



Effects of a Special Olympics Unified Sports soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disability

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of a Special Olympics (SO) Unified Sports (UNS) soccer program on psycho-social attributes of youth with and without intellectual disabilities (ID). Participants were 76 male youth with ($n = 38$) and without ($n = 38$) ID. Participants with ID were randomly allocated into a SO athletes group ($n = 23$, mean age = 14.5; SD = 1.2 years) and a control group (CG) ($n = 15$, mean age = 14.5; SD = .8 years). Twenty-three randomly selected youth without ID formed the partner group (mean age = 14.1; SD = .9 years) and 15 youth without ID (mean age = 13.8; SD = .5 years) formed the CG. Instruments included the Friendship Activity Scale (FAS) (Siperstein, 1980), the Adjective Checklist (Siperstein, 1980), and the Children Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991). The soccer training program lasted eight weeks, 1.5 h per session, three times per week, in addition to school physical education (PE). The CG did not participate in any sports in addition to PE. The findings showed that the UNS program was effective in decreasing the problem behaviors of youth with ID and increasing their social competence and FAS scores. In addition, the program was found to be effective in improving the attitude of youth without disabilities toward participants with disabilities. In conclusion, the present findings demonstrate the utility of a UNS program for both youth with and without disabilities.

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1. Introduction

Persons with Intellectual Disability (ID) are known to have significant limitations in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which originate before the age of 18 years (Schalock et al., 2010). Wehmeyer and Obremski (2010) emphasize the role of supports in bridging the gap between the capacity of persons with ID and the performance expectations of their social environments. Supports are defined in this regard as “resources and strategies that aim to promote the development, education, interests, and personal well-being of a person and that enhance individual functioning” (Luckasson et al., 2002, p. 151). Inclusive educational experiences better prepare students with disabilities for community living (Steadward, Wheeler, & Watkinson, 2003). What is important is that inclusive education is distinguished by an acceptance of differences between students as ordinary aspects of human development (Florian, 2008). Inclusive educational environments that are modified to enable persons with ID exhibit competence and adaptive behavior are of particular interest (Sherrill, 2004). The current study is aimed at examining the effect of one such supportive program within

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the framework of Special Olympics (SO) programs. SO is an international sports training and competition program open to individuals with ID, eight years of age and older, regardless of their abilities (*History of Special Olympics*, n.d.). The mission of SO is to provide year-round sports training and competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with ID (Winnick, 2000). The SO offers physical activity in 28 Olympic-type sports (Roswal, 2007). This world organization provides year-round training and athletic competition for 3.2 million athletes in over 150 countries.

Since its establishment, the SO has been sensitive to changes in societal policies and attitudes toward individuals with ID. One such change has been the “inclusion movement,” wherein individuals with ID participate in general education classrooms and schools, integrated workplaces, and their local communities. The SO responded by developing the Integrated Sports Program, later named Unified Sports (UNS) program, which has been included within the SO program since 1989 (Siperstein & Hardman, 2001). UNS combines approximately equal numbers of SO athletes and athletes without ID (partners) on sports teams, which meet regularly for training and competition. The guiding criteria for group assembly are age and ability match. The UNS program is intended to provide children with and without ID continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, and experience joy, and to participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with other SO athletes, partners, and the community (*Special Olympics*, 2003). According to the 2009 census of SO-Europe, 16,000 youth participate in UNS programs across Europe, of whom 10,000 play soccer (S. Menke, personal communication, October 4, 2010).

Research conducted to discover the psycho-social effect of SO programs started in the 1980s. Wright and Cowden (1986) utilized the Children's Self-Concept Scale developed by Piers and Harris (1964), and found a significant effect of a 10-week SO swim training program on 25 participants with ID. Gibbons and Bushakra (1989) used a pictorial scale for measuring perceived competence in children, and reported significant improvements between pre- and post-test outcomes of participants in a SO one-and-a-half-day track and field meet compared to randomly selected controls. The participant group gained around 30% on peer acceptance and physical competence ($p < .0001$), whereas a slight decrease occurred in the control group. Castagno (1991) reported significant improvement in self-concept scores after participation in a 12-week specific after-school physical education (PE) program that involved children of middle-school age with and without ID. Dykens and Cohen (1996) investigated the demographics and psycho-social attributes of 33 US SO athletes who participated in the Winter World Games (1993), and compared them to non-participants. These authors found that SO athletes had higher self-esteem and social-competence scores than the control group, and that there was an association between these outcomes and the length of time spent in SO programs.

Research on the effect of UNS programs started in the 1990s, and studies found varied outcomes when compared to those of participants in separated (non-inclusive) SO programs. Riggen and Ulrich (1993) reported increases in both social self-perception and basketball skills when athletes with ID participated in a UNS basketballs program. Castagno (2001) reported significant improvement in scores of self-esteem, basketball skills, and the Adjective Control List (ACL) and Friendship Activity Scale (FAS) in participants with and without ID after attending an eight-week UNS basketball program. However, no comparison with separated SO program participants was conducted in this study. Rosegard, Pegg, and Compton (2001) investigated the effect of a 12-week UNS bowling program on maladaptive behaviors among SO athletes. This study utilized the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and found that the training group reported significantly lower internalizing and externalizing scores over time, compared to matched controls not attending a similar program.

Up to this point in time, only the participants with ID were investigated within the studies on the effect of UNS programs. Also, the scope of activities examined was limited to basketball and bowling. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of participation in a UNS program compared to no participation in extracurricular sports on psycho-social attributes of SO athletes and their nondisabled partners. Specifically, social competence, internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behavior were examined by means of CBCL, and attitude was examined by means of ACL and FAS.

2. Methods

This study was designed as a randomized comparative intervention study across two types of population (with and without ID) who were matched and selected in equal numbers into a training group (TG) and a control group (CG).

2.1. Participants

A special education school and a secondary school from a large urban community in Turkey served as the research sites for this study. SO athletes and their CG were recruited from youth who attended a regional special education school. Inclusion criteria for participation in this study were: (a) age between 12 and 15, (b) male, (c) not specially trained in soccer, and (d) not having a secondary disability such as physical or visual impairment. Exclusion criteria were health problems preventing the youth from participation in sports training. Altogether 38 participants with ID and 38 partners and matched controls without ID were recruited into this study.

One week before the study, simple randomization was employed in the participating special school and the regular school, using a computer generated table of random numbers, by a person without any knowledge about the study or its purpose. Forty-eight youth were initially selected out of 60 students attending 7th and 8th grade in the special school. Half of the participants were allocated into each of the UNS programs as athletes and partners, and the other half as the CG. However, one UNS athlete did not follow the training program after the third week. In addition, four children with ID in the

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