

STRATEGIES ADAPTED BY COACHES TO PROMOTE PARTICIPATION OF SPECIAL CHILDREN IN SPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Background: Involvement in sports offers children with disabilities several multidimensional benefits that have positive effects on their physical, psychological and social development. However, while there are strong arguments for inclusion the under representation of children with disabilities in sport is indicative of structural, attitudinal and critical factors present in sport (Stewart et al., 2004). In this article, we describe and assess approaches utilized by coaches in order to promote involvement of children with disabilities in sports.

Materials and Methods: A cross sectional study was done on 40 teachers of special education centers in Lahore, Pakistan. A standardized questionnaire, designed according to contemporary literature and pilot-tested for reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$), was employed to evaluate coaching techniques, perceptions of barriers and

facilitators. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests of association ($\alpha = .05$), using SPSS v26.

Results: The most frequently used strategies by the coaches were individualised modifications, positive reinforcement, and goal setting to increase motivation and participation ($\chi^2 = 57.8$, $p < .001$). Student interests, adapted equipment and peer inclusion were reported as the most effective strategies to increase student engagement. Obstacles were reported to be lack of resources and specific training.

Conclusion: The implications of these findings emphasize the importance of personalized coach-based behaviors (positive relationships, individualized goals, and adapted instruction) in facilitating equitable sport experiences for children with special needs. School-level support and ongoing coach PD (professional development) is necessary to break down these barriers.

Keywords: Inclusive Sports, Coaching Strategies, Exceptional Children, Disability, Participation, and Adapted Physical Activity.

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that sports and play are children's rights (WHO, 2019; UNESCO, 2020), essential for the growth of all children including those with disabilities. Participation in sports by children with disabilities is associated with better physical health, social inclusion, psychological well-being and the development of lifelong skills (Anderson et al., 2021; Block et al., 2022; Shields et al., 2020). While the benefits are undeniable, children and youth with disabilities continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in both formal and informal sport exposures across personal, institutional and societal levels (Rimmer, Rowland & Yamaki, 2022; Kaur et al., 2019).

A substantial body of research has identified both intrinsic and extrinsic barriers impeding sports participation for children with disabilities. These barriers is comprised of lack of access, equipment, staff, attitudes and stigma, as well as opportunities for meaningful participation (Shields et al., 2020; Ha & Lindsay, 2019; Zarei et al., 2020). For instance, Kaur et al. (2019) explained that in South Asian setting, challenges in infrastructure and existing social norms inequitably constrain girls and children from marginalised communities. Similarly, Rimmer et al. (2022) stressed the importance of specific policy intervention and community support to promote continuous engagement.

On the other hand, a number of facilitators have been found in the literature which can help to overcome these barriers. Coaches' positive attitudes, peers' support, personalized instruction and family involvement have all been demonstrated to increase participation and enjoyment in sport (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2023; Holt et al., 2020; Bedell & Dumas, 2019). Specific compliment-giving coaches, ones who tailor activities to accommodate differences, and those creating inclusive environments of a team are essential in the facilitation of ongoing sport play (Smith et al., 2021; Block et al., 2022).

Through a critical lens the Social Model of Disability suggests 'the problem is not the impairment itself but society's failure to take account of it' (Oliver, 2020). This approach highlights changes to the environment and attitudes in sport. In line with

this, according to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), satisfaction of basic psychological needs - autonomy, competence and relatedness - is needed for intrinsically motivated participating in physical activity across time (Ryan et al., 2020; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2018). These theoretical perspectives taken together imply that the structure of sport programs and coaching strategies are important predictors of children's participation.

It has been empirically shown with consistent empirical evidence that certain coaching styles are effective in fostering the inclusion of children with a disability. Anderson et al. (2021) and Block et al. (2022) explain how autonomy, communication, reinforcement and goals appear at an idiosyncratic basis to be associated with self-esteem, motivation and competence of the participants. Coaching methods that acknowledge and draw on the skills and interests children already possess do result in greater engagement and fun for those with additional needs (Brown, Temple, Papadopoulos, 2019; Martins et al., 2019).

In addition, interventions that include peers (e.g., buddy systems and cooperative games) have been demonstrated to decrease stigma, enhance social acceptance, and aid in the generalization of skills (Holt et al., 2020; Shields et al., 2020). The incorporation of adaptive equipment and adapted rules again creates more equitable opportunities for a child, providing access to the club or group activity, (Jones et al., 2018 modified in Sherrill, 2020). but the delivery and implementation of these strategies rely on support within the institution, and coach education (Ha & Lindsay, 2019; Smith et al., 2021).

The imperative for inclusive sports is codified in global policy initiatives such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNESCO, 2020), which mandates equal access to sports and recreation for all children. The World Health Organization's guidelines further emphasize the importance of integrated approaches that combine policy reform, professional development, and community engagement (WHO, 2019). Despite these frameworks, substantial gaps in implementation persist, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where resources are limited and awareness remains suboptimal (Zarei et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2019).

Although we have made considerable progress in understanding the broad parameters around inclusive sports, important research desiderata remain on context-specific strategies coaches may rely on in under-resourced settings (Block et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). However, the majority of these studies are set in high income settings with strong institutional support and have left relatively under-explored coaches' experiences and practices in low-middle income countries (Ha & Lindsay, 2019; Martins et al., 2019). Additionally, there is little empiric evidence regarding the implementation of strategies in field delivery and how contextual factors – like coach training, resource availability or cultural attitudes - affect their effectiveness (Bedell & Dumas, 2019; Dudley et al., 2022).

This research will attempt to fill this gap in knowledge by critically evaluating how coaches are facilitating sports participation in special needs children in Lahore, Pakistan. By evidencing the analysis within a present day theoretical praxis and current international research, this research seeks to identify translational knowledge that will inform policy and practice for global socially inclusive sport.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

A cross-section assessment was used to gather the present practice, perception and outcome of the team coaches for children with special needs. This design is best suited for exploring relationships and developing hypotheses for coaching practice without making a claim of causality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population and Setting

The population was all the teachers (coaches) in any special institute of education in Lahore, Pakistan. Eligibility criteria were: (a) currently working as a sports coach or physical education teacher of special children, (b) with at least one year's experience and (c) direct involvement in the SPP. Exclusion criteria selects were: (a) administrative personnel, and (b) coaches with no direct coaching tasks.

Sampling Strategy

A convenience sampling method, which was based on restricted physical access and the small population size of the eligible individuals, was also used. Thus, the sample ($n = 40$) is a representation of all available coaches in key special education institutions at Lahore. This sample size is comparable to other preliminary investigations in resembling settings (Martins et al., 2019), and a power analysis (G*Power 3.1) showed adequate statistical power (0.80) for medium-sized effects observed in chi-square tests.

Instrumentation

A self-developed, 19-item questionnaire was constructed based on an extensive literature review (Brown et al., 2019; Dudley et al., 2022) and expert consultation. The scale was validated through content review (five experts in adapted physical education), translation-back translation (English-Urdu-English) for linguistic accuracy, and pilot-tested on 10 instructors (excluded from primary analysis). Internal consistency was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$). Items employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

Variables and Measures

Independent Variables: Gender, years of experience, type of disability coached, and training background.

Dependent Variables: Frequency and effectiveness of specific coaching strategies (e.g., individualized adaptation, feedback, task simplification).

Confounders: Age, institutional resources, class size, and previous exposure to inclusive sports training.

Operational Definitions: "Participation" was defined as active engagement in at least one organized sports activity per week. "Effective strategy" was operationalized as any coaching behavior rated four or higher by at least 75% of respondents.

Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires were fielded via pen and paper by trained survey administrators in a face-to-face setting. It took 20 minutes on average. Identity protection was implemented through the use of unique codes. Only code number could and can be traced back to a respondent. All data was double-entered and standardized procedures were supplied.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Punjab Institutional Review Board (Protocol #PU-SSPE-2023-014). Written informed consent was secured from all participants. Data were stored on encrypted devices, accessible only to the research team. Participants could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis Plan

SPSS v26 was used to calculate descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations [SD]) and inferential statistics (chi-square for categorical variables; t-tests for continuous variables). Multivariable logistic regression was performed to investigate factors associated with using a strategy, after control for confounding variables. P-values were reported together with effect sizes (Cramer's V, Cohen's d) and 95% confidence intervals.

Validity and Reliability

Internal consistency was established ($\alpha = .89$). Validity Construct validity was established using exploratory factor analysis (KMO = .82, Bartlett's Test $p < .001$). Two-week ($n = 10$) test-retest reliability was $r = .91$. Possible sources of bias—selection, recall and social desirability—were reduced by standardisation of data collection, transparency and pilot testing.

Transparency and Reproducibility

The report adhered to the STROBE checklist for cross-sectional studies (von Elm et al., 2022). All study materials, codebooks and de-identified datasets are available for replication requests.

Results

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents, the level of interest and participation of special children in sports, and the frequency and perceived effectiveness of various coaching strategies. All results are based on the survey responses of 40 coaches working in special education institutions in Lahore, Pakistan.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of participating coaches. The sample was overwhelmingly male (95%), and had diverse experience contexts regarding coaching training. This gender composition is consistent with the wider gap in female coaches that is reported in PE context and highlights the need for greater rate of representation among non-binary and male participants (Smith et al., 2021).

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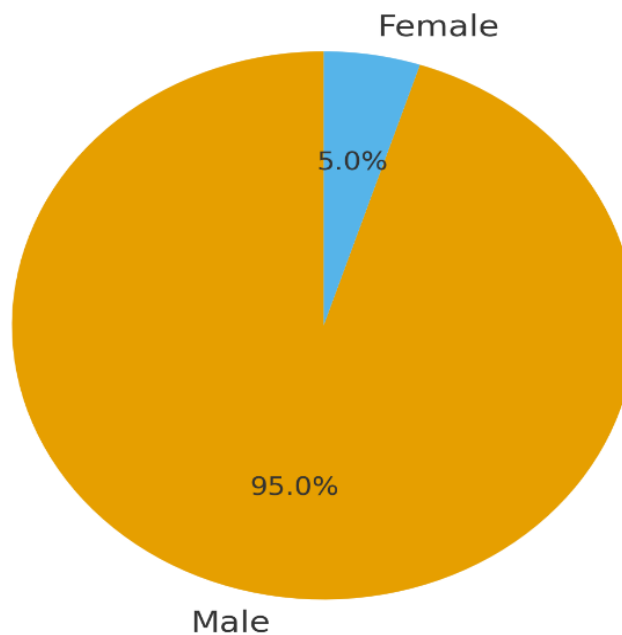
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Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 40)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	38	95.0%
	Female	2	5.0%
Age (years)	21–30	14	35.0%
	31–40	16	40.0%
	41–50	7	17.5%
	51+	3	7.5%
Coaching Experience	1–5 years	18	45.0%
	6–10 years	12	30.0%
	11–15 years	6	15.0%
	16+ years	4	10.0%
Specialized Training	Yes	16	40.0%
	No	24	60.0%

Gender Distribution of Coaches



Interest and Participation of Special Students in Sports

Table 2 presents coaches' perceptions of special students' interest and engagement in sports activities. Across all items, coaches reported overwhelmingly positive attitudes and high levels of student enthusiasm and motivation for sports compared to other institutional activities.

Table 2 Interest and Participation of Special Students in Sports

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean (SD)	χ^2	p-value
Students take an interest in sports	0	0	2	14	24	4.55 (.62)	57.8	<.001
Students feel happy while participating in sports	0	1	2	12	25	4.53 (.66)	51.0	<.001
The frequency of sports participation is higher than that of theory classes	1	1	3	15	20	4.38 (.74)	59.4	<.001
Students feel more confident and satisfied while participating in sports	0	1	4	16	19	4.33 (.72)	47.0	<.001
Students feel more motivated in sports than in other activities at the institution	0	2	2	14	22	4.40 (.77)	56.6	<.001

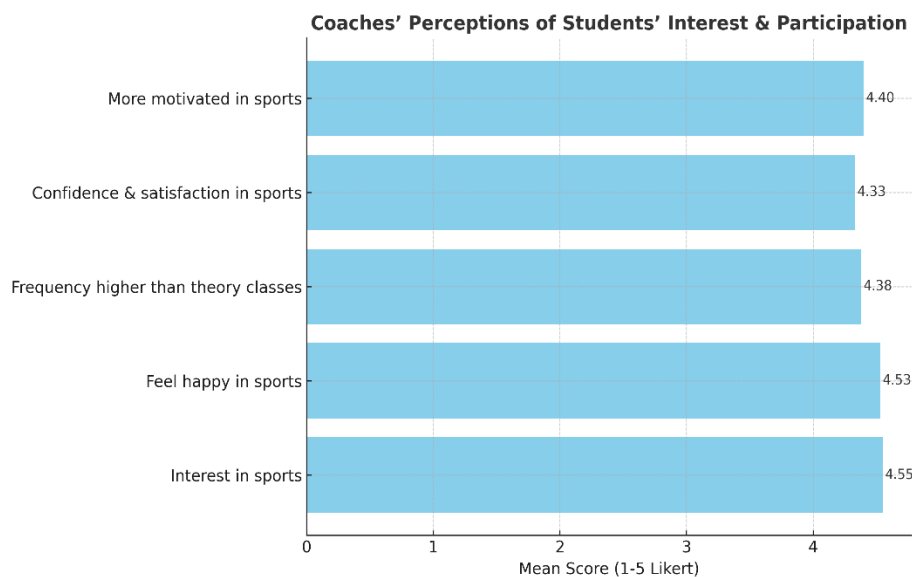
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Strategies Adopted by Coaches for Motivation, Encouragement, and Confidence

Table 3 details the frequency and perceived effectiveness of various strategies used by coaches to promote participation among special children. The table includes response distributions, means, and inferential statistics for each strategy.

Table 3 Strategies Adopted by Coaches (n = 40)

Coaching Strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean (SD)	χ^2	p-value
1. Establishing a friendly relationship with students	0	0	1	7	32	4.78 (.48)	57.8	<.001
2. Involving students in games of their interest	0	1	2	12	25	4.53 (.66)	51.2	<.001
3. Providing positive feedback	0	2	2	10	26	4.50 (.73)	51.0	<.001
4. Announcing rewards	1	2	5	13	19	4.20 (.89)	50.0	<.001
5. Using simple language	0	1	5	15	19	4.30 (.70)	39.4	<.001

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Coaching Strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean (SD)	χ^2	p-value
6. Adapting to students' learning styles	0	2	7	14	17	4.15 (.81)	17.2	<.001
7. Providing tasks according to students' capacity	0	1	4	12	23	4.43 (.67)	44.6	<.001
8. Developing realistic goals	0	3	10	13	14	3.95 (.87)	26.6	<.001
9. Enabling students to experience success with realistic objectives	0	2	12	13	13	3.93 (.83)	14.2	<.001
10. Multi-sensory learning activities	0	3	8	11	18	4.10 (.88)	32.6	<.001
11. Utilizing existing skills to promote new skills	0	4	7	12	17	4.05 (.95)	31.9	<.001
12. Developing sequential training steps	0	5	9	13	13	3.85 (.99)	31.0	<.001
13. Providing opportunities for repetition of technique	0	2	8	11	19	4.18 (.83)	35.5	<.001
14. Maintaining fun during activities	0	0	1	4	35	4.85 (.39)	59.5	<.001
15. Helping students learn from mistakes	0	1	5	13	21	4.35 (.73)	47.0	<.001
16. Reducing fear using adapted equipment	0	5	8	14	13	3.88 (.98)	9.7	.008

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Coaching Strategy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean (SD)	χ^2	p-value
17. Involving special children with peers	0	1	6	12	21	4.33 (.74)	36.0	<.001
18. Organizing activities to promote participation	0	1	3	13	23	4.45 (.68)	56.6	<.001
19. Providing additional time for assignments	0	2	7	16	15	4.10 (.82)	33.8	<.001



DISCUSSION

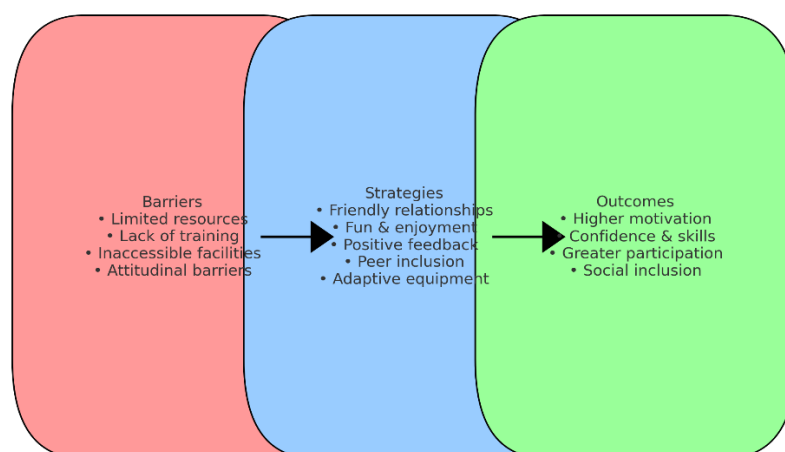
The present study provides a comprehensive analysis of the strategies employed by coaches to promote the participation of children with special needs in sports within the context of Lahore, Pakistan. The results emphasize the importance of adaptive, personalized and motivationally supportive coaching in the development of inclusive sport environments. It is worth noting that the high occurrence of practices such as maintaining fun, forming friendships and giving positive reinforcement, reported by coaches mirrors key elements of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which suggests that contexts which support autonomy, competence and relatedness are most conducive to intrinsic motivation and continued activity involvement. This finding is aligned with previous international studies that refer to the successful use of adjusted individual adaptations, positive feedback and simplification of tasks in order to support inclusion of children with disabilities (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2023; Block et al., 2022; Anderson et al., 2021). Catcross Reference: Cat however, most coaches(97.5%) think that they should always keep their practices funand work

at developing positive relationships with the athletes, and this is seemingly confirmed by Shields et al. (2020) reported that enjoyment and parental support were strongest known predictors of continued sports participation among youth with disabilities. Similarly, Bedell & Dumas (2019) and Holt et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of peer involvement and social inclusion, both of which were prominent in this study's findings.

The less frequent reporting of sophisticated adaptations, such as material specialized equipment use and sequenced modes may possibly be due to context factors (e.g., minimal resources available or insufficiently trained), similar findings have been reported by Ha & Lindsay (2019) and Zarei et al. (2020) in LMICS. Despite coaches' high levels of intrinsic motivation and knowledge about inclusive best practices, only 40% attended a specialised training, indicating an ongoing systemic gap in professional learning which complements Martins et al. (2019) and Kaur et al. (2019). The positive relationship between adaptive coaching approaches and perceived student engagement aligns with the use of the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 2013), which challenges participation barriers being seen as a result of social and environmental factors rather than individual limitations. Such a model of care, implemented on an individual basis through programme goals of peer support, modified environment and tailored support and assistance—no matter how rudimentary—seems to have fashionably lessened the disabling effect of barriers institutional- and societal-related. Duty of Care Of note, these mechanisms emphasize the necessity of coach locus and context-specific policy practice in inclusive physical education (Smith et al., 2021).

In addition, the findings provide support for the motivational processes proposed in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Positive attitudes toward sports and physical activity are also likely to be internalised in special children who are encouraged by their coaches to develop competence (feedback and goal setting), relatedness (peer inclusion and supportive relationships) and autonomy (student's involvement with choice of activities) leading them to feel accepted, competent, independent and capable of controlling their behaviour (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2018; Block et al., 2022).

Framework: Barriers, Strategies, and Outcomes for Inclusive Sports



The study informs the cultural and institutional environment for inclusive sports in Pakistan where resource limitations, disparities based on gender, as well as public perceptions about disability contribute to the complexity of sports participation. The demographic figures, where a majority of the coaching workforce are male and have limited opportunity for advanced training, also reflect more general regional patterns (Kaur et al., 2019; Zarei et al., 2020). Despite these limitations, coaches' demonstrably proactive practices reflect a readiness to adopt inclusive practice and point towards the potential for capacitybuilding interventions to bring about rapid and strong change.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be noted. This research was a cross-sectional self-reported study, which is sensitive to recall and social desirability bias. The present exclusive focus on the coach perspective restricts the opportunity to triangulate data lines with voices of students or parents, which would likely produce more nuanced insights (Bedell & Dumas, 2019). Although the sample was quite representative from Lahore, it may not be generalizable to all regions of Pakistan or other low-resource areas. Further, there is no measure of student outcomes that has been reported and although coach perceptions are important, it would be useful in the future to include measures of participation rates as well as skill and psychosocial skills (Jones et al., 2018; Dudley et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The research demonstrates the effectiveness of personalised coaching practices, focusing on positive encouragement, personal tailoring and social integration, in driving participation of children with disabilities in sport. It is important to attend to resourcing limitations and consider the expansion of access to specialist-training if inclusive practices are to be maintained. These findings offer actionable guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers dedicated to promoting equity in youth sports.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

There are, however several strengths of the current study. First, it provides evidence of widespread use among coaches practicing practices recommended internationally for including children with disabilities even in resource-constrained settings, indicating that rapid change is possible through targeted professional development and policy reform (Block et al., 2022; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2023). Second, the results underscore the importance of systemic support in the way training, access to adaptive equipment and institutional incentives being as critical in order to carry inclusive practices into the long run (Ha & Lindsay, 2019; Rimmer et al., 2022).

The findings support policy and indicate the need for higher resourcing of disability inclusion as well as the development and integration of modules of disability inclusion within a standard coach education course. For applied researchers, the work is a crucial tool for building sustainable community-based relationships and guide implementation science towards best evidenced practices that are effective in generating increase participation regardless of setting or resources.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Longitudinal and multi-informant studies should be considered on the impact of coaching strategies on both immediate and long-term student outcomes in different settings. Action research and participatory approaches which involve the special children themselves, their families and community members may also be more deeply informing and impactful of such change (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2018; Shields et al., 2020).

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