



TRAINING SPORT COACHES FOR ATHLETES WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: THE TEAMUP PROJECT

Dimitrios Kokaridas¹ⁱ,

Marios Goudas¹,

Athanasios Kolovelonis¹,

Domenico Manente²,

Claire Cambier²,

Dario Jagić³,

Predrag Marinković³,

Sorin Victor Roman⁴,

Julio Juan García Sabater⁵

¹Department of Physical Education and Sport Science,
University of Thessaly,
Greece

²European Association of Service providers
for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD),
Belgium

³Health Life Academy,
Croatia

⁴Asociatia Clubul Sportiv Experienta Multisport,
Romania

⁵Fundacion Espurna de la Comunitat Valenciana,
Spain

Abstract:

This paper presents the Erasmus + TeamUp project which aimed to provide basic skills and knowledge to sport coaches in order to enable them to work with individuals with intellectual disability (ID) and act as facilitators in their own country and local community transmitting this knowledge and values. The rationale for conducting the program is analyzed and its aims and objectives are described, with emphasis given on all relative educational material developed for application in sport and physical education settings. In particular, one of the main activities of the program was the development of the educational package by the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, University of Thessaly, aiming to increase knowledge and skills of sport coaches in three different chapters concerning ID, Special Olympics and Paralympic Games, individualized education programming and physical activity adaptations and

ⁱ Correspondence: email dkokar@pe.uth.gr

inclusion strategies for athletes with ID, respectively. Dissemination of this educational package and results of sport coaches' responses from Greece, Croatia, Romania and Spain to three online questionnaires relative to the three topics created, are also presented and analyzed. Finally, practical implications and suggestions for further development are discussed.

Keywords: TeamUp project, sport coaches, intellectual disability, educational package

1. Introduction

During the last decade, the European Declaration on the Health of Children and Young People with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) and their Families by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) in partnership with UNICEF, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and other social and educational providers and representatives, acknowledged that people with ID are at risk of discrimination and their health and quality of life are strongly influenced by poverty and inequality in our societies.

Since then, joined efforts of international organizations have been intensified to develop and expand community-based services with a purpose to improve health and well-being of children and young people with ID and their families, eliminate inequalities and institutionalization, and promote inclusion. Inclusion as a term endorsing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) is primarily discussed in education emphasizing the right of all children to benefit from an education without discrimination, and has also been discussed in various contexts including community, employment and work, cultural life and leisure, recreation and sports (UN, 2011).

The value of sports and physical exercise in physical education (PE) and sport settings in improving health, wellbeing, and quality of everyone's life and promote inclusion is acknowledged by the WHO and is even more important in the case of participants with ID (WHO, 2010). For this reason, the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 (European Commission, 2010) recognised the need to encourage participation to the fullest extent possible, of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities.

1.1. The Erasmus+ TeamUp project: Purpose and necessity of the program

Inclusion, meaning educating students with disabilities in general educational settings – including (PE) - has started to emerge during the late 70s as a movement first in the USA and then worldwide. Inclusion assumes that separate education is not an equal education and it is guided by the fundamental principles of valuing diversity, acceptance and sense of belonging and equal support for all individuals, with and without disabilities, first in schools and later in workplace and life (Sherrill, 2004).

Since the starting point of reference regarding inclusion was education, inclusive PE is often connected with the related concept of participation in disability sports, although PE and sports as terms are relative but different. Sports refer to the individual preference of each child or young person with ID to participate in an inclusive

environment of personal choice rather than being placed in a specific inclusion context by other education professionals. Nevertheless, from a comparative inclusive PE point of view, PE and sports both include the meanings of access and participation in PE settings, so they are relative inclusion terms (Winnick & Poretta, 2016).

Nowadays, inclusion that has been generalized to exercise and sport settings outside schools has been proven a difficult task to accomplish and despite significant efforts, participation in mainstream PE and sport activities is not yet fully deployed. People with ID still find it more difficult to practice mainstream sport activities and be physically active, due to several reasons that include the disability itself as well as the lack of accessibility, resources, social support, policy framework and public and sporting synergies noted (Bossink et al., 2017). Thus, difficulties in practicing inclusive sports do continue to exist, since an obvious gap between theory and real application of inclusion in practice (Kokaridas, 2016) has been noticed in previous years to a less or to a greater extent in all countries.

In this context, the TeamUp project was developed to address those issues. The purpose of the project was to promote social inclusion and equal opportunities in sport by developing training material and tools for sport coaches of athletes with ID, raising awareness and building community networks for inclusive sports so as to improve access to sport for people with ID in mainstream sport structures and promote dissemination of inclusive sports policies in local, regional and EU level.

Especially, as regards to the training package created for sport coaches, providing an overall picture of the basic knowledge and skills that every sport coach should possess to succeed when working with participants with ID, the crucial objective was not only to provide knowledge but to help sport coaches to act as facilitators in their own country and local community, transmitting this knowledge and promoting the values of World Health Organization (WHO) to the benefit of participants with ID and their families.

1.2. Objectives of the TeamUp project

The TeamUp project was co-funded by the Erasmus + Program, Collaborative Partnerships in Higher Education and was implemented by a partnership of five organizations. Specifically, the program was coordinated by the EASPD - European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (Belgium), a wide European network of members and services across Europe with the partnership of the Health Life Academy (Croatia), the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, University of Thessaly (Greece), the Asociația Clubul Sportiv Experienta Multisport (Romania) and the Fundacion Espurna de la Comunitat Valenciana (Spain). The program lasted 24 months from January 2019 to December 2020.

The main objectives of the TeamUp project was to develop, test and disseminate community-based approaches, tools and methodologies that will increase the potential of inclusive sports policy for a stronger impact at local, regional and EU level through the development of the following innovative outputs: a) a Community Mapping Tool to help organizations in the identification and assessment of relevant local sports stakeholders

with the final aim of strengthening relationships and building local networks for inclusive sports b) a Training Pack for sports coaches providing knowledge of how to exercise participants with ID in PE and sport settings and apply inclusive sport approaches to support the creation of an inclusive sports environment that will lead to an increase of access to mainstream sports for persons with ID c) a Roadmap of Practice for local communities to create an inclusive sport network at regional/national level linked to multiplier events so as to raise awareness of sport stakeholders toward a more inclusive sports policy and influence policy-makers to improve access to mainstream sports for persons with ID.

This article focuses on the presentation of the training pack created for sport coaches in order to enable them how to train persons with ID and apply inclusive strategies to increase access to mainstream PE and sports settings for these participants, as well as to present the results derived from coaches' responses to relative online questionnaires developed.

2. Method

2.1. Needs Analysis

Prior to the development of the training package, a questionnaire with seven open ended questions was administered to 24 sport coaches of athletes with ID with an average of ten years of coaching experience. The purpose was to gain an initial and deeper understanding of their perceptions concerning important sources of knowledge, coaching challenges and inclusive opportunities of athletes with ID in exercise and sport settings. All this initial information was utilized to develop the training package of the Team Up project and to address emerged feedback provided by sport coaches. Qualitative results including representative texts from coaches' answers in each question, are presented as follows:

Question 1: What actual and preferred sources of knowledge (e.g. seminars, internet, videos, books, power point handouts) do you feel that are the most useful facilitators for you and others to coach people with ID and create inclusive conditions? All coaches responded that the sources they use to gain knowledge include the use of the internet, continuous training by attending relevant seminars, conferences, undergraduate and postgraduate studies related to adapted physical education and reading relative books and educational material. The family environment of each athlete with ID was also mentioned as an important source of knowledge and information, as well as their previous experience both in the work context as physical educators as well as in the athletic field as young athletes in the past. Everyone agreed that the knowledge obtained should be *"related not only to theoretical training but also to the empirical knowledge acquired through practice."*

Question 2: What knowledge do you feel that you need in order to be a better coach of people with ID?

Excellent knowledge of adapted physical education, knowledge concerning the technical aspects of each sport and classification rules according to the functionality level of athletes with ID, as well as knowledge related to pedagogy, psychology, counseling and applied behavior analysis were views that dominated the answers of coaches. *"Knowing yourself first and foremost, the limits of your resilience, your mission and what motivates you as a coach"* was also a characteristic and interesting perception. All coaches emphasized the importance of training and assessing performance of athletes with disabilities *"on the basis of an Individualized Exercise Program (I.E.P), which focuses on effective teaching and optimal support of each athlete with ID through exercise, environment, material and teaching adaptations."*

Question 3: What problems that you can remember did you face when coaching people with ID and what did you do to solve them?

Emotional state instability, manifestations of various behaviors of mainly emotional nature (especially in adolescent athletes), medication effects, refusals, agitation, distraction and short attention span, fatigue due to lack of physical fitness or athletes' difficulty of understanding the regulations of each sport were mentioned as the main reasons by almost all coaches. Lack of sport facilities and the very few sport areas available along with the minimum free hours available for participants with ID were additional reasons also mentioned. All issues were addressed *"with patience and understanding ... with enough discussion with athletes and parents, with mutual agreements and a typical "good behavior contracts" signed inside and outside training... with moral rewards using stickers available in the training area and better understanding of exercises with more repetitions, with many experiential exercises and games, collaborative and teambuilding exercises that foster empathy and go beyond the purely coaching model, but give holistic benefits to both the athletes and the coaches"*.

Question 4: Do you think that coaching issues related to coaching athletes with an ID compared to non-disabled participants are specifically related to knowledge regarding ID or do other issues also emerge?

The answers to this question vary from *"there is no difference in the exercise of people with or without disabilities, differences are those that come from one person to another"*, to the answer given by most coaches that they *"relate mainly to knowledge concerning ID"*. A coach replied that *"I personally think working with individuals with ID it's like working with children, so you have to deal with them, not forgetting that they are adults in terms of needs"* while another coach responded more emotionally by approaching the concept of knowledge under a different perspective saying that *"the kindness of people with ID pass through you ... All this cannot be found in books or seminars, and then one thing will be sure ... that you will be the richest coach in knowledge."* Nevertheless, the overriding answer was that *"the basis is to have knowledge about ID so that you can shape the right profile of the person you are dealing with and of course set the right goals and the corresponding exercise adaptations."*

Question 5: What are the biggest challenges about coaching and providing inclusive opportunities to people with ID and how do you deal with these challenges?

According to coaches' responses, inclusion of participants with ID is a major challenge itself, along with the difficulty of *"change society perceptions and make people without disabilities understand the mental, emotional and physical effort that individuals with ID put into participating in adapted sports"*. A major challenge is also *"the great variety of performance of athletes with ID both physical as well as psychological in terms of their willingness to co-operate and continue participating in sports without drop out occurrence"* which can be addressed by *"the creation of small homogeneous groups and the corresponding adaptations during exercise"*. Another challenge mentioned by coaches is also *"to avoid feeling discouraged when working with athletes with ID"* due to probable environmental barriers and performance limitations.

Question 6: Given the opportunity, would you cooperate with other coaches of individuals with ID and do you think that other coaches would also be interested?

The answer is clearly *"yes"* for both parts of the question, with all coaches *"definitely willing to work with colleagues who share the same moral and quality values"* with them. As they said, everyone has already been working with other coaches in adapted sports and Special Olympics events and they all highlighted the importance of co-operation so as to produce the most promising results in terms of performance and behavior improvement of athletes with ID.

Question 7: Overall, what makes a good sport coach for ID?

Excellent knowledge of adapted physical education and sports, pedagogy and psychology, setting realistic goals, creativity and imagination, ability to create collaboration opportunities with fellow coaches and athletes with ID, patience to cope with difficulties that will surely emerge, and *"love for what you do"*.

Conclusively, open-ended questions administered to coaches of athletes with ID provided useful information and a first understanding of their perceptions regarding their most important sources of knowledge, coaching challenges and inclusive opportunities of athletes with ID in exercise and sport settings. All this initial information was used to develop the training package for sport coaches of the Team Up project, organized in a framework of learning outcomes and content related to the feedback provided by the sport coaches.

2.2. Training package for sport coaches of athletes with ID

The main objective of the training package of the TeamUp project was to present in a simple way to sport coaches who are not necessarily familiarized with ID, adapted PE and sports, the basic knowledge requirements needed to help them succeed in their role to teach participants with ID in sport and PE settings. By doing that, the crucial objective was to help sports professionals to support the creation of an inclusive sports environment in their region that will lead to an increase of access to mainstream sports for persons with ID. The content of the training package was organized in three topics that is, chapter title, purpose and learning outcomes (Table 1).

Table 1: Chapters, purpose and learning outcomes of the TeamUp training package

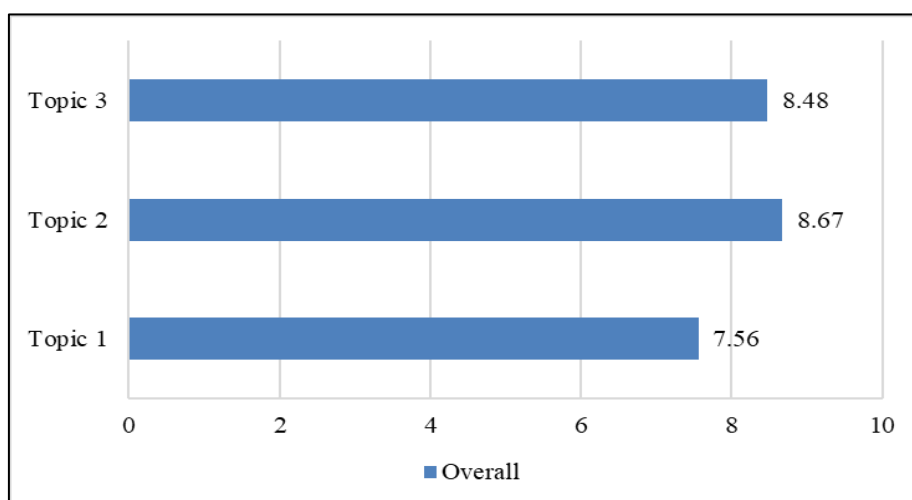
Chapter Title	Purpose	Learning outcomes
Introduction, Special Olympics, Paralympics & Intellectual Disability	To introduce sport coaches to the meaning of inclusion in PE and sports and provide knowledge concerning ID, Special Olympics and Paralympic Games	<p>Studying this topic, sport coaches are informed about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of PE and sports in the life of people with ID. • The meaning of inclusion in PE and sport settings. • Definition and severity classification of ID. • Causes, prevalence, characteristics and main ID syndromes. • The two major sport events organized for athletes with intellectual and other disabilities. • The similarities and differences between the Special Olympics and the Paralympic Games. • The history and relative information of each major sport event. • The disability type, eligibility and divisioning/classification process of athletes participating in Special Olympics and Paralympics respectively. • The Special Olympics and Paralympic sports available for athletes with disabilities along with relative coaching resources.
Individualized Education Program (I.E.P.) of Adapted PE and Sports for Athletes with ID	To teach sport coaches how to use the I.E.P., to evaluate, describe and apply physical activity programming for each athlete with ID	<p>Studying this topic, sport coaches learn how to use the I.E.P, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a clear description of the present level of performance of their athlete with ID, following a holistic approach of psychomotor evaluation. • Choose representative adaptations of teaching, activities and environment in each PE lesson, with short, middle and long-term objectives identified and lesson planning. • Evaluate overall progress and set future goals.
Adaptations and Inclusion Strategies for ID	To learn sport coaches how to use general and sport-specific adaptations in training and apply inclusion strategies to promote inclusion and awareness	<p>Studying this topic, sport coaches learn how to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply general exercise, environment and teaching adaptations for people with ID, with and without Down Syndrome (DS). • Locate sport-specific material with applied examples and training session paradigms provided by the Special Olympics' coaching guide for each sport, with 'rich' and easily understood context. • Apply inclusion strategies and the inclusion spectrum paradigm for participants with ID, to create inclusive multiplier events and raise awareness of local sport stakeholders toward a more inclusive sports policy and access improvement to mainstream sports for people with ID.

Each topic was developed as a word text and was administered in a pdf form. In addition, a PowerPoint presentation was also prepared and administered to serve as an aid and guide for sport coaches to apply relevant knowledge. Finally, the training package included the creation of three multiple choice questionnaires, one for each topic, that are available online for every sport coach who is willing to check all relevant knowledge acquired following the download and reading of the material. All training material is freely available in English, Croatian, Romanian and Spanish language and can be retrieved from the www.dlot.eu website, following registration, and choosing "Online Learning Platform" and "Team Up Training Course".

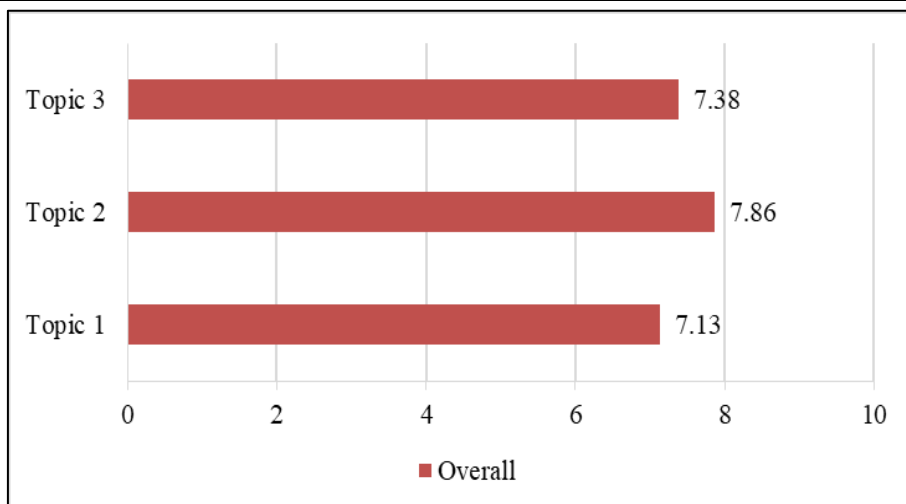
3. Results

On self- enrolment (Mentee) section of the "Online Learning Platform", each coach can choose "enroll me" option and start the course, with three online questionnaires available for every sport coach who wishes to answer to check the level of knowledge acquired after reading the training material. Each questionnaire represents the corresponding chapter written and consists of 10 multiple choice questions with one correct answer at each inquiry.

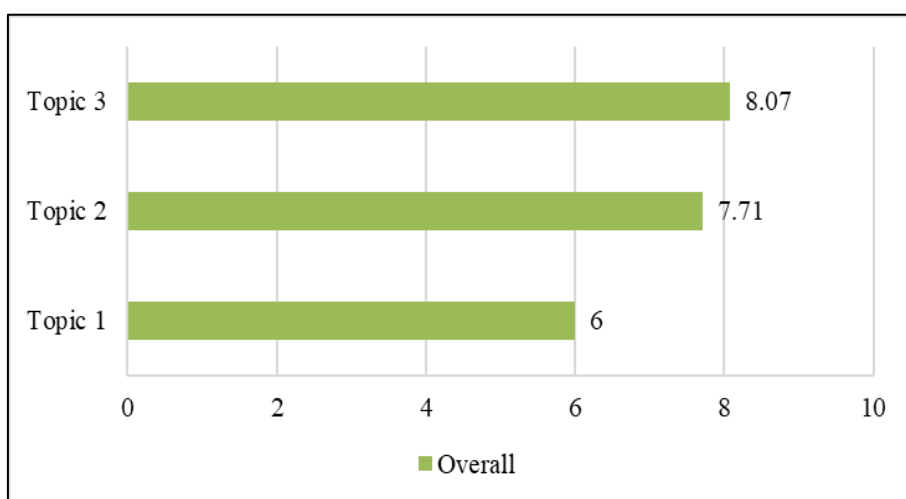
The online questionnaires were developed were administered on a pilot basis to sport coaches of the four countries that participated in the program. The following graphs (1, 2 & 3). represent the medium average of overall responses to the online multiple-choice questionnaires of the Greek (N=97), Croatian (N=33) and Romanian (N=40) sport coaches respectively, with 10 correct answers out of 10 questions representing the best probable score achieved in each chapter.



Graph 1: Responses of Greek Sport Coaches



Graph 2: Responses of Croatian Sport Coach



Graph 3: Responses of Romanian Sport Coaches

4. Discussion

As an overall impression of the illustrated graphs, the medium average of the correct answers received from the online questionnaires administered to sport coaches of the participating countries, shows the increased percentage of the sport coaches answering correctly the questions in each topic and points out the effectiveness of the training package on the level of knowledge acquired by sport coaches. Good test scores indicate that the training package was clearly written, well organized and structured and with specific learning outcomes, tables and graphs that summarized successfully all key topics, along with power point presentation for each chapter as accompanying material which presented in a concise and comprehensive way the educational material of the package.

The article described the purpose, objectives and actions of the TeamUp project, with emphasis given on the training package produced for sport coaches of athletes with ID and the results derived from coaches' responses to relative online questionnaires

developed. In fact, the training material developed for sport coaches can be applied in many different PE and sport settings to provide equal sport opportunities and promote inclusion of persons with ID in real practice conditions.

In this transitory period moving from theory toward full inclusion in sport and PE practice, placing individuals with ID into mainstream sport settings only as a “physical presence” is not enough as a standard practice. Rather, it can only make things worse in case there is no careful planning of the exercise, teaching and environment adaptations, individualized instruction when needed and application of inclusive strategies required, to achieve equal instructional and social involvement of the participant with ID in mainstream sports and PE settings.

Thus, approaching the training package of the TeamUp project through the online learning platform of EASPD organization, the reader should initially understand that knowledge concerning adapted PE and sports constitutes a necessary requirement for a skillful sport professional who is in position to provide equal sport opportunities and satisfy individual needs of all participants -with or without ID- in the sport team or PE class.

In this regard, the training package of the TeamUp project aimed to present in a simple way to sport coaches who are not necessarily familiarized with ID, adapted PE and sports, the basic knowledge requirements needed to help them succeed in their crucial role, that included material concerning a) ID conditions, causes, severity, classification and main ID syndromes b) teaching, exercise and environment adaptations c) inclusion strategies d) design and implementation of the Individualized Education Program (I.E.P.) and e) information about Special Olympics and Paralympics Sports for athletes with ID.

Considering the high medium average of correct answers from the online questionnaires completed on a pilot basis by the sport coaches of the participating countries, initial responses indicate that the training package of the TeamUp project succeed largely in its role to transmit knowledge in a simple and effective way to sport coaches who are willing to work with participants with ID. Nevertheless, it remains a task for each sport coach to use this training material and tools as a mean to facilitate inclusion and improve access for people with ID and their families in mainstream sports.

5. Conclusion

Physical education and sports are ideal fields to promote the humanistic principles of UNESCO and the value of sports and physical activity in improving health, quality of life and inclusion is greatly acknowledged the World Health Organization (WHO), especially for persons with ID and their families. In this regard, dissemination of knowledge and inclusive sports policies in local, regional, national and EU level is the crucial objective of the TeamUp project through the creation of inclusive sport networks, with all sport coaches acting as facilitators in their crucial role to create multiplier sport events and raise local awareness.

Creating a roadmap of practice for local communities is currently under full development and requires the effort of all willing to involve in enabling this inclusion process, including sport coaches, stakeholders, education and public authorities, policy makers, families and athletes with and without ID. Overall, the course toward social inclusion and equal opportunities for people with ID through PE and sports is a long-term concept and international efforts to achieve such a goal through the development and application of programs like the TeamUp project, has just begun. It's a start, but it's a good one.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Dimitrios Kokaridas, Associate Professor, Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, University of Thessaly, Greece.

Marios Goudas, Professor, Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, University of Thessaly, Greece.

Athanasios Kolovelonis, Teaching Staff, Department of Physical Education and Sport Science, University of Thessaly, Greece.

Domenico Manente, Project Officer, European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), Belgium.

Claire Cambier, Project Officer, European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), Belgium.

Dario Jagić, Managing Director, Health Life Academy, Croatia.

Predrag Marinković, Managing Director, Health Life Academy, Croatia.

Sorin Victor Roman, President, Asociatia Clubul Sportiv Experienta Multisport, Romania.

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