept. In this study, social inclusion is seen as an individual's participation in community activities combined with positive interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging.

Sports and physical activities represent powerful low-cost tools to promote social inclusion (United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace, 2014). Their potential to contribute in raising awareness about the potential of individuals living with intellectual disability is clear (Grandisson, Tétreault, & Freeman, 2009, 2012; Harada, Siperstein, Parker, & Lenox, 2011; Inoue & Forneris, 2015). Yet, they also provide opportunities for the development of positive relationships with other athletes, coaches, and the public (Grandisson et al., 2012; Harada et al., 2011; Inoue & Forneris, 2015;

International Network of Sport and Development Consultant, 2008). Special Olympics, an international organization offering sports and physical activities for people with intellectual disability, clearly recognizes its role in developing more inclusive communities and sees sports as a catalyst for social change (Special Olympics, 2016). Throughout the world, more than 4.5 million athletes (Note: The word athlete refers to any person engaged in sports or physical activity, without any discrimination based on the activity performed or the performance in this activity; which is coherent with Special Olympics' terminology.) with intellectual disability are engaged in sports in specialized settings through Special Olympics (SO) activities (Special Olympics, 2017b). Studies indicate that these SO activities, in which athletes with intellectual disability practice and compete together, promote friendship development with other athletes living with this condition, and help to enhance relationships with parents and siblings (Fiorilli et al., 2016; Grandisson et al., 2012; Inoue & Forneris, 2015; Weiss, 2008; Wilhite & Kleiber, 1992). A study (Inoue & Forneris, 2015) pointed out that, although parents, athletes, coaches and volunteers perceive SO as having positive influences on social inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability, many also recognize that specialized programs are largely exclusive because of the limited exchanges with the general population. In order to address this and further promote social inclusion, SO created Unified Sports in which an equal number of athletes with and without intellectual disability practice and compete together (Special Olympics, 2017a). In some countries, such as the United States, Unified Sports are increasingly popular, with 1.4 million people engaged in these initiatives throughout the world. The situation is different in Canada, and particularly so in the province of Quebec—stakeholders have carried a few temporary local initiatives, but no Unified team and no clear structure to promote inclusion through sports are in place yet.

This study intends to produce knowledge on how to expand and diversify Unified Sports in order to build inclusive communities through sports and physical activities.

The objectives of this study were to identify the perceived advantages and disadvantages of different strategies that can foster social inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability through sports as well as key considerations for their implementation in Quebec, Canada. It focuses on strategies that could facilitate participation of athletes with intellectual disability in sports alongside nondisabled community members or foster positive interactions with them. This does not entail that all athletes should participate in inclusive or Unified Sports. Rather, in line with suggestions from others (Carbonneau, Cantin, & St-Onge, 2015; Harada et al., 2011), the goal is to provide a range of opportunities for athletes to participate in sports and physical activities that foster the development of their full potential and positive relationships with other participants, in a context that is as inclusive as possible.

<1>Method

A descriptive study with a strong qualitative focus was best suited to meet our objective of exploring potential strategies to foster inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability through sports. Ethical approval was obtained at Laval University (2017-077). A consultative research committee was formed to accompany the researchers during the project (Bigby, Frawley, & Ramcharan, 2014). Committee members were selected to represent individuals 1) involved at different levels in specialized and mainstream sports and leisure, 2) interested in widening the options for inclusion through sports, 3) with experience regarding inclusion of people with intellectual disability, and 4) able to provide constructive comments on the study (i.e., either by phone, in person, or in

writing). This committee included an athlete living with an intellectual disability, a Special Olympics Quebec employee in charge of program development, a representative of inclusive sports activities, and a parent of an athlete. The inclusion of a Special Olympics program developer is thought to enhance the likelihood that the study results will be used. The role of the advisory committee was to help improve the strategies to foster inclusion through sports, ensure the appropriateness of the data collection methods and visual aids used, facilitate recruitment, and validate findings. It can be noted that the first author (MG) has also been involved in a peer-support inclusive running initiative and as a coach in Special Olympics.

<2>Participants

A convenience sampling strategy was used as those involved in specialized or inclusive sports settings who were interested in the topic of inclusion through sports were invited to participate. This includes athletes, coaches, volunteers, parents, and employees of sports organizations. In order to gather a holistic perspective and account for regional differences, participants were recruited in both urban and rural settings in the province of Quebec (Canada). Inputs from consultative committee members helped to select two regions and facilitated contacts with stakeholders in these regions (i.e., Quebec and Saguenay). Recruitment took place between June and November 2017. Committee members and a variety of sports organizations in the chosen regions distributed invitations in their networks through emails and social media. Brochures were handed out during the 2017 Special Olympics Quebec summer games. In addition, personal contacts and snowball sampling helped boost recruitment.

<2>Data Collection Methods

A total of four focus group sessions (Patton, 2015) were conducted, two in Quebec City and two in Saguenay. Each session lasted 2 hours and was held in a convenient location for the participants (e.g., in a sports facility, in a school, or in a house). Seven strategies were discussed: 1) developing Unified Sports, 2) conducting activities to raise awareness, 3) providing training to coaches, 4) using shadows, 5) developing a peer-support structure, 6) having a resource person available when needed, and 7) facilitating engagement in non-playing roles. Strategies 3 to 7 aimed to support inclusion in inclusive physical activities or sports. These were identified through a scoping review of the peer-reviewed literature conducted by the research team prior to this study (Grandisson, Marcotte, Niquette, & Milot, 2018). Although this review focused on intellectual disability, strategies used to facilitate engagement of other disability groups in physical education or sports were also considered. Individual meetings with committee members enabled the team to enhance the strategies using their experiential knowledge. For example, this helped the team add strategies derived from inclusion in recreational settings and consider the workplace as a potential context to implement Unified sports. In addition, one strategy found in the literature (i.e., reverse integration) for athletes using wheelchairs was deemed less appropriate by committee members for the population living with intellectual disability and was integrated into occasional activities to raise awareness rather than presented as a strategy in itself. In the end, all strategies with potential to foster inclusion of people with intellectual disability through sports were included, whether they had been evaluated or had been the object of a peer-reviewed publication or not. More details regarding how each strategy was selected can be found in the Scoping review (Grandisson et al., 2018).

Participatory activities inspired by the tools developed by Chevalier and colleagues (Chevalier, Buckles, & Bourassa, 2013) and visual aids facilitated active engagement for all. The pictograms used to illustrate each strategy can be found in Figure 1, along with a brief description of the strategies. In the pictograms, red players represent athletes with intellectual disability, and blue players represent athletes without intellectual disability. All participants were given a three-point visual scale (Figure 2) and small pictograms representing each strategy. They were asked to take a position on whether they thought this strategy should be used to foster inclusion through sports, thinking about its potential impact on social inclusion and the feasibility of implementing it in Quebec (Canada). Participants then shared their opinion along with their perception of the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy. They were invited to suggest adaptations or considerations for implementation of the strategies. At the end of each session, all participants voted for their preferred strategy and explained their rationale. To offer an alternative way of sharing ideas when time was limited or when they preferred anonymity, participants were also invited to write down ideas on the large sheets covering the tables or to share ideas in the suggestions box during the sessions.

<INSERT FIGURES 1 & 2 HERE>

<2>Data Analysis

Concerning qualitative analyses, focus group sessions were audio recorded and key ideas transcribed in full verbatim. Ideas written on the tables and in the suggestions box were also transcribed. Semi-inductive content analyses (Patton, 2015) were completed using N-Vivo 11 software by two members of the research team who verified each other's codes. Ideas on each strategy were coded in perceived advantages and

disadvantages or in suggested adaptations for implementation. Within perceived advantages and disadvantages, ideas were coded in relation to potential impact on social inclusion or feasibility of implementation. In regard to considerations for implementation, inductive content analysis enabled the team to identify emerging themes. The researchers also conducted descriptive quantitative analyses. First, the mean score representing the level of support for each strategy was calculated. Because some participants decided to place their pictogram in between two levels (e.g., in between *I like it a lot* and *I'm not sure if I like it*), the three-point scale was transformed into a five-point scale for data analyses. The number of votes for each strategy were also counted. Differences between rural and urban stakeholder perceptions were accounted for in both qualitative and quantitative analyses.

<1>Results

<2>Participants

A total of 28 participants took part in the four focus group sessions, 16 in the urban region (Quebec City) and 12 in the rural region (Saguenay). Participants were either involved in inclusive sports settings only ($n = 8$), in specialized sports settings only ($n = 13$), or in both ($n = 7$). Their roles in the sports setting were highly varied, including athletes ($n = 15$), employees ($n = 8$), coaches ($n = 16$), parents ($n = 9$) and volunteers ($n = 15$). Many of the participants endorsed more than one role. Three athletes with intellectual disability participated in the sessions.

<2>Perspectives on the Strategies

Participants' perspectives on each of the seven strategies suggested to foster social inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability through sports are presented in this

section. For each strategy, the mean level of support on the visual scale, perceived advantages and disadvantages, and considerations for implementation are discussed. Table 1 summarizes the main advantages, disadvantages and key considerations for implementation.

<INSERT TABLE 1>

<3>Strategy 1: Developing Unified sports. Mean level of support per participant: 4.4/5 (Urban: 4.4/5, Rural: 4.4/5).

Advantages and disadvantages. Participants perceived that Unified Sports had a very good potential to contribute to social inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability. One said: “For social inclusion, I think it could be pretty awesome.” They emphasized that it could facilitate the development of positive relationships between athletes with and without intellectual disability, encourage athletes to help each other and facilitate association with positive role models. One individual mentioned: “It brings about a kind of normalisation to interacting with people who are different,” Some of the participants had experienced similar initiatives (e.g., inclusive walking club, inclusive yoga, preparation for a race alongside athletes with disabilities). They all spoke positively about these experiences. Nonetheless, participants expressed many concerns regarding the feasibility of implementing Unified sports. One element that came out strongly is that they were not comfortable with a strict policy on the composition of the group being half athletes with intellectual disability and half without: “I’m fed up with focus on 50-50,” and “difficult to implement because the basin of individuals with intellectual disability is limited, especially in rural areas.” Others thought that inclusive sports settings and athletes without intellectual disability might not be interested in participating in such an

initiative: “Are there a lot of youths that would do this voluntarily?” They saw it as particularly difficult to implement in competitive and team sports. In addition, participants expressed concerns associated with integrating a new structure into the existing sports federations who have their own categories, calendars, and plans.

Considerations for implementation. The first consideration that emerged is the necessity to be open to actual team composition, not being too rigid about having exactly half of the athletes living with intellectual disability. Participants also suggested setting common goals in Unified activities, for example by training together to prepare for an event such as a 5k race. One participant said: “the preparation for the event is as important as the event (...), preparing together, supporting each other during this time.” They highlighted that having a common goal could help focus on the similarities rather than the differences: “What brings us together is the sport. The differences are not important because our goal is the same and our steps are the same.” Participants also suggested developing initiatives for certain periods of the year only, when the calendar of sports federations are less busy, and providing incentives to sports organizations who develop Unified sports (e.g., financial or material). Other suggestions included starting Unified sports in individual sports, recreative inclusive settings and with younger athletes. Lastly, the need to combine this strategy with others, including raising awareness, training coaches, and providing shadows as needed, also came out.

<3>Strategy 2: Conducting activities to raise awareness. Mean level of support per participant: 4.5/5 (Urban: 4.7/5, Rural: 4.3/5).

Advantages and disadvantages. Participants mainly perceived that conducting activities to raise awareness was feasible to implement and relatively easy to organize.

Some also mentioned that this represents a critical first step, necessary for all other strategies to work well. For example, one person expressed: “I feel like raising awareness comes before all other strategies. It is needed for all the other strategies to succeed.” Yet, participants thought that activities to raise awareness were largely insufficient for a significant impact on social inclusion or for people to really change their behaviors. One said: “We raise awareness, it’s fun, we see people, but how many people will be included in another group after the fact?”

Considerations for implementation. Participants had a variety of suggestions to boost the impact of activities to raise awareness. First, they emphasized the need to go beyond words and develop opportunities for the nondisabled population to meet and play sports with athletes with intellectual disability. For example, they suggested: “We played a game with students studying in special education ..., a match against parents ..., brothers, sisters, cousins,” “trials ..., a free class.” They also expressed that these activities should be done before any other strategy (e.g., before developing a Unified Sports team): “It is a springboard to other things.” In addition, they highlighted that activities that raise awareness must be thought of in the long term, not as an exceptional event happening only once. For example, one participant said: “If it happened every year ... the club makes a habit of it ... If you do it every year ..., it is on everyone’s mind ... well, every year we have our game, a match with regular players.” All agreed that diverse means must be used to send positive messages about people with intellectual disability and their potential, including but not being limited to social media, ads, and documentaries on television, and shared infrastructures allowing for people without intellectual disability to see the athletes train or compete. Participants also suggested that

choosing the right spokespeople was important—although some thought that celebrities could potentially have more reach, others thought that athletes with intellectual disability themselves who have inspiring stories might also be good spokespeople.

<3>Strategy 3: Providing training to coaches. Mean level of support per participant: 4.5/5 (Urban: 4.3/5, Rural: 4.8/5).

Advantages and disadvantages. Participants generally perceived this strategy as very relevant to help coaches better understand the needs of athletes with intellectual disability and be more open to including them. Yet, they were more concerned about the feasibility of providing training to all the coaches who would eventually be in contact with athletes with intellectual disability. Among the factors that brought them to question the feasibility, one strongly highlighted “there is a lot of turnover, it changes frequently. I manage 25 coaches right now. Next season, I will have 15 gone and 10 new ones. So, when do I train them?” In addition, participants thought of the financial impact of implementing such training and questioned if enough coaches would be interested, especially if offered as a separate training session. Participants also said that providing training was not sufficient in itself to foster inclusion.

Considerations for implementation. Participants first provided ideas regarding the content of such training, including communication with athletes with intellectual disability, adaptations of exercises, relationships with others, and safety issues. For example, one participant said:

What do we need to know immediately, when we are coaching? In general, just tell us what is intellectual disability, then give some concrete strategies for the

coaches. How to integrate that child into your team? So that he is accepted by others, ways to adapt exercises.

They suggested looking at the training offered to coaches by Special Olympics and building from that. Many ideas came out in order to boost the feasibility of offering training to coaches. One is the bare minimum that coaches should know that people with intellectual disability might join their team eventually. This should be integrated into the existing structures of sports federations and recreational activities, providing links to useful resources if needed. Another key idea that came out is that such training might not need to be intense or formal. On this matter, they suggested using short videos on different topics that could be relevant to the coaches. One mentioned that in each video there could be “someone who speaks a little about the theory, but with the athlete [with an intellectual disability] present, who speaks about his needs.”

<3>Strategy 4: Using shadows. Mean level of support per participant: 4.4/5 (Urban: 4.1/5, Rural: 4.8/5).

Advantages and disadvantages. Participants generally perceived this type of support as positive to help athletes go beyond their initial challenges and be motivated to pursue their efforts. One person highlighted that it works well in other contexts, such as day camps that include children with disabilities. Participants also perceived support by shadows as very reassuring for coaches who are not alone with the responsibility of including the athlete. Nonetheless, they thought that having a shadow who is not part of the team was “less normalising for the youth.” They expressed concerns regarding the development of the autonomy of the athlete, especially if the shadow is not trained on this regard. For example, one individual said: “I’m worried that it can become a crutch ... that

it inhibits integration because the child or the individual will interact more with the support person than the coach.” In terms of feasibility, participants also highlighted that it might be hard to find suitable shadows because of financial constraints and scarcity of interested individuals.

Considerations for implementation. The necessity to train shadows emerged, especially regarding how to foster the development of the autonomy of the athlete and his real inclusion in the sports group. For example, one participant said: “The ultimate goal is that the person no longer needs the support.” In regard to who should act as shadows, participants suggested students in relevant fields could be interested in volunteering as it could provide them with a meaningful experience with populations they may encounter in their future work. They also suggested that priorities should be given to shadows who have knowledge about the sport in which the athlete participates. One element that came out strongly is to offer a support that is adapted to the needs, abilities, and desires of the athlete, as well as the context in which he or she is included. On this matter, they saw support from a shadow as the first type of support that may be provided, but that the goal should be to develop the athlete’s autonomy, eventually progressing towards peer support or support from a resource person when possible.

<3>Strategy 5: Developing a peer-support structure. Mean level of support per participant: 4.7/5 (Urban: 4.6/5, Rural: 4.8/5).

Advantages and disadvantages. Participants generally had very positive opinions regarding this strategy, which they perceived as more normalizing than using shadows. One participant said: “To really feel like you belong, the inclusion, the support by peers is the most ideal support.” Others highlighted that it promotes mutual aid and positive

relationships between athletes with and without intellectual disability: “We have a bond. We love running and that is what brings us together.” Participants also liked that it could be an enriching experience for peers without intellectual disability and that these become models for other team members. Concerning feasibility, participants perceived this strategy as more realistic to implement because of the limited amount of resources needed. For example, one said: “You simply need to find someone on the team.” However, some participants were concerned that it might be hard to keep peers engaged over the long term, especially if the amount of support required is too important: “The person cannot feel a weight on his shoulders. They are also there to have fun and participate in sports.” Other disadvantages perceived include that it might be less reassuring for coaches than a shadow, that it might be insufficient for some athletes, and that it might be less suitable for younger athletes.

Considerations for implementation. Recommendations include providing a simple training or information session to peers regarding the involvement it requires and how to support the athlete with an intellectual disability. Another suggestion is to consider having more than one peer involved “It would be great if we could occasionally switch partners ... It helps bond and build friendships.” Participants also reiterated the gradation between using a shadow, peer-support and having a resource person available.

<3>Strategy 6: Having a resource person available. Mean level of support per participant: 4.3/5 (Urban: 3.9/5, Rural: 4.8/5).

Advantages and disadvantages. Participants thought that having a resource person available could be useful and somewhat reassuring for coaches. For example, one person said:

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I see the resource person more as a reference. For example: “ah, I have a crisis, something is happening and I don’t know what to do,” like in other crisis management centres. When something happens and I have no more tools, I can call and someone will reassure me.

Yet, the groups strongly highlighted that it was insufficient in itself to foster successful inclusion in inclusive sports settings. They were also concerned about the feasibility of implementing this strategy because of the resources required for meaningful and timely support.

Considerations for implementation. Participants shared ideas regarding the desirable characteristics of the resource person: being knowledgeable about intellectual disability and knowing the athletes included and their families came out as two critical elements. In addition, they suggested that the presence of a support person should be coupled with other strategies that provide support closer to the athlete (e.g., peer support, training to coaches or shadows), at least initially. Participants also suggested that resource persons could potentially be in charge of providing training to coaches, shadows, or peers.

<3>Strategy 7: Facilitating engagement in nonplaying roles. Mean level of support per participant: 3.4/5 (Urban: 3.2/5, Rural: 3.7/5).

Advantages and disadvantages. Participants perceived that to be engaged in nonplaying roles could be a positive experience for some individuals with intellectual disability, allowing them to play a role they value in a sports setting in their community. They said it was one opportunity of facilitating contact between one person with an intellectual disability and nondisabled community members. One participant shared:

“There was a young adult who was our assistant coach and at every half-time he encouraged us, at every half -time we threw him some balls. He was very included in our team.” Two main disadvantages of this strategy strongly emerged. First, participants feared that the person with an intellectual disability endorsing a role other than sports player could be seen as a “mascot,” one said: “I’m worried about the image it conveys.” The second disadvantage is that people with intellectual disability are less physically active in this strategy: “it seems to me that there are other ways to integrate someone that allows him to be physically active, that he plays soccer like everyone else.”

Considerations for implementation. The first consideration that came out is the need to be centered on the person’s interests and strengths to find a suitable role for him/her within a sports group. One participant expressed:

I have one person in mind ... who was always with the hockey teams and it was positive for him ... When you are on a team, all the tasks are important He loves hockey, he interacts with the players, so it is a positive.

Other considerations included to ensure that the person has opportunities to be physically active as well (for example in Special Olympics), and to combine with activities for raising awareness to ensure that the person’s role is valued within the sports setting.

<2>Preferred Strategies (Votes)

Participants voted on their preferred strategy. These votes represent the strategies for which they thought it is critical to pursue efforts to implement in the near future. Although participants were asked to select a unique strategy, only 10 (35%) chose one strategy with 18 (64%) opting for a combination of two or more strategies. They highlighted that no strategy was sufficient in itself and that they thought it was best to opt

for a combination of strategies depending on the context and the individual. For example, many participants ($n = 12$) decided to combine raising awareness with other strategies such as Unified sports, training for coaches, or peer-support. They perceived raising awareness as insufficient in itself, yet critical to the success of all the other strategies. The results are presented in Table 2—the number and percentage of the 28 participants who voted for each strategy are shown for urban and rural context, as well as for the combination of urban and rural contexts. The percentages represent the proportion of participants who voted for each strategy, whether they voted for one or multiple strategies. Scores for the strategies who received more than 50% of the votes are bolded in the table. It can be observed that the most popular strategies were developing Unified sports in the urban context and conducting activities to raise awareness in the rural context. Providing training to coaches and developing a peer-support structure were also selected frequently by stakeholders from the rural area.

<insert Table 2 around here >

<1>**Discussion**

This study provides a thorough look at seven strategies that could foster social inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability through sports. These provide insight for program and policy development regarding community inclusion. Although one of these strategies consists in the development of Unified sports as recommended by Special Olympics, our study goes further to explore other strategies that might be more suitable to some contexts and complimentary to the Unified sports strategy. One important finding from our study is that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. The strategies should be chosen carefully considering the needs, abilities, and desires of athletes with

intellectual disability as well as the context in which they practice sports. Most often, strategies may actually need to be combined together to ensure that the experience truly fosters the development of positive relationships between athletes with and without intellectual disability and of a sense of belonging to the group. For example, our study suggests that activities that raise awareness are essential, yet largely insufficient when not combined with other strategies facilitating meaningful contact between athletes with and without intellectual disability.

Although participants from urban settings were highly in favor of developing Unified sports initiatives, those living in rural areas perceived it as less realistic. In line with previous studies on this topic (Bota, Teodorescu, & Serbanoiu, 2014; Hassan, Dowling, McConkey, & Menke, 2012; McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, & Menke, 2013), its potential to foster social inclusion of athletes with intellectual disability was perceived as very high. Yet, our study identified key considerations when implementing Unified Sports. Among them: not being too rigid concerning the composition of the group, setting common goals, and holding such initiatives over a few weeks during periods of the year that may be less busy in the different sports federations came out strongly. This can have important implications for practice as it can guide Special Olympics in implementing these initiatives in a larger variety of contexts.

With regards to the different strategies that could be used to facilitate inclusion in inclusive sports settings, the necessity to include awareness-raising activities and to provide training to coaches was recognized by all. Yet, these were considered insufficient in themselves to engender tangible benefits regarding social inclusion. This is congruent with the fact that educational interventions are crucial, yet most likely to engender

behavioral changes if combined with other interventions (World Health Organization, 1997). Our study clarifies that three other different types of practical support may be provided to facilitate inclusion of an athlete with an intellectual disability in a inclusive team: support by a shadow, peer support, or having a resource person available when needed. One key consideration for implementation includes providing the type of support that enables an experience that is as inclusive as possible, while also being careful of not burdening coaches or peers and fostering the development of the autonomy of the athlete. Our findings also suggest that three supports might be seen as a continuum in which the athlete and his team might progress—from a support by a shadow who is not part of the team, to a support from one or more peers, to a support when needed by a resource person. This can support policy and program development regarding inclusion of individuals with intellectual disability in inclusive sports. Although Special Olympics might play a role to provide training or support, sports facilities also have a responsibility on this matter to help facilitate access to their activities to the whole community they intend to serve. Specific funding from governments to help make their activities accessible would help make this wish a reality.

Encouraging involvement in nonplaying roles was the least popular of all the strategies in both urban and rural contexts. Our findings suggest that, although this strategy might be appropriate for some, conditions must be in place for this experience to be positive and the individuals with intellectual disability should ideally have other opportunities to be physically active. Similarly, Southby and colleagues (Southby, 2013) evaluated the outcomes of being a football fan and found that it appeared as a positive social experience for individuals with intellectual disability. Although they highlighted

that it fostered the development of a collective identity and of positive relationships with other fans during matches, they also acknowledged that the relationships were unlikely to be pursued outside of the actual matches and, hence, the potential to contribute to social inclusion was more limited. Therefore, although being involved in a nonplaying role might be an option, alternatives must be explored and caution should be exercised when implementing this strategy.

This study has strengths and limitations. One important strength is certainly the variety of strategies used to facilitate active engagement of all individuals, including those with intellectual disability, in the focus group sessions. Efforts to include the perspectives of stakeholders from both rural and urban settings and to outreach to individuals involved in inclusive and specialized sports helped explore a wide range of advantages and disadvantages for each strategy, while identifying creative and applicable ways of facilitating their implementation. Nonetheless, opinions of stakeholders from only two regions in Quebec (Canada) were included. Therefore, some of the considerations for implementation might not be applicable to other contexts. It is impossible to pretend that our findings represent the opinions of all individuals involved in sports in Quebec (Canada). The decision to include individuals from inclusive and specialized settings in the same sessions facilitated contacts between these two worlds and brainstorming to identify solutions applicable to both realities. Yet, some participants might have restrained themselves from sharing negative opinions in front of each other. To answer this, researchers invited participants to write down ideas, which they felt less comfortable sharing to the entire group in a suggestion box.

<1>Conclusion

The study provides insights into strategies to foster social inclusion of individuals with ID through sports. Although it was conducted in Quebec (Canada), many of the considerations for implementation may apply to other contexts. It offers an opportunity to build from the work done in Special Olympics Unified Sports activities in order to develop programs and policies that contribute to building inclusive communities through sports. Areas for further research include documenting 1) the policy changes required to facilitate the implementation of the different strategies to foster inclusion through sports, 2) the acceptability of the strategies in different contexts and with different disability groups, and 3) the outcomes of implementing these strategies on social inclusion. Although the outcomes of Unified sports have been evaluated (Baran, Top, Aktop, Özer, & Nalbant, 2009; McConkey et al., 2013; Ninot & Maïano, 2007; Özer et al., 2012; Wilski, Nadolska, Dowling, McConkey, & Hassan, 2012), the outcomes of other strategies are still poorly described in the literature.

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Table 1. Main Advantages and Disadvantages and Key Considerations for Implementation

Strategies	Main advantages	Main disadvantages	Key considerations for implementation: <i>Combine strategies and be centered on the athlete and context</i>
Developing Unified sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large potential to promote social inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hard to implement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Be open concerning team composition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Set common goals ▪ Develop initiatives over a few weeks
Conducting activities to raise awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Necessary ▪ Feasible to implement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Insufficient to promote social inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop opportunities for people to meet and play sports together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Favor initiatives over the long term ▪ Use of variety of means ▪ Choose messengers that inspire people
Providing training to coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Useful to support inclusion in mainstream sports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hard to implement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use short and concrete videos <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Integrate into existing structures ▪ Include information on intellectual disability, communication, adaptation of exercises, safety issues, and social relationships
Using shadows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reassuring for coaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hard to implement ▪ Not as normalizing as other types of support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Train shadows to develop the athlete’s autonomy and to facilitate relationships with others ▪ Attempt to progress towards a more normalizing type of support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prioritize shadows with experience in the sport played
Developing a peer-support structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large potential to promote social inclusion ▪ Limited resources required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ May be less reassuring for coaches than other types of support ▪ Risk of putting a burden on the peer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Train peers to develop the athlete autonomy and facilitate relationships with others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consider pairing with more than one peer
Having a resource person available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Useful when a difficulty arises ▪ Reassuring for coaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More appropriate for athletes with high level of autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Choose someone who knows about intellectual disability ▪ Ensure the resource person knows the athletes and families concerned

<p>Facilitating engagement in nonplaying roles</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪May correspond to one's desires ▪Facilitates contacts with people without intellectual disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪Risk of not being valued ▪Limited engagement in physical activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪Be centered on the person's interests and strengths ▪Ensure the person has opportunities to be physically active
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Table 2. Number of Votes per Strategy

Strategies	# of votes – urban (%)	# of votes – rural (%)	# of votes – general (%)
1. Developing Unified sports	15 (94%)	2 (17%)	17 (61%)
2. Conducting activities to raise awareness	7 (44%)	9 (75%)	16 (57%)
3. Providing training for coaches	6 (38%)	7 (58%)	13 (46%)
4. Using shadows	3 (19%)	3 (25%)	6 (21%)
5. Developing a peer-support structure	4 (25%)	7 (58%)	11 (39%)
6. Having a resource person available	3 (19%)	4 (33%)	7 (25%)
7. Facilitating engagement in non-playing roles	3 (19%)	2 (17%)	5 (18%)