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THE ROLE OF SWIMMING IN THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES: SURVEY-BASED ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *Swimming has increasingly been recognized as a beneficial sport for individuals with disabilities, offering both physical and psychosocial gains. This study investigates the role of swimming in improving physical fitness, enhancing self-confidence, and fostering social integration in disabled individuals, based on a survey conducted among swimming coaches. The results indicate strong support for swimming as a tool for improving motor skills, motivation, and quality of life while identifying barriers such as lack of facilities and trained personnel. This article also discusses current literature and highlights the importance of inclusive sports programs.*

Keywords: *disabled individuals, swimming, social integration, physical fitness, motivation, coach perceptions.*

INTRODUCTION

As much as physical activity is essential for everyone, it is particularly vital for individuals with disabilities, as it assists health maintenance, development of motor skills, and promotion of mental well-being.

Lundberg et al. (2011) state that sports are effective in rebuilding the individual's self-identity and have the potential to transform stigmatized identities. Jaarsma et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of social support and accessible environments while defining the factors that prevent sports participation of individuals with physical disabilities.

The relevant literature by researchers such as Sherrill (2004), Shields and Synnot (2016), DePauw and Gavron (2005), Groff et al. (2009), and Válková (2002) highlights the positive impact of sports on the self-esteem, social integration, and quality of life of individuals with disabilities.

Among various physical activities, swimming stands out due to its inclusive nature, reduced joint strain, and therapeutic benefits (Sherrill, 2004). The buoyancy of water supports the body, making it easier for individuals with limited mobility to exercise safely and effectively.

Futhermore, swimming can significantly impact the improvement of self-esteem, enhancement of social interaction, and the building of a sense of belonging. According to Groff and Kleiber (2001), participation in sports helps young people with physical disabilities construct a positive self-identity. Some researches (Wu, Williams and Sherrill, 2000; Ahmedova, Belomazheva-Dimitrova, 2021) have

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established that structured swimming programs significantly improve physical fitness levels in individuals with disabilities.

In contrast, barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained staff, financial constraints, and social stigma still limit participation in aquatic programs (Jaarsma et al., 2014). The purpose of this study is to gain better understanding of both the benefits and the challenges associated with swimming for individuals with disabilities by assessing coaches' experiences and perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

Participants: A total of 38 swimming coaches participated in the study. The survey was conducted anonymously and designed to gather both demographic information and insights into the coaches' experiences with disabled swimmers.

Data Collection Tool: A structured questionnaire consisting of 11 key questions was applied. The items included in the form examine demographic characteristics, professional experience, frequency of training, perceived benefits of swimming, challenges observed, and recommendations.

Data Analysis: Survey responses were analyzed through descriptive statistics, with results presented in percentage form. Pie charts were generated to visualize the data. These were then interpreted qualitatively to draw meaningful conclusions about the role of swimming in disability sport.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In all questions, the majority of respondents consider swimming to have positive impact on disabled individuals, both physically and emotionally. This means that swimming is not only perceived as a sport but as a means of rehabilitation and support as well. Furthermore, participants agree that swimming has a largely positive effect on disabled individuals in terms of both physical fitness and social integration.

The answers given to the first question „How long have you been a swimming coach?“ (Figure 1), which was answered by 38 people, are as follows: less than 1 year: 10.5%, between 1 and 5 years: 34.2%, more than 5 years: 55.3%. Interpretation: More than half of the participants (55.3%) have been coaching for more than 5 years. This indicates that the participants are largely experienced and their observations are trustworthy.

38 responses

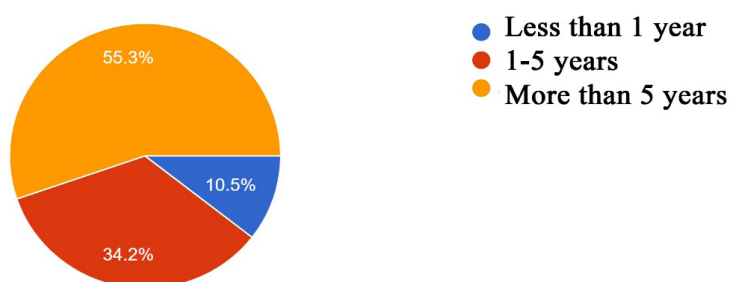


Figure 1. How long have you been a swimming coach?

38 responses

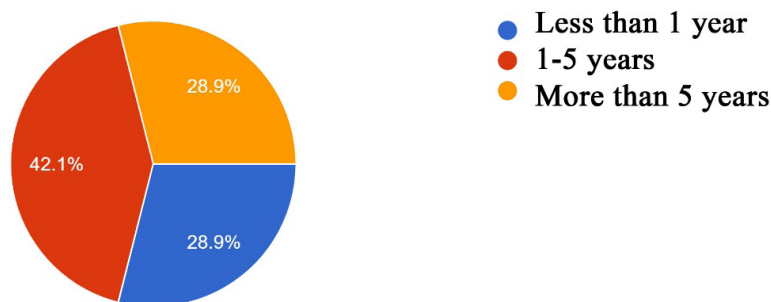


Figure 2. How long have you been a swimming coach for people with disabilities?

The answers to the second question „How long have you been a swimming coach for people with disabilities?” (Figure 2), which was answered by 38 people, are as follows: less than 1 year: 28.9%, between 1 and 5 years: 42.1%, more than 5 years: 28.9%. The majority of the participants have worked with people with disabilities for 1 to 5 years. Percentage-wise, those with more than 5 years of experience are equal to those with less than 1 year. This shows that the survey has included coaches with various degrees of experience.

38 responses

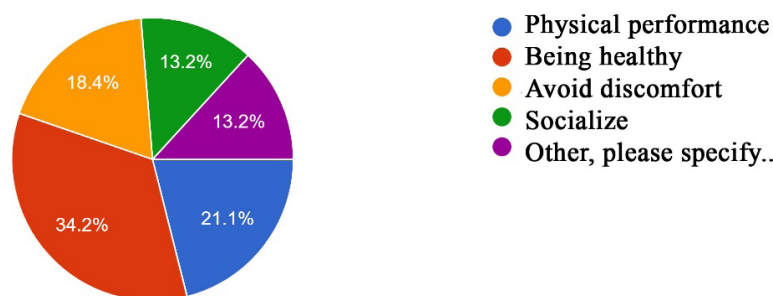


Figure 3. What do you think the benefits of swimming are?

The answers given to the question „What do you think the benefits of swimming are?” (Figure 3), which was answered by 38 people, are as follows: physical performance: 34.2%, psychological relaxation: 21.1%, socialization: 18.4%, self-confidence: 13.2%, focus/academic success: 10.5%, other: 2.6%. Increased physical performance is outlined as the most prominent benefit of swimming. Nevertheless, psychological relaxation and socialization are also considered to have important contributions.

The answers given to the fourth question „Has the disabled persons’ self-esteem changed since they started swimming?” (Figure 4), which was answered by 38 people, are as follows: yes: 94.7% ; no: 5.3%. The overwhelming majority think that swimming increases self-esteem. This result shows that swimming is a very powerful tool in terms of gaining self-confidence.

38 responses

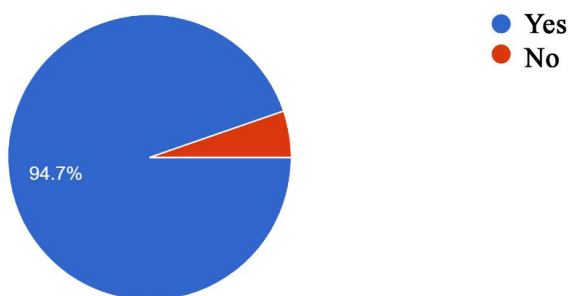


Figure 4. Has the disabled persons' self-esteem changed since they started swimming?

38 responses

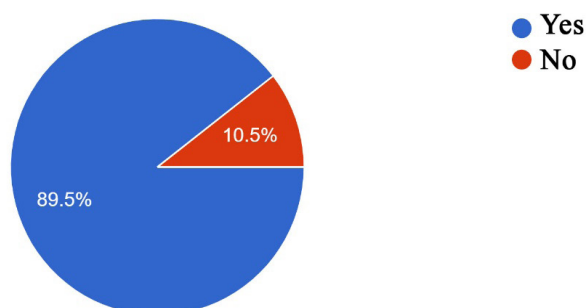


Figure 5. Has the disabled person's acceptance by other people improved since they started swimming?

The answers given to the fifth question „Has the disabled person's acceptance by other people improved since they started swimming?” (Figure 5), which was answered by 38 people, are as follows: yes: 89.5%; no: 10.5%. It is a common observation that disabled individuals who take up swimming are more accepted by society. This highlights the role of swimming in terms of social adaptation.

The answers to the sixth question „What changes have occurred in the disabled person's behavior since they started swimming?” (Figure 6), which was answered by 38 people, are as follows: increased self-confidence: 28.9%, more focus: 20%, more discipline: 18.4%, more patience: 15.8%, compliance with social rules: 9.2%, other: 7.9%. The prevalent change that is observed is the increased self-confidence. This is followed by focus and discipline. This shows that swimming is effective not only in physical development but also in terms of personality development.

38 responses

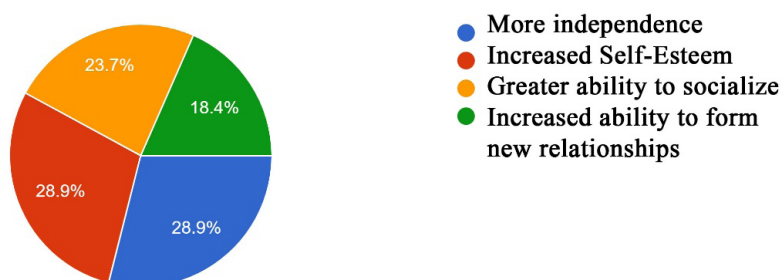


Figure 6. What changes have occurred in the disabled person's behavior since they started swimming?

38 responses

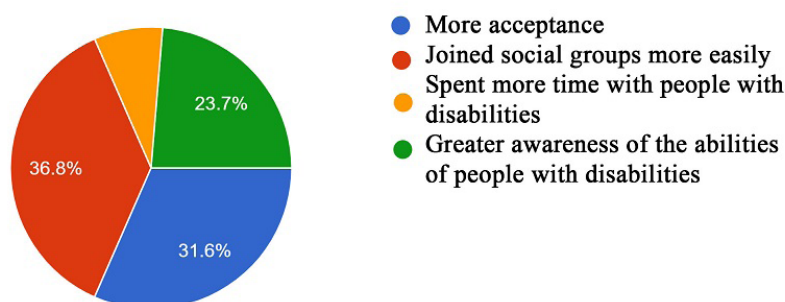


Figure 7. What changes have occurred in the behavior of others towards the disabled person who swims?

The answers to the question „What changes have occurred in the behavior of others towards the disabled person who swims?“, displayed in Figure 7, are as follows: more visibility in society: 36.8%, more acceptance: 31.6%, awareness of differences: 23.7%, better communication: 7.9%. Swimming makes disabled individuals more visible and helps them be more accepted. Consequently, awareness in society is also seen to increase.

The answers given to the eighth question „Does swimming have a positive effect on the social integration of people with disabilities?“ (Figure 8), which was answered by 38 people, are as follows: yes, owing to sports: 65.8%, yes, due to environmental changes: 13.2%, yes, through family support: 2.6%, no: 2.6%, no, limited effect: 15.8%. Swimming makes a significant contribution to social integration, especially due to the sport itself. Only 18.4% of the participants think that there is a limited or negative effect.

38 responses

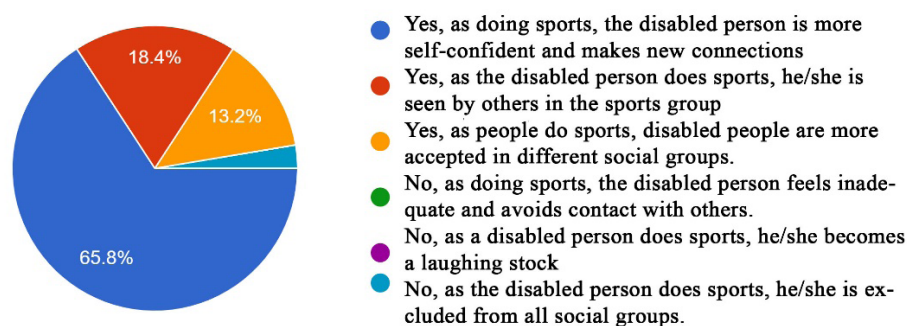


Figure 8. Does swimming have a positive effect on the social integration of people with disabilities?

The answers given to the question „Do you think swimming improves the physical fitness of people with disabilities?“, visualised in Figure 9, are as follows: Definitely yes: 73.7%, rather yes: 18.4%, neither yes nor no: 5.3%, definitely no: 2.6%. The majority of the coaches (92.1%) believe that swimming has a strong effect on physical fitness. This showcases the power of swimming as a rehabilitation tool.

38 responses

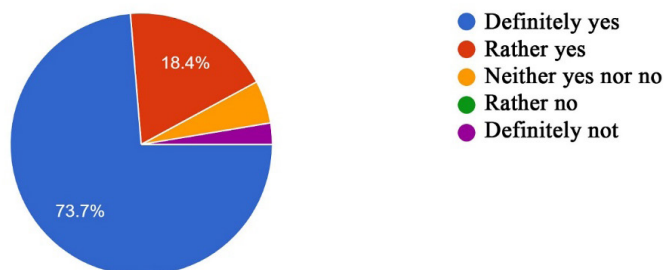


Figure 9. Do you think swimming improves the physical fitness of people with disabilities?

38 responses

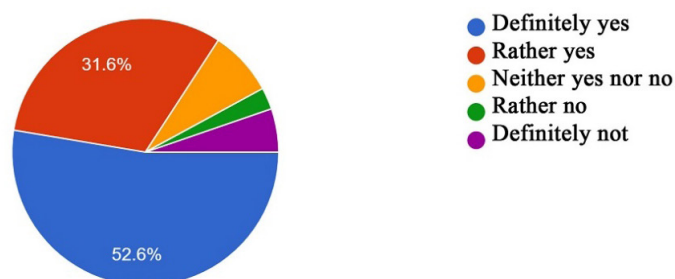


Figure 10. Do you think swimming helps disabled people become more independent in their daily lives?

The answers given to question number 10 „Do you think swimming helps disabled people become more independent in their daily lives?“ are as follows: definitely yes: 52.6%, rather yes: 31.6%, neither yes nor no: 7.9%, rather no: 5.3%, definitely no: 2.6%. The greater number of the participants (84.2%) stated that swimming provides independence in daily life. This reveals the effect of both physical and psychological development on daily life.

The answers given to eleventh question „Do you think swimming has a positive effect on the emotional state of a disabled person?“ (Figure 11), which was answered by 38 participants in total, are as follows: definitely yes: 52.6%, rather yes: 29%, neither yes nor no: 9.2%, rather no: 5.3%, definitely no: 3.9%. A majority of 81.6% stated that swimming contributes positively to the emotional state. This is of considerable significance in terms of motivation, morale and quality of life.

38 responses

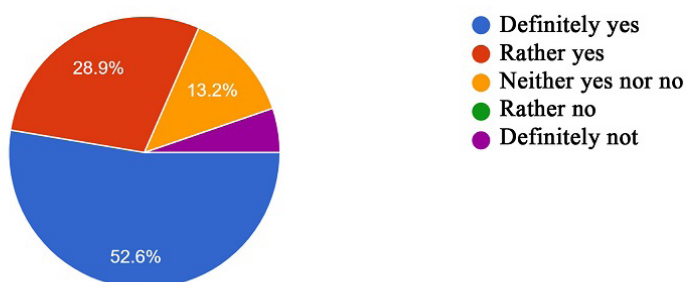


Figure 11. Do you think swimming has a positive effect on the emotional state of a disabled person?

The findings of this study strongly support the idea that swimming is an effective tool for promoting both physical and psychosocial development in individuals with disabilities. Coaches observed significant improvements in physical fitness, motor skills, and daily functioning. These observations align with the findings of Wu, Williams and Sherrill (2000), who documented measurable physical gains following structured swimming interventions.

Beyond physical development, coaches also reported notable gains in self-confidence, motivation, and social interaction. These findings echo those of Groff and Kleiber (2001), who emphasized the identity-building and empowering nature of sports participation for young people with disabilities.

In addition, most respondents indicated that swimming fosters a sense of belonging - an essential component for the social integration of individuals with disabilities (Blinde, McClung, 1997). By contrast, coaches identified barriers such as lack of trained personnel, insufficient facilities, and lingering societal stigma. These challenges are consistent with the observations made by Jaarsma et al. (2014), who stressed the need for inclusive infrastructure and policy reform.

An important implication of the findings is the need for additional training in disability sports as expressed by the coaches. This suggests that while there is enthusiasm and goodwill, there is also a need for professional development to ensure more effective and inclusive coaching practices.

The present analysis resulted in the following general conclusions:

Swimming plays a critical role in both the physical and psychosocial development of disabled individuals. Social prejudices can be reduced through sports activities such as swimming, and the role of coaches is not only limited to providing technical information, but also to mediating transformations that improve the quality of life of individuals. More space should be allocated to swimming in rehabilitation and special education programs. These results are consistent with the observations of the coaches as well as with the physical and psychological contributions revealed in studies such as Aslan and Çakmakçı (2016) and Rimmer et al. (2005).

Social exclusion of individuals can effectively be prevented through the power of sports. In this context, Martin (2013) argues that disabled individuals can overcome social barriers and strengthen their social relations through sports. In addition, Goodwin and Staples (2005) state that camps and sports activities develop a sense of belonging in disabled youth.

Therefore, the guiding role of coaches is of ingent importance here as they are the carriers of social change. With the support of trained and thoughtful coaches, the integration of disabled individuals into sports can become more effective and permanent. As a result, the increase in the number of swimming activities for individuals with disabilities in public policies and local sports organizations would be a valuable strategy in terms of social awareness as well as individual development (Murphy, Carbone, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Swimming provides comprehensive benefits for individuals with disabilities, encompassing improvements in physical fitness, emotional well-being, and social integration. The feedback from coaches underscores the sport's therapeutic and inclusive nature while also highlighting areas for further development such as infrastructure and professional training. Also, the data obtained shows that swimming not only provides physical development but acts as a multifaceted tool that supports social integration, self-esteem development and emotional well-being. In accordance with similar studies, swimming is seen as holding the potential to increase the self-esteem and social acceptance of disabled individuals.

The observations of the coaches highlight the importance of integrating sports into rehabilitation processes and how the increase in social awareness directly affects the quality of life of disabled individuals.

Policy-makers, educators, and sports organizations should invest in accessible swimming facilities, develop inclusive coaching programs, and raise public awareness about the value of adaptive sports. Provided with suitable support, swimming can continue to be a transformative force in the lives of individuals with disabilities.

The findings of the study revealed that swimming has multifaceted positive effects on individuals with disabilities. Physical, psychological and social development are considered as a whole and the observations of the coaches are focused in this direction. These results are consistent with the studies of Özdemir and Gürbüz (2016) and Yazıcıoğlu and Çetin (2018). They are also compatible with the principles of “participatory life” and “social inclusion” emphasized in the WHO (2011) report.

In conclusion, this study shows that swimming is an effective tool in the development of not only the physical capacity but also the psychosocial aspects of the individual. These findings are strongly supported by national and international literature.

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