



Differences in socialization between visually impaired student-athletes and non-athletes

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether there was a significant difference in measure of socialization between visually impaired student-athletes and non-athletes. We compared the social skills of Iranian visually impaired student-athletes ($n = 51$) and visually impaired student non-athletes ($n = 56$) with ages ranging from 13 to 19 years enrolled in academic year 2009–2010. Socialization was measured with the Social Maturity Scale (Weitzman, 1949). The results indicate that the two examined groups differ in regards to socialization and that the visually impaired student-athletes scored significantly higher than the visually impaired student non-athletes on the socialization test, proving the notion that participation in sports results in better improvements in socializations. If officials and parents encourage sports participation in visually impaired individuals, they will have a better opportunity of having more social skills in life.

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Several Studies have investigated development of socialization in visually impaired children and have concluded that they do not display a considerable amount of social interactions (Rettig, 1994; Sacks, Kekelis, & Gaylord-Ross, 1992; Warren, 1984).

Socialization has been defined as the process by which individuals learn the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors. This enables them to take part as members of society in which they live. Socialization is a life long process by which a child becomes an adult. People (especially family members, peers, and friends), institutions, and activities are the most important factors that affect the process of socialization. Socialization is particularly important during the period of adolescence. The need to belong is one of the most forceful forces of adolescence (Gallahue & Ozmun, 2006).

Watching others often makes people develop social skills incidentally, yet individuals with visual impairments are not able to observe social interactions directly and often have disadvantages becoming socially proficient (Sacks et al., 1992). Stein (1996) claims that children with visual impairments are not fully socialized.

The process of socialization is deeply affected by skills of daily living, recreational activities, and competitive sport experiences. Physical activities and sports play a critical role in psychosocial development. Investigators have found that children with visual impairment had fewer friends (MacCuspie, 1992) and were rejected by their sighted classmates leading to social isolation (Jones & Chiba, 1985). Sometimes, peer based social interactions are severely deteriorated in visually impaired children. Thus, social play may create feelings of frustration, annoyance and dissatisfaction rather than feelings of self-efficacy, sovereignty, and independence, which illustrate the social skill of typical children (Celeste & Darja, 2010). Visually impaired children usually face much more separation and are deficient in socialization opportunities compared to their sighted peers (Kallanoitis & Johnston, 1994; Robinson, 2002).

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Weiss (1987) claims that because individuals seek group affiliation, they try to participate in physical activity programs. Self esteem, self confidence, and self competence that are essential materials for social development are also achieved through engaging in sports and physical exercises (Gallahue & Ozmun, 2006).

According to Shields and Bredemeier (1995), sport is a socializing agent that forms attitudes, enhances value formation and moral development. Participation in sport and exercise offers opportunities that might result in greater and wider social networks, social connections and social cohesion. Regular participation in exercise leads to the establishment of friendship networks (Coalter, Allison, & Taylor, 2000). Sport and athletic competitions obviously has the potential to supply a great variety of social and recreational networks, which enhances social interaction. Social interactions provided by sport participation are critical and key elements for community development, social inclusion and mental wellbeing (Forrest & Kearns, 1999; Thomas, 1995). Sport and exercise can assist in the peer integration of young people with physical disabilities.

Physical activity can be considered as a normalizing agent for children with physical disabilities. It provides social identity, enhances social skills and establishes social networks with their peers (Taub & Greer, 2000).

In a study, Zaharopoulos and Hodge (1991) studied the difference between athletes and non-athletes' physical ability self-concept. Their findings indicated that athletes differed from non-athletes in physical ability self-concept. They concluded that participation in sports is more likely to influence specific areas of self-concept.

Because investigators have not yet studied social development in visually impaired students on the basis of their participation in organized and formal sports, and to shed more light on the role played by sports in social development, in the present study our goal was to determine whether there is a difference between visually impaired student-athletes and non-athletes' social development. The foremost hypothesis was that visually impaired students who participate in goalball (a formal sport for visually impaired people) would show better socialization, as compared to visually impaired students who do not engage in goalball or any organized sports. The finding that visually impaired student-athletes showed better socialization in comparison with that of visually impaired student non-athletes would support the hypothesis that participation in organized and formal sports would result in achieving more improved socialization.

1. Methods

1.1. Participants

A total of 107 visually impaired male students (aged from 13 to 19 years) from School for Visually Impaired Students in Tehran volunteered to take part in our study. In the present study, a student with visual impairments is an individual who has vision loss to such a degree as to qualify as an additional need through a considerable limitation of visual ability resulting from any conditions that can not be corrected by conventional means, such as refractive correction, medication, or surgery (Arditi & Rosenthal, 1998). The athlete group consisted of 51 goalball teams' members. Goalball is a game for people with visual impairments. Players who want to compete in a goalball match must be legally blind. Each team includes 3 members; one centre and two wings. They try to defend their goal line. The game comprises two 7 min halves. It requires a rubber ball with some bells inside. The bells are used for auditory tracking. Each player must wear a blindfold irrespective of the degree of visual disorder. The field of play is 18 m long by 9 m wide. (For more details, see Lieberman & Cowart, 1996; Paciorek & Jones, 2001; Winnick, 2000). The non-athlete group consisted of 56 non-active individuals not involving themselves in any kind of sport activity and athletic event before. To qualify as an athlete, a student must be presently representing a school or club competition. They took part in the study after their scheduled class. All participants were in reasonably good health and physical condition except being visually impaired. The study procedure, aims and the process of interview were told to them. Besides, they all gave their informed consent. The Committee for Ethical Considerations in Human Experimentation of University of Isfahan assessed and approved the experimental protocol.

1.2. Materials

We used Weitzman's Social Maturity Scale (1949) to evaluate the participants' level of social development. The original version of Weitzman's Social Maturity Scale is a 31-item questionnaire designed to measure social maturity level in 13–19-year-old individuals. The scale has been one of the most widely used socialization inventories. The questions are based on a study of social growth in teen-agers. The scale will give a teen-ager a measure of where she/he stands on the social development ladder. For each item, individuals are asked to mark 1 of 3 or 4 statements that best express their behavior or feelings. In answering the questions, one should be very careful to describe her/his own behavior as accurately, precisely and truthfully as possible. The questions deal with the individual's level of sensible independence of others, looking ahead (foresight), moderation, positive approach, assuming responsibility, and sense of humor. Total scores were used in the analyses of the difference in measure of socialization between visually impaired student-athletes and non-athletes.

1.3. Procedure

First we introduced the study and explained the aims of the investigation. Then the consented participants were administered the Social Maturity Scale. In total, the inventory took 40–50 min to complete for each student. The survey items

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