

'UNIFIED GIVES US A CHANCE'

AN EVALUATION OF THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS YOUTH UNIFIED SPORTS® PROGRAMME IN EUROPE

The Unified Sports® Programme

This programme combines players with intellectual disabilities (called athletes) and those without intellectual disabilities (called partners) in the same sports teams for training and competition. The Youth Unified Sports programme in the Special Olympics (SO) Europe Eurasia region is targeted at young people aged 12-25 years.

Teams are formed by athletes and partners of similar skill level. They train regularly and compete in local as well as national and international competitions.

The programme's intention is to enable athletes to develop their sporting skills and to offer a platform to socialize with peers and have the opportunity to develop new friendships, to experience inclusion and to take part in the life of their community. Youth Unified Sports programmes are mainly initiated through school as well as local sports clubs settings.

For further information about the programme please see:

www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports.aspx

Previous evaluations of the Unified Programme have shown it to be successful in building self-esteem and confidence amongst athletes and also as a forum for the growth of improved understanding of people with intellectual disabilities amongst their non-disabled peers, (Norins-Barden et al 2006).



The Research Project

This study aimed to examine the strength of the Unified Sports programme in generating Social Capital¹ amongst its participants. It was designed to identify particular elements of the programme that led to the greater inclusion of athletes in their local communities and to assess whether these were embedded in social capital.

We also wanted to highlight the contribution of the programme to the development of friendships between players and to establish which aspects of the programme encouraged this.

Finally we planned to identify the barriers to social inclusion and the challenges made by the programme to overcoming these.

Methods

Commencing in April 2009 and continuing for a fifteen-month period, this largely qualitative study worked with a range of stakeholders across five countries – Serbia, Poland, Ukraine, Germany and Hungary. Working internationally led to the development of partnerships with academics in local Universities and with local SO programme staff who assisted with translation and data gathering. We are very grateful to them.

In each country, training or competitive events for Unified Teams were held in usually two different locations as a backdrop to data collection.

Representatives from each of the stakeholder groups attended these events. This included team players - athletes and partners, aged 12-25 years, but also their coaches, the parents of athletes and partners, and members of the local community (see Table 1 overleaf).

Data was gathered using interviews with individuals and teams, and through asking people to tell their personal histories using life-story techniques.

¹ The term Social Capital is used to describe the social networks and community cohesion that can bind a society together in bonds of mutual trust, reciprocity, support and co-operation.

Table 1: Total samples in study

Data gathered	Total across countries
Athlete interview	25
Partner interview	28
Parent interview	24
Coach interview	25
Team interview	20
Community rep interview	22
Life story - athlete	18
Life story - partner	17
Connections chart - athlete	23
Connections chart - partner	19
Total Sample	221

Connections charts, which mapped the range and extent of an individual's social network were also created. We used questionnaires to gather demographic data about players.

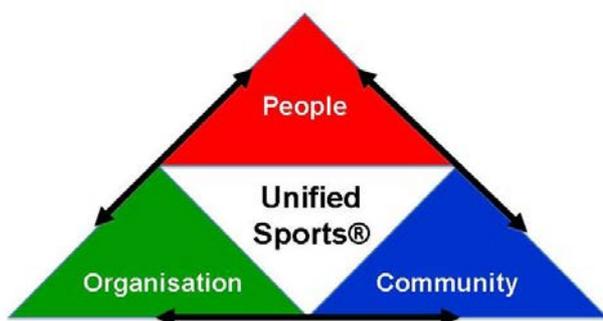
Data was collected in the local language and later translated and sent to the research manager for transcription and analysis. A detailed description of the projects methodology can be found at:

www.science.ulster.ac.uk/unifiedsports

Athletes in our sample were likely to be at greater risk of experiencing social exclusion in relation to schooling, family background, living circumstances and employment compared to their non-disabled peers.

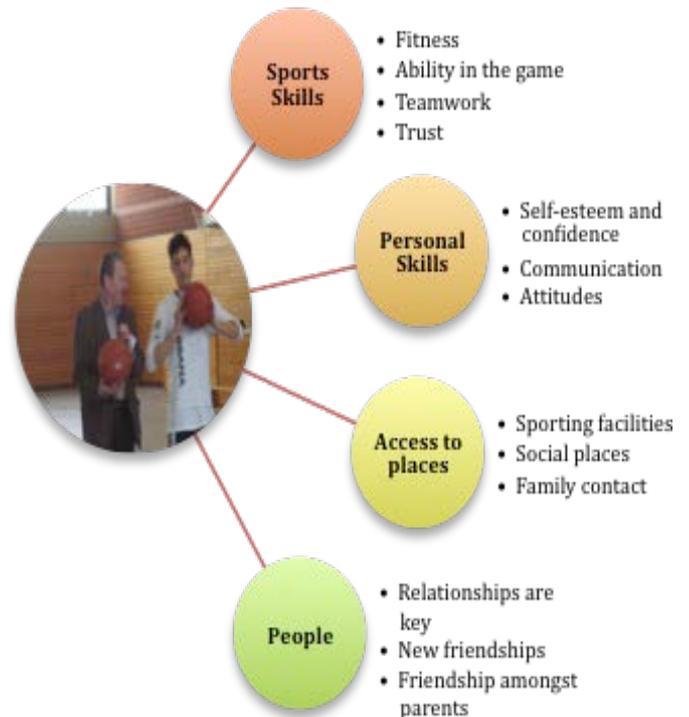
Findings from the Evaluation

Unified Sports appears to be a relatively simple idea – bringing together two groups of young people around a common interest in playing sport. However we have found that in fact it operates through the complex and dynamic interaction of three key domains – as the Figure below shows. Each one is now explained.



1. Personal Development through Unified Sports

All the people we spoke with were clear that the young participants gain personally from their participation as shown below. This occurred in four main areas.



Sports Skills: Players reported improvements in their abilities on the sports field, as well as increased fitness and technical ability. They emphasised the importance of team-work and trust between players. Improved ability led to greater status in their schools.

'My skills have improved, I have more stamina and I can run faster, I am more accurate in shooting, yes I am better; we train hard, we are a good team.' (Hungary, Partner,)

Personal skills: Improvements in confidence, self-esteem and communication skills were reported by players. Partners also reported a positive change in attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities.

'He has really got a lot from taking part in the project ... he is much better at communicating with others, he can listen and is patient and he does not judge people.' (Parent of athlete, Serbia)

Access to places: Athletes reported increased access to community 'places' such as sports facilities and social venues. Further access to good quality sports facilities would be welcomed by the Teams.

We go to the town square and talk, or to the games arcade, or we go for a drink in a café. The guys from the team know places to go and we go after training if we all have time. (Athlete, Serbia)

Relationships with people: Friendships were a central and vital aspect of taking part in the Teams. Friendships developed between athletes and partners as well as strong relationships between players and coaches. There is evidence of the successful growth of these relationships beyond the sports-field.

Friendship is the most important thing about being a member of a unified team. We are all friends both on and off the field. We also have a good connection with our coaches who I think I can say, are our friends. (Partner, Poland)



2. Social inclusion within Unified Sports

The second domain we explored in the data was the contribution of Unified Sports towards social inclusion. We found that there were six key elements within the Unified Sports programme, which supported the growth of inclusion for athletes in the community. These are noted in the Figure below and elaborated in the following text.



Organisational Ethos: The Unified Sports programme is all about inclusion and this philosophy guides the behavior and attitudes of all those taking part and in so doing, presents a challenge to the social exclusion of people with disabilities that occurs in most communities.

Unified Sports, it is not about abilities and winning, it is about playing together. (Coach, Germany,)

Established position in the community: The Unified programme benefits from being part of Special Olympics with its existing profile locally and nationally. Also it provides a network of support that the organisation has established with local schools and sports clubs.

At first I was nervous of this idea – whether it could work or not, and then my colleague told me that it was part of Special Olympics and I say that: yes this can work - so I would really give it a go in my school. (Coach, Poland)

Enduring programme: Unified is an on-going rather than time limited programme, which enables the development of strong bonds between athletes, partners and coaches, contributing to the growth of social capital.

These activities bring about changes for these kids. I have seen very big changes in them in their game, their physique and how they act with others. This is something that I want to continue, I have a strong commitment to these kids. (Coach, Hungary)

Focus on sport: Athletes and players share an interest in sport. This provides a focus for what they have in common rather than emphasising their differences.

We talk about sports, what teams we support and games that we have watched. We could do this straight away because sport is something we are all interested in. (Partner, Ukraine)

Opportunities for travel and competition: The programme enables players to compete at national and international competitions. The benefits to athletes are manifold – broadening horizons, promoting independence and imparting a valued role in their community.

I look at the athletes who travel and who compete and you see the difference, they come back a different person, confident and independent, like you never thought they would be. And they are popular in school, like celebrities! (Coach, Serbia)

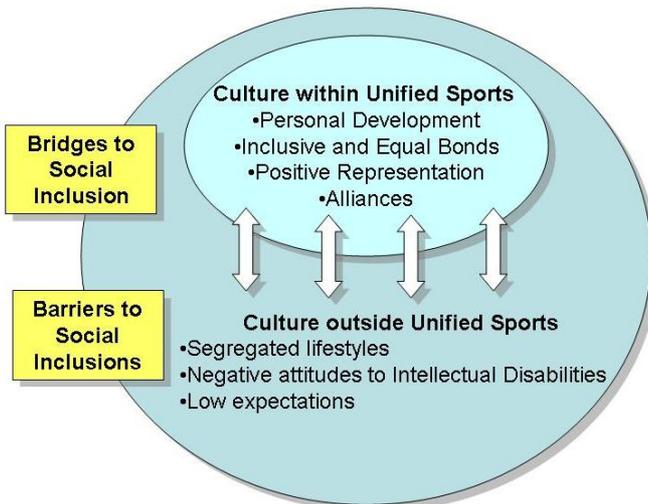
Financial costs: Substantial investment has enabled the development of the programme to its current level, although sustained and increased financial support would allow the continuation and

further development of the programme and possibly enable more athletes to take part.

Sometimes I do not have enough money to pay the bus fare to go to training, sometimes I walk there, but it is a long way and a long way to walk home. I try to always go to training, but it is money that stops me. My family are not wealthy, we live off the land. (Athlete, Serbia)

3. Unified Sports – a micro-culture within a wider dominant culture.

The third aspect of our findings related to the relationship between the micro-culture of Unified teams and the wider community from which the participants came. There were important differences between the two cultures but Unified Sports provided a bridge towards social inclusion as the Figure shows.



Culture within Unified Sports: The community within Unified Sports forms a micro-culture based on an ethos of inclusion and integration of people with intellectual disabilities. The role of coaches, which is influenced by their background either in disability sports or mainstream sports, has a critical influence on the development of team attitudes and their social activities beyond the playing field. They have a key role in forging positive attitudes and creating alliances.

I want to talk about the healthy attitude of partners, because their attitude is very good, there is no negative attitude to children with disabilities, they do not go ahead with the ball, they give athletes every opportunity to show their skills so that everyone is involved in the game. This is how the coaches teach them and this is really working well. (Parent, Ukraine)

Culture outside Unified Sports: The wider societies in which Unified programmes operate

continue to present both structural and attitudinal barriers to the inclusion and integration of people with intellectual disabilities. Parents and athletes spoke of the negative attitudes they had experienced.

I am ashamed to say that I used to laugh at these people (people with intellectual disabilities), now I will tell anybody to stop laughing if I see it and I will stand up for people if I can. It is wrong to laugh at these people, but I didn't know much before. I just did what everyone else did. (Partner, Hungary)

Barriers and bridges to social inclusion: Unified Sports presents challenges to the obstacles to social inclusion through gradual yet continual tests of negative actions, positive representations of people with intellectual disabilities and through enabling the development of parent alliance and advocacy.

There are stereotypes about people with intellectual disability that keep us away from each other, fears that they are difficult and so on, but if you take part in Unified Sports then you can smash these stereotypes and see just that they are people. (Partner, Poland)

Coaches played a key role in building bridges both within team and into the wider community.

It is important to really know your team, all of them as individuals, because they often need some help with something that is not a sports problem but maybe something at school or at home. We include them and they have belief in us - it is part of what we do as unified coaches. (Coach, Hungary)

I know that friendships exist off the field between athletes and partners ... indeed we in the club push people together to do different activities, not just sports activities; we want them to hang around together after school, go to dances, go to discos, go to towns, and we also organise for nature walks, and we invite everyone to participate in this. So we have lots of different non-sports activities that connect people and this helps them to spend more time together. (Coach, Serbia)



Social inclusion and social capital

In the final section of the report we draw together four main lessons from the evaluation with respect to how Unified Sports might further the social inclusion of athletes with disabilities within their local communities.

We propose that the development of social inclusion in the community for participating athletes is best understood within the theoretical edifice of social capital. This provides a means of understanding the types of inclusion found in the data and to illuminate their potential impact in terms of real and sustained inclusion within the wider community.

We have identified four domains in which the link between social inclusion and social capital is evident in the findings of this study. These show a strengthening social capital with a concomitant deepening of social inclusion.



1. PRESENCE

When I walk around town lots of different people say hello to me, people that I did not know before but now I do because I met them through this team or have played against them in some other competitions. (Athlete, Serbia)

At the most basic and simplest level, young people with intellectual disabilities can become more visible in their local communities through taking part in Unified Sports as they access community resources such as sports facilities, mainstream schools and leisure centres. Likewise links to community leaders are facilitated through the contacts which the programme makes with senior figures in the local community – in sports, education, local government and church leaders.

2. PARTICIPATION

In my eyes the importance of sport cannot be overstated. It is open to everyone; it accepts everyone and all people can

find a place in sport. Sport is a place that these kids can share and join in together with others without prejudice. (Coach, Hungary)

Athletes develop a role in their communities which is valued and is based on a recognition of ability rather than disability. The opportunity to play in competitions, and more importantly to represent their club, region or country, provides an interface through which the wider public can connect with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Sport provides a connecting focus for the community and its Unified nature draws together a wider cross section of the community. Athletes also develop an increased profile in their community through media attention their successes attract, which further elevates their status.

We see here a second type of social capital emerging, that which acknowledges sport as the basis for the common shared norms that bring previously uninformed and unconnected groups together.

3. RELATIONSHIPS

It is fun, bad things don't happen here and we meet new people and make new friends, the atmosphere is great. (Partner, Poland)

Relationships are the glue that bond people: a reminder that this type of social capital is said to be critical to the development of community cohesion. Unified Sports provides a particularly valuable form of bonding, namely with peer partners who offer athletes access to areas of community life which they alone had not been able to access. Through taking part in activities outside of the playing field with partners, athletes become more visible in their local communities. This helps to break down divisions and to challenge negative attitudes.

4. EQUALITY

In some ways, because of this programme, society starts to understand that all people should have equal possibilities and equal rights and this should not depend on the physical or intellectual abilities of a person. Such projects change the conscience of people in society. (Ukrainian mother)

Although identifying themselves separately as 'athletes' and 'partners'; team members also say that there is no difference between them on the sports field and more widely, that they are equal as people as well as players.

However, equality – this fourth layer of social capital building, is arguably the hardest to achieve

as many of the young people with disability lead very different lives to those of the partners, particularly those living within institutional settings. It is not a question of ignoring these differences but rather of nurturing cultures that respect diversity and accord all citizens equality of opportunity. Internationally we are a long way from achieving this outcome but at least Unified Sports does provide a model as to how it may come about through time.

Looking to the future

The study provides significant pointers for the further development of Unified Sports in order to enhance its contribution to greater social inclusion for youth with intellectual disabilities. These include:

- Alliance building among Unified Teams and other community partners such as local sports clubs and mainstream schools.
- Increasing the profile of Unified Sports within schools, parents and community leaders.
- Further education and guidance for coaches in promoting inclusion beyond the sports field.
- Strategic financial investments for coordination, logistics and equipment costs to sustain and extend national programmes.
- The implementation of the Youth Unified concept with further sports so as to include athletes with lower abilities and more female players.
- Addressing the transition and scheduling issues as youths change from school to further education and employment.

Conclusions

Unified Sports is an exciting initiative that holds much promise in transforming the life experiences of young athletes with intellectual disabilities. It does this in a natural and highly cost-effective manner due to the mobilisation of volunteers.

Our evaluation suggests that its concepts and modes of operations transcend national boundaries and cultures at least within a European context. There is no doubt as to its feasibility – it does achieve its aims.

Our recommendations are directed at enhancing its viability both in terms of sustaining existing Teams but more crucially in extending its reach within countries and across regions. In the words of the athlete from Serbia who provided the title for this report – *Unified gives us a chance* – many more persons around Europe & Eurasia deserve and want that chance.



Further Information

Full details of the study are available at the project web-site:

www.science.ulster.ac.uk/unifiedsports

A copy of the full report of the evaluation can be down-loaded there. Also available is a report detailing the methods used and an electronic version of this summary report.

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