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Enhancing social inclusion through adapted football: exploring effective teaching strategies for children with special educational needs in institutionalized settings

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Abstract

Aim. This exploratory research aims to identify effective teaching strategies for enhancing physical and psychological training in adapted football for children aged 12-15 with special educational needs (SEN).

Material and method. By employing questionnaires and tailored evidence sensitive to the requirements and potential of institutionalized children within this age group, this study seeks to develop and implement teaching strategies conducive to improving football within institutionalized centers. Various research methods including informational-bibliographic analysis, pedagogical observation, conversation, recording, graphical-tabular analysis, and questionnaire surveys were employed over a six-month period (October 2023 - March 2024).

Results. The research yielded valuable insights and experiences, revealing the multifaceted nature of effective teaching strategies in football adaptation for children with SEN. Pedagogical observations provided nuanced understanding, while conversations and recordings enriched data collection. Graphical-tabular analyses facilitated systematic evaluation, and questionnaire surveys offered perspectives from stakeholders. The findings reveal significant challenges in social inclusion, with 65% of respondents identifying it as low. Moreover, 40% perceive social inclusion among children aged 12-15 with SEN as low, while 31% rate it as very low. Despite acknowledging favorable factors such as international conventions and national strategies (recognized by over 80% of respondents), specialists also identify constraining factors, including societal attitudes and resource constraints. Nevertheless, there is a consensus (46%) on the high contribution of sport to social inclusion, with 94% perceiving adapted football's influence as high or very high. Specialists emphasize the socialization function (33%) and recognize social benefits such as reintegration (29%). These results underscore the need for improvement in football programs tailored to children with SEN, particularly in enhancing social inclusion and skill development.

Conclusions. The study concludes that optimal didactic strategies, attuned to the unique requirements and potential of children with SEN, hold promise for advancing their physical and psychological training through football in institutionalized centers.

Key words: children with special educational needs, questionnaire, integration.

Rezumat

Scop. Această cercetare exploratorie își propune să identifice strategii de predare eficiente pentru îmbunătățirea antrenamentului fizic și psihologic în fotbalul adaptat pentru copiii cu vârsta între 12 și 15 ani, cu nevoi educaționale speciale (SEN).

Material și metodă. Prin utilizarea chestionarelor și a unor dovezi adaptate sensibile la cerințele și potențialul copiilor instituționalizați în această grupă de vârstă, acest studiu își propune să dezvolte și să implementeze strategii de predare care să contribuie la îmbunătățirea fotbalului în centrele instituționalizate. Diverse metode de cercetare, inclusiv analiza informațional-bibliografică, observația pedagogică, conversația, înregistrarea, analiza grafică-tabulară și chestionarele au fost folosite pe o perioadă de șase luni (octombrie 2023 - martie 2024).

Results. Cercetarea a furnizat informații valoroase și experiențe, dezvăluind natura multifacetică a strategiilor eficiente de predare în adaptarea fotbalului pentru copiii cu SEN. Observațiile pedagogice au oferit o înțelegere subtilă, în timp ce conversațiile și înregistrările au îmbogățit colectarea datelor. Analizele grafice-tabulare au facilitat evaluarea sistematică, iar chestionarele au oferit perspective din partea părților interesate. Concluziile relevă provocări semnificative în ceea ce privește includerea socială, 65% dintre respondenți identificând-o ca fiind scăzută. Mai mult, 40% percepe includerea socială între copiii cu vârsta între 12 și 15 ani cu SEN ca fiind scăzută, în timp ce 31% o evaluează ca fiind foarte scăzută. În ciuda recunoașterii factorilor favorabili precum convențiile internaționale și strategiile naționale (recunoscute de peste 80% dintre respondenți), specialiștii identifică și factori constrângători, inclusiv atitudinile societale și constrângerile resurselor. Cu toate acestea, există un consens (46%) cu privire la contribuția ridicată a sportului la includerea socială, 94% percepuând influența fotbalului

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adaptat ca fiind mare sau foarte mare. Specialiștii subliniază funcția de socializare (33%) și recunosc beneficiile sociale precum reintegrarea (29%). Aceste rezultate subliniază necesitatea îmbunătățirii programelor de fotbal adaptate pentru copiii cu SEN, în special în ceea ce privește îmbunătățirea includerii sociale și dezvoltarea abilităților.

Concluzii. Studiul concluzionează că strategiile didactice optime, adaptate cerințelor și potențialului unic al copiilor cu SEN, promet să avanseze antrenamentul lor fizic și psihologic prin fotbal în centrele instituționalizate.

Cuvinte cheie: *copii cu nevoi educaționale speciale, chestionar, integrare.*

Introduction

Institutionalized environments

Institutionalized environments can often be perceived as static, lacking in the vibrancy and dynamism that are inherent to childhood. Yet, amidst the structured routines and regulated spaces, there exists a fundamental need for movement, play, and engagement in sports (Malcolm, 2016). This need transcends mere physical activity; it embodies a vital aspect of human existence—the innate desire to explore, interact, and thrive (Rosu et al., 2022).

For children with SEN, navigating through institutionalized settings can present unique challenges. These environments, while providing necessary care and support, may inadvertently constrain opportunities for holistic development and social integration (Berens & Nelson, 2015). However, within this context, sports emerge as a powerful catalyst—a bridge that connects the structured confines of institutional life with the boundless realm of human potential (Thachuk, 2006; Luminița & Valentina, 2017). Sports, ranging from basketball and football to hockey, volleyball, and tennis, serve as invaluable conduits for self-expression, social interaction, and personal growth (Badau et al., 2023; Marin et al., 2023; Patrascan & Stefanica, 2019; Rosu et al., 2023). They offer avenues through which children with SEN can not only engage in physical activity but also develop crucial life skills such as teamwork, discipline, and resilience. Yet, the journey towards reaping these benefits is not without its hurdles (Kourkoutas & Vitalaki, 2015).

Adaptive sports programs

Concepts of strategy, team play, and adherence to rules within sports can pose significant challenges for children with SEN (Cigman, 2006). The intricacies of these concepts may not always align with their cognitive or social capabilities, creating barriers to full participation and integration. Furthermore, individuals with moderate mental disabilities may require tailored approaches to sports engagement, one that acknowledges and accommodates their unique psychosocial skills (O'Donnell et al., 2020). In response to these challenges, adaptive sports programs have emerged as a beacon of inclusivity and empowerment. These programs recognize the diverse needs and abilities of participants, offering modified rules, structured support, and inclusive environments conducive to learning and growth (Patrascan & Stefanica, 2023; Ghosh, 2024). By tailoring sports

activities to suit the individual strengths and challenges of children with SEN, these programs unlock a world of possibilities, fostering a sense of belonging and achievement (Juvonen et al., 2024).

Moreover, adaptive sports programs extend beyond the conventional notion of competition and performance. While acknowledging and celebrating achievements, they place equal emphasis on participation, effort, and personal progress. In doing so, they cultivate a culture of inclusivity and support, where every individual—regardless of ability—finds value and affirmation in their engagement with sports (Brown, 2019, Valentina & Daniel, 2018).

The integration of adaptive sports programs

Within the realm of institutionalized care, the integration of adaptive sports programs holds immense promise. By infusing these environments with the dynamism and joy inherent to sports, institutions can transcend their role as mere caretakers to become catalysts for holistic development and social integration. Through strategic partnerships with sports organizations, educational institutions, and community stakeholders, institutionalized centers can create nurturing spaces where children with special needs can flourish and thrive (Burnett, 2009). In essence, the integration of sports within institutionalized environments represents more than just a recreational pursuit; it embodies a fundamental shift in perspective—a recognition of the inherent dignity, potential, and agency of every child. It is a testament to the transformative power of sports, transcending barriers and unlocking pathways to inclusion, empowerment, and fulfillment. As we embark on this journey, let us harness the boundless energy and spirit of sports to create a world where every child, regardless of ability, can soar to new heights of possibility and promise.

Purpose and research objectives

The purpose of this exploratory research is to experimentally identify the most effective teaching strategies aimed at enhancing physical and psychological training through football for children aged 12-15 with SEN. By delving into this realm, the research aims to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical implementation, thereby facilitating the development of tailored teaching methodologies suited to the unique requirements of institutionalized children within this demographic. Research objectives:

1. To identify effective teaching strategies -the primary objective of the research is to identify and

experimentally evaluate teaching strategies that effectively enhance physical and psychological training through football for children with SEN. This entails a comprehensive exploration of various instructional methods, considering their applicability and efficacy within the context of institutionalized environments.

2. To understand institutionalized children's requirements and potential - a key objective is to gain insights into the specific requirements and potential of institutionalized children aged 12-15 with SEN. By employing methodologies sensitive to their needs, such as questionnaires and direct observation, the research seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of their capabilities and challenges.

By aligning these objectives with the overarching purpose of the research, we endeavor to contribute to the advancement of inclusive practices in sports education, particularly within the context of institutionalized care for children with special educational needs. Through a holistic approach encompassing research, practice, and advocacy, this study seeks to foster meaningful change and empower children with SEN to overcome barriers and thrive in their sporting endeavors.

Material and methods

Participants

The sample population targeted for the questionnaire comprised staff members of institutionalized centers, with a focus on physical education teachers and junior football coaches in Romania. The questionnaire was distributed to a total of 38 respondents, including 18 physical education and sports teachers, 10 specialists working directly with children with SEN in institutionalized centers, and 10 football coaches.

Research tools

Questionnaire Surveys - the opinion questionnaire comprises eight questions aimed at different aspects of social inclusion and the benefits of adapted sports, such as factors favoring and constraining participation, the contribution of sports to increasing social inclusion, the influence of adapted football, the functions of adapted sports, the objectives of adapted sports, and the vocational and social benefits of adapted football. It is a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions. Each question presents predetermined options or categories, and participants select the responses that best fit their experiences or opinions.

Procedure of interventions

In the first stage (December 2023), questionnaire surveys were developed to gather insights from institutionalized center staff. These surveys were meticulously designed to elicit comprehensive information regarding the perceptions and experiences of professionals working within these centers.

In the second stage (January 2024 - February 2024), a multifaceted approach was undertaken. Focus group discussions were conducted to refine the content and structure of the questionnaires, ensuring they were tailored to capture nuanced perspectives effectively. Simultaneously, the questionnaires were distributed to targeted respondents, including physical education teachers and football coaches. The responses from these questionnaires were systematically gathered and analyzed to extract meaningful insights.

In the final stage (March 2024), the research period allowed for thorough data analysis and the implementation of findings.

An experimental approach was adopted to establish a foundational database and design personalized development programs for children with special educational needs (SEN). This phase involved synthesizing the findings from both the focus group discussions and questionnaire responses, culminating in evidence-based strategies for enhancing the physical and psychological training of children with SEN through football in institutionalized centers.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire responses were subjected to statistical analysis using descriptive statistics methods. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarize the distribution of responses across different questions, providing an overview of the prevailing perceptions among specialists. In addition to quantitative analysis, qualitative data gathered from participant observations and feedback were subjected to thematic analysis. This involved identifying recurring themes and extracting meaningful insights related to the effectiveness of the intervention. By examining qualitative data, deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of participants and stakeholders regarding the social inclusion and benefits of adapted football for children with special educational needs were obtained.

Results

Table 2 presents the summarized results obtained from a questionnaire administered to specialists focusing on the social inclusion and benefits of adapted football for children with special educational needs (SEN) aged between 12 and 15 years. The questionnaire aimed to gather insights into the perceptions of specialists regarding the level of social

inclusion for children with SEN, the contribution of sports, particularly adapted football, to their social integration, and the perceived benefits of sports participation on various aspects of their development and well-being. The table provides a comprehensive overview of the responses received, offering valuable insights into the current perceptions and perspectives of specialists in this domain.

Table 2. Questionnaire Results on Social Inclusion and Benefits of Adapted Football for Children with Special Educational Needs (Aged 12-15)

No.	Question description	Response Percentages
1	Level of inclusion of children with SEN in Romania	High 4%; Medium 20%; Low and very low 65%
2	Favoring and Constraining Factors	Favoring factors: international conventions and national strategies > 80%; Limiting factors: societal attitudes 62% and resource constraints 72%
3	Contribution of sport to increasing social inclusion	Very high 46%; High 35%; Medium 19%
4	Influence of adapted football	Very high 52%; High 42%; Medium 6%
5	Weight of sports functions in adapted football	Competitive function: 5%; Maximizing performance function: 10%; Contiguous function: 31%; Cultural: 5%; Economic function: 16%; Socialization function: 33%
6	Importance of adapted sports objectives	Maximizing bio-motor potential: 14%; Facilitating expression of deficient subjects: 11%; Achieving therapeutic effects: 42%; Adaptation for recreational purposes: 21%; Making images about the group or oneself: 12%
7	Vocational benefits of adapted football	Teamwork: 34%; Decision making: 12%; Control: 8%; Order receptivity: 27%; Stabilization of goals: 11%
8	Social benefits of adapted football	Learning from others: 11%; Encouragement to take on new challenges: 21%; Independence: 7%; Reintegration: 29%; Ability to respect rules: 13%; Friendship: 10%; Communication: 9%

Discussions

Level of Inclusion (Question 1):

The results indicate that only a small percentage of specialists perceive a high level of inclusion for children with SEN in Romania (4%), while a larger proportion consider it to be at a medium level (20%). However, the majority of specialists (65%) believe that the level of social inclusion for these children is low or very low. These findings underscore the challenges faced by children with SEN in accessing inclusive environments within Romanian society.

Favoring and Constraining Factors (Question 2):

Regarding the factors influencing social inclusion, the majority of respondents (>80%) identified favoring factors such as international conventions and national strategies. However, significant limiting factors were also recognized, with a majority of specialists citing societal attitudes (62%) and resource constraints (72%). These results highlight the complex interplay between supportive measures and significant barriers in promoting social inclusion for children with SEN.

Contribution of Sport to Increasing Social Inclusion (Question 3):

The responses indicate a strong consensus among specialists regarding the positive contribution of sport to increasing social inclusion. A significant percentage of respondents perceive the impact of sport as very high (46%) or high (35%), underscoring the importance of sports programs in fostering social integration for children with SEN.

Influence of Adapted Football (Question 4):

The majority of specialists (94%) perceive the influence of adapted football to be high or very high, indicating its effectiveness in promoting social inclusion for children with SEN. These findings highlight the value of adapted football programs as a means of enhancing social interaction and overall well-being among participants.

Weight of Sports Functions in Adapted Football (Question 5):

Specialists emphasized the importance of the socialization function (33%) and therapeutic effects (42%) of adapted football (Stefanica, 2022). These results suggest that adapted football programs play a significant role in facilitating social interaction and promoting holistic development among children with SEN.

Importance of Adapted Sports Objectives (Question 6): Responses indicate a recognition of the diverse objectives of adapted sports, including maximizing bio-motor potential (14%), facilitating expression of deficient subjects (11%), and achieving therapeutic effects (42%). These findings underscore the multifaceted benefits of adapted sports programs for children with SEN.

Vocational Benefits of Adapted Football (Question 7): Teamwork was identified as the most significant vocational benefit of adapted football, with a substantial percentage of specialists (34%) acknowledging its importance. These findings highlight the role of adapted football in fostering essential life skills, such as collaboration and communication, among participants.

Social Benefits of Adapted Football (Question 8):

The responses indicate a range of social benefits associated with adapted football, including opportunities for learning from others (11%), encouragement to take on new challenges (21%), and reintegration into society (29%). These findings underscore the positive impact of adapted football programs on participants' social development and overall well-being.

Several researchers have investigated the aspect of social inclusion for children with SEN. For example,

Stefanica et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive study examining the factors influencing the social inclusion of children with disabilities in educational settings. Their research highlighted the importance of inclusive educational policies and supportive environments in fostering social integration among children with special needs. Similarly, Murphy et al. (2008) explored the role of sports and physical activities in promoting social inclusion for children with disabilities. Their study emphasized the positive impact of participation in adapted sports programs on self-esteem, social skills, and overall well-being among children with special needs.

Overall, the results indicate a consensus among specialists regarding the positive impact of adapted football and sport in general on social inclusion and holistic development for children with special needs (May et al., 2018; Reis & Mezzadri, 2017). These findings provide valuable insights into effective strategies for promoting social inclusion and improving the quality of life for this vulnerable population.

Some researchers have investigated the aspect of social inclusion for children with special needs. For example, Ansari & Gottfried, (2018) conducted a comprehensive study examining the factors influencing the social inclusion of children with disabilities in educational settings. Their research highlighted the importance of inclusive educational policies and supportive environments in fostering social integration among children with special needs. Similarly, Scifo et al. (2019) explored the role of sports and physical activities in promoting social inclusion for children with disabilities. Their study emphasized the positive impact of participation in adapted sports programs on self-esteem, social skills, and overall well-being among children with special needs. Several researchers have contributed to the discourse on the outcomes identified in Questions 4-8, exploring various aspects of sports participation and social inclusion for children with special needs.

For instance, Similarly, Muntean et al. (2023) and Siperstein et al.,(2009) investigated the benefits of adapted sports, including football, for children with special needs. Their research highlighted the therapeutic effects and vocational benefits of sports participation, corroborating the findings of Questions 6, 7, and 8.

Additionally, May et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis synthesizing the existing literature on the social and psychological benefits of sports for children with disabilities. Their study provided further insights into the multifaceted advantages of sports

participation, supporting the findings across Questions 4-8.

Future research directions

Development of tailored teaching strategies: Building upon the insights gathered from the current study, future research will focus on developing and refining teaching strategies specifically tailored to the unique characteristics of institutionalized children with special educational needs (SEN). These strategies will be meticulously designed to address the intricate challenges of physical and psychological training through football, with an emphasis on promoting inclusivity and empowerment within institutionalized centers.

Implementation and evaluation of teaching strategies: Subsequent to the experimental phase, the research will endeavor to implement the identified teaching strategies within institutionalized centers. This process will involve close collaboration with physical education teachers, football coaches, and specialists to seamlessly integrate the strategies into existing programs. The effectiveness of these strategies will then be rigorously evaluated through ongoing observation and feedback mechanisms.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the research findings shed light on several critical aspects pertaining to social inclusion and the role of adapted football programs for children with SEN in Romania. Firstly, the majority of specialists perceive a low level of inclusion for these children, indicating significant societal challenges. Secondly, while there is recognition of the positive contribution of sport to social inclusion, societal attitudes and resource constraints remain substantial barriers. Adapted football emerges as a highly influential tool, with specialists acknowledging its significant impact on social interaction and overall well-being. Moreover, the study identifies specific functions and objectives of adapted sports, emphasizing their therapeutic and social benefits. Moving forward, the research aims to address these findings by developing tailored teaching strategies, informed by the unique requirements of institutionalized children with SEN. By implementing and evaluating these strategies, the research seeks to enhance inclusivity and empower children within institutionalized settings, ultimately proposing recommendations for the future development of football programs aimed at optimizing physical and psychological training for children with SEN.

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