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# IPEU! IPEU!

## ***I PLAY EUNIFIED, AND YOU?***

# IPEU!



***IPEU: I play EUnified,  
you?***



**PARTNERSHIP**





## ***I PLAY EUNIFIED, AND YOU?***

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The project will be an Erasmus Plus Sport Small Collaborative partnerships, according to Erasmus Plus Programme rules.

“IPEU” has the **general objective** of encouraging the involvement and participation in unified sport activities of young people with ID from 8 to 12 years old and enhance their inclusion in sport environments where young people with and without ID coexist and learn to know each other.

The **specific objectives** are: to increase the knowledge of 8-12 years old with ID and their families about good practices of integration of young people with ID, and local and international organizations that offer unified sport activities for people with ID; to provide more opportunities for people with ID to try different unified sports and deepen how to adapt different sports to their necessities and desires; to reduce preconceptions and prejudices about the impossibility of people with ID to participate in sport activities on the same level as their peers without ID.

### **Activities and outputs:**

- Research about the current best practices in the field of integration of people with ID within the sport activities;
- Mapping of organizations offering unified sport activities
- International SPORT summer camp in Italy with 20 young people to create, a set of guidelines
- on how to make sports more accessible to young people with ID;
- Twitch channel for both youngsters with and without ID who are involved in unified sports.

## INDEX

### **1. Introduction to Unified Sports**

- 1.1. Benefits of Unified Sports
- 1.2. Challenges of Unified Sports
- 1.3. Implications of Unified Sports
- 1.4. Example of Unified Sports in Schools: Special Olympics Unified Champions Schools.

### **2. Peer-Support Programs: Facilitating Inclusion and Empowerment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities.**

- 2.1. Methodology of Peer Support Programs
- 2.2. Benefits of Peer Support Programs
- 2.3. Challenges of Peer Support Programs
- 2.4. Example of Peer Support Programs: “we can talk while we’re walking”: Seeking the views of adults with intellectual disability to inform a walking and social-support program

### **3. Methods of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities.**

- 3.1. Benefits of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities
- 3.2. Challenges of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities
- 3.3. Example of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities: Enabling Integration in Sports for Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities

### **4. Summary**

### **5. References**

## **IPEU: The state of the art of the combination of intellectual disabled young people and sport: a collection of best practices.**

Sport integration has the potential to greatly impact the lives of young people with intellectual disabilities as well as those of the participants without (Thomson, 2020). While research generally supports this stand from a broader perspective, opinions vary between different methodologies and approaches.

Including people with intellectual disabilities through sport is essential for their health and participation in society (Grandisson, 2012). Experiencing team spirit and learning perseverance through cooperation with peers can lay the basis for an overall more integrated lifestyle. However, the impact of physical activity and sports programs on social participation in this population is not as well documented (Thomson, 2020). Nevertheless, sport can serve as a tool for social inclusion, provide a platform for disability awareness, and promote a sense of identity and meaning in life (Kamberidou, 2019). By this, not only participants with intellectual disabilities learn on how to integrate themselves better, especially participants without intellectual disabilities learn how to lead a more inclusive lifestyle. That is because proper integration of disabled and able-bodied people into sport leads to true inclusion and reduced stigma (Nixon, 1984).

Generally, literature distinguishes between five major approaches. These said approaches are namely the development of Unified Sports, the development of peer-support programs, the facilitation of participation of athletes in mainstream activities, the facilitation of participation as a fan in mainstream activities and the conduction of activities to raise awareness (Grandisson, 2019). Here, only the first three are considered as relevant.

### **1.0 Unified Sports**

Unified Sports is an initiative by Special Olympics (Unified Sports, 2018) representing an approach to social inclusion and empowerment through sports, particularly targeting individuals with intellectual disabilities. The program seeks to bridge the gap between individuals with and without disabilities by promoting shared participation in sports activities. In focus of the approach are therefore the belief in equality, acceptance and respect. The benefits of Unified Sports are widely acknowledged, presenting a learning opportunity for both participants with and without intellectual disability. Some learning opportunities include improving physical performance, improving fitness and technical skills, and developing teamwork and self-confidence (Wilski, 2012). Unified sports also promote greater social inclusion, increased self-esteem, and positive perceptions of athletes' abilities (Bota, 2014; Alharbi, 2023). Also, unifying sport helps build national identity and unity as it provides a platform for international cooperation and understanding (Jaksa, 2011).

## 1.1 Benefits of Unified Sports

Unified Sports emphasizes the active involvement of individuals with intellectual disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities. This approach aims to create an environment where all participants feel valued and empowered to contribute to the team's success. Central to the methodology of Unified Sports is the pairing of athletes with intellectual disabilities and partners without disabilities to form unified teams. It is important to ensure pairings are curated as equal as possible to ensure compatibility. If executed correctly the aim is to facilitate collaboration between team members who are intellectually disabled or not. By this, the activity builds mutual support and enables friendship among teammates. While avoiding competitiveness and ambition getting in the way of experiencing inclusive sports as a positive event. Nonetheless sports activities in Unified Sports have to be adapted and modified to accommodate participants of varying abilities. This may involve adjusting rules, equipment, or formats of play to create a level playing field and ensure that individuals with disabilities can fully engage in the sports experience (Bota, 2014).

## 1.2 Challenges of Unified Sports

Despite its many benefits, Unified Sports also presents challenges that need to be addressed to optimize participation and inclusion:

Participants with intellectual disabilities may face challenges in communication during the activity, as for instance spontaneous tactical plays in soccer or basketball. That can lead to frustration and hinder the goal of establishing an environment of teamwork and mutual support (Aghazadeh (2009). Even more so, the understanding of a game's rules and/ or structure can impact the ability of intellectually disabled participants to fully engage in sports activities and interact with teammates. Providing clear instructions, visual aids, and alternative communication strategies can help minimize these challenges and enhance the overall experience for all participants (Grandisson, 2019)

Generally, building positive social relationships and fostering teamwork can be challenging in Unified Sports, particularly for participants with intellectual disabilities who may experience social stigma or isolation (Grandisson, 2019). Therefore it is important to create opportunities for social interaction, team-building exercises, and peer support networks that can help cultivate a sense of belonging and camaraderie among teammates.

Finally Individuals with intellectual disabilities may require additional support and resources to develop their athletic skills and confidence in sports. Tailored training programs can accompany the original sports activity and provide individualized coaching and offering ongoing feedback and encouragement can help facilitate skill development and promote a sense of achievement and progress.

### 1.3 Implications of Unified Sports

If carried out successfully, Unified Sports has the potential to have far-reaching implications for promoting inclusion and diversity in sports and society at large:

By bringing individuals with and without disabilities together on the same teams, Unified Sports promotes social inclusion and breaks down barriers between people of diverse backgrounds and abilities. This inclusive model fosters empathy, understanding, and respect, that hopefully lasts over the course of the activity. Hence, it creates opportunities for meaningful connections and friendships (Baran, F., Aktop, A., Özer, D., Nalbant, S., Ağlamış, E., Barak, S., & Hutzler, Y., 2013)

Then, participation in Unified Sports empowers individuals with intellectual disabilities to develop confidence and a sense of agency (McConkey, 2013). Through sports, they gain valuable life skills such as teamwork, communication, and leadership, which can be translated into increased independence and opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment in their personal and professional life.

Partners, the participants without intellectual disabilities, often report a sense of purpose and fulfillment from their involvement in Unified Sports (McConkey, 2013). By actively participating in inclusive activities and supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities, partners contribute to creating a more inclusive and welcoming community. This sense of contribution and making a positive difference can be deeply rewarding and motivating. Through their participation in Unified Sports, partners challenge their own stereotypes and biases associated with intellectual disabilities. They gain firsthand experience of the capabilities and strengths of individuals with intellectual disabilities, breaking down barriers and promoting acceptance within their communities. On a personal level Unified Sports provides partners with the opportunity to build meaningful relationships and connections with individuals they may not have interacted with otherwise. They form friendships and bonds with their teammates, creating a supportive network of peers who share common interests and values. These social connections enrich their lives and contribute to their overall well-being. Additionally, engaging in physical activity through Unified Sports offers partners numerous health benefits, including improved physical fitness, stress reduction, and enhanced mental well-being. The sense of belonging fostered in Unified Sports might further contribute to positive mental health outcomes (Wilski, 2013)

Unified Sports actively engages schools, local organizations, and volunteers in its programs, fostering community involvement and support. By raising awareness and promoting acceptance of individuals with disabilities, Unified Sports contributes to building more inclusive and equitable communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

#### **1.4. Example of Unified Sports in Schools: Special Olympics Unified Champions Schools**

One specific example for this method would be the Special Olympics Unified Champions Schools in the USA. Simply said, the initiative offers resources to schools who are willing to implement Unified Sports courses in their curriculum. The initiative is funded and organized by Special Olympics and aims at connecting people with disabilities in different ways to connect with their communities. Besides Unified sports the program is accompanied by inclusive youth Leadership opportunities and whole-school awareness activities. That is as the primary goal of the course is not simply improving physical abilities but also includes better integration in and outside of schools, reinforce positive health related habits, advance leadership competencies and deepen the understanding of sports and games. Because the courses are supposed to provide continuous leadership opportunities, participants are being motivated and enabled to speak up for themselves/ their disabled classmates in and outside of the course. Therefore it is to hope that the general school climate will improve through the offering of said course (Olympics, S. (o. J.))

Approximately equal numbers of students with and without disabilities are put together in classes and participate in the same activities. It is important to notice that students without disabilities are in fact not supposed to be coaches or supporters for their peers with disabilities. Everybody participates in activities equally and tries to support each other by implementing their individual strengths. Specific elements of the courses include team building activities, student's pre-assessment, fitness exercises, wellness activities, unified sports training, skill-training, leadership training etc. Whenever applicable students without disabilities are supposed to be paired with students without disabilities. Examples of this might be the presentation of the background of a specific sport, explain the rules to other students or lead warm-up activities. There are numerous proofs of why the program is widely successful. One of the most interesting implications is that after graduation, 71% of students, encompassing both those with and without intellectual disabilities, maintained connections with peers with disabilities whom they had met through their school's inclusive programs. Notably, the most enduring relationships were observed among peers who had jointly served as leaders within these programs. Also, a significant 87% of students have learned the value of advocating for what they believe is right (Specialolympics.org)

#### **2.0 Peer-Support Programs: Facilitating Inclusion and Empowerment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities**

Peer-support programs represent a valuable strategy for promoting the inclusion and empowerment of individuals with intellectual disabilities within various social contexts, including schools, workplaces, and community settings. These programs use the power of peer relationships to provide support for individuals with intellectual disabilities. They might also be able to profit from encouragement and social connections as well as a deeper social understanding of social situations through sports (Stanish, H. I., & Temple, V. A. 2012)



## 2.1 Methodology of Peer Support Programs

The methodology of peer-support programs centers around creating opportunities for meaningful interactions and relationships between individuals with intellectual disabilities and their peers without disabilities. Key components of this methodology include peer mentoring, social activities and training and education.

Peer-support programs often involve the pairing of individuals with intellectual disabilities with peers who serve as mentors or allies. These peer mentors might offer guidance, encouragement, and practical assistance to individuals with disabilities, helping them navigate social situations so that they can develop skills and achieve their goals (Culnane, 2016). In sports, that can mean explaining tactics and team dynamics, improving their athletic skills and participating in important meets and games. It can also include advocating for their intellectually disabled partner towards other team members or coaches.

Peer mentors may receive training and education on disability awareness, communication strategies and the supportive techniques that come with them to effectively support individuals with intellectual disabilities so they have the knowledge and skills needed to provide meaningful assistance and build positive relationships (Brooker, 2015).

To add to that, peer-support programs may organize social activities and events revolving around sports that facilitate interaction and relationship-building among participants. Besides performing training that can mean visiting sports-related events or organizing social events such as team barbecues etc. The aim of these activities is to provide opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to connect with their peers, build friendships, engage in shared interests and improve their overall wellbeing by feeling a sense of belonging.

## 2.2 Benefits of Peer Support Programs

Peer-support programs play a crucial role in fostering peer relationships and connections, ultimately promoting social inclusion and reducing social isolation among individuals with intellectual disabilities. Through support provided by peer mentors, individuals with disabilities are able to feel included in various social activities and networks. Engaging in peer-support programs empowers individuals with intellectual disabilities to cultivate self-confidence, independence, and self-advocacy skills. Interactions with peer mentors enable individuals with disabilities to develop a sense of agency and autonomy, empowering them to effectively navigate social obstacles and pursue their goals with increased confidence and resilience (Powers, 1995). Peer mentors serve as positive role models and advocates for inclusion, actively challenging stereotypes and promoting acceptance of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the community. By exemplifying empathy, respect, and support, peer mentors contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and compassionate society that celebrates and values diversity (Rilotta, 2022).



### 2.3 Challenges of Peer Support Programs

While peer-support programs offer numerous benefits, they also present challenges that require careful consideration and proactive strategies:

For individuals with disabilities, challenges in peer support initiatives within sports projects often stem from a lack of awareness and accommodation for their specific needs (Shapiro, 2020). Communication barriers, including differences in language comprehension and expressive abilities, hinder effective interaction and understanding between intellectually disabled individuals and their peers. It might be necessary to adjust mainstream activities to an amount non disabled peers might not feel comfortable with (Byran, 1978). Additionally, social stigma and stereotypes surrounding intellectual disabilities may undermine the confidence and credibility of intellectually disabled peer mentors, contributing to feelings of disempowerment and dependency. Limited access to comprehensive training and support tailored to their unique needs further compounds these challenges, hindering their ability to provide meaningful support and navigate obstacles within the peer support framework. Ensuring accessibility and inclusivity within the sports environment remains crucial, with physical, social, and attitudinal barriers posing significant obstacles to full participation and engagement for individuals with disabilities.

Then again individuals without disabilities may face challenges in understanding and effectively engaging with their intellectually disabled peers within peer support initiatives (Carter 2011). Mismatched expectations and understanding regarding roles and responsibilities may lead to misunderstandings or ineffective support. Social stigma and unconscious biases may also inhibit genuine connection and collaboration, as non-disabled peers may harbor misconceptions about interacting with individuals with disabilities. Moreover, unequal power dynamics may emerge, with non-disabled peers inadvertently assuming paternalistic or condescending attitudes, undermining the principles of mutual respect and empowerment inherent in peer support frameworks. Limited training and guidance on how to create inclusive environments and address accessibility barriers further hinder non-disabled peers' ability to fully embrace their roles and foster genuine inclusion and belonging for all participants.

In conclusion, peer-support programs offer a promising avenue for promoting the inclusion and empowerment of individuals with intellectual disabilities through meaningful peer relationships and support networks.

### 2.4 Example of Peer Support Programs: “we can talk while we’re walking”: Seeking the views of adults with intellectual disability to inform a walking and social-support program

Brooker et.al. conducted a study in 2015 in order to gain insights into how physical activity programs with peer support can enhance health and social support outcomes for individuals with intellectual disability, researchers conducted semistructured interviews with 11 participants with

intellectual disability and community-based volunteers in Brisbane, Australia. Through thematic analysis, three overarching themes emerged: individual factors promoting activity, external barriers hindering participation and broader normative influences shaping engagement. A significant finding was the nuanced differences in perceived barriers and facilitators between participants with intellectual disability and volunteers. The study recommends tailored interventions to enhance physical activity and social support for this population. Notably, the study underscores the importance of involving potential participants in program planning to inform implementation and advocates for a qualitative, inclusive approach in health interventions (Brooker 2015)

### 3.0 Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities

Promoting the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities is essential for a truly inclusive environment (Grandisson, 2012)

Supporting athletes with intellectual disabilities to participate in mainstream activities requires a comprehensive approach to ensure inclusion and accessibility in different aspects of social life. This requires intentionally creating opportunities and conditions for people with intellectual disabilities to actively participate in activities enjoyed by the general population. In practice, this can ensure that people with intellectual disabilities have the accommodations they need to participate in sports, recreational activities, cultural events, educational programs, other activities, and other community events. These activities are often referred to as "essential activities" and are generally accessible and enjoyable by people of all abilities, without discrimination on the basis of disability. This approach emphasizes the importance of embracing diversity and recognizes the unique talents and contributions of each member of society on a daily basis. Enabling people with intellectual disabilities to participate in normal activities is about more than just participation. It also promotes social inclusion, personal growth and community cohesion. Athletes with intellectual disabilities have the opportunity to build friendships, develop social skills, and strengthen their sense of belonging by interacting and sharing experiences with non-disabled peers (Burns, 2020). The core of supporting athletes with intellectual disabilities to participate in traditional activities is to ensure that everyone, regardless of ability, can fully participate, make a meaningful contribution, and enjoy the benefits of social participation. It's about building a more inclusive society. This requires continued efforts to remove barriers, address systemic inequalities, and foster a culture of inclusion and respect for all. Inclusion should not be something reserved for specific social causes but take part every day for everybody (McConkey, 2013)

### **3. Methods of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities**

Implementing accessibility measures to ensure that mainstream activities are accessible to athletes with intellectual disabilities. This may include providing adaptive equipment, modifying facilities and hereby accommodating individual needs to remove physical barriers and create a more inclusive environment for all participants.

Offering individualized support and assistance to athletes with intellectual disabilities to help them overcome challenges and barriers to participation might be necessary in order to open specific activities for everybody. This may involve providing coaching to address specific needs and enhance intellectually disabled athlete's experience and performance.

An important factor when it comes to inclusion in mainstream activities is developing inclusive programming and initiatives that actively promote the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities. This may include organizing inclusive sports events that welcome athletes of all abilities and provide opportunities for meaningful engagement and competition. In other words, mainstream events are being designed in a way that fosters inclusion from the beginning, in contrast to adapting preexisting events.

#### **3.1 Benefits of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities**

Facilitating the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities offers a range of benefits for athletes, organizers, and the broader community:

By promoting the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities, organizers demonstrate a commitment to inclusion, diversity, and equal opportunities for all. This fosters a culture of acceptance and respect, where individuals of all abilities are valued and celebrated for their unique talents and contributions (McConkey, 2013).

Participation in mainstream activities provides athletes with intellectual disabilities opportunities to develop athletic skills. Engaging in mainstream activities exposes athletes to new challenges and experiences, helping them grow and develop both on and off the field.

Mainstream activities offer opportunities for athletes with intellectual disabilities to socialize, connect, and build relationships with their peers without disabilities. This promotes social integration, friendship through mutual understanding. The aim is to break down barriers and foster positive interactions that can possibly lead to long lasting relationships.

### **3.2 Challenges of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities**

Despite the many benefits, facilitating the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities presents challenges that require careful consideration and proactive strategies: Attitudinal barriers and stereotypes may hinder the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities. Addressing misconceptions is essential for overcoming this barrier and creating an environment where athletes of all abilities feel welcome and valued. Limited resources, funding, and support may pose challenges to the implementation of inclusive programming and initiatives (Sibanda, P. 2018). Securing adequate resources, by leveraging community support is essential for overcoming resource limitations and ensuring the success and sustainability of inclusive sports activities. Moreover, accessibility issues, such as physical barriers and inadequate facilities, may hinder the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities. Investing in accessibility measures, conducting facility audits, and advocating for inclusive design principles can help address these issues and create more accessible and inclusive environments for athletes of all abilities (Sherlock-Shangraw, R. 2013)

In conclusion, facilitating the participation of athletes with intellectual disabilities in mainstream activities is essential for promoting inclusion, diversity, and equal opportunities in sports and society. Despite the difficulties, it is possible to create environments where athletes of all abilities can fully engage in mainstream activities, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

### **3.3. Example of Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities: Enabling Integration in Sports for Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities**

Grandisson's study from 2012 focused on adolescents between the ages of 12 and 19, a critical period for identity formation and habit formation according to psychological and physiological criteria. This study was conducted in Quebec, Canada, to understand the impact of sport participation on youth with intellectual disabilities and their integration into inclusive sport environments. Data were collected from a variety of sources, including youth with intellectual disabilities, their parents, and rehabilitation staff. The study included adolescents diagnosed with mild or moderate mental retardation who were able to communicate in French or English. People with severe disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, or hospitalization for physical or mental health reasons were excluded from the study in order to keep a realistic approach on possible inclusion in mainstream activities. Included adolescents were divided into two groups: those who participate in organized sports and those who do not. Both groups were studied to identify barriers to participation in exercise. Additionally, the event included one parent per youth, as well as Quebec staff who work with people with intellectual disabilities. This comprehensive approach aimed to provide a

comprehensive understanding of sports performance and inclusion factors for youth with intellectual disabilities (Grandison, 2012)

First, exercise was found to improve physical and mental health, with participants expressing a sense of balance and reporting a positive impact on their health. Building self-esteem was another important theme, with participants reporting increased confidence and pride, especially when achieving success in sporting events. Social inclusion is cited as a key benefit, allowing teenagers to feel a sense of belonging and develop friendships through sports activities.

In addition, sports are associated with the development of motor, social and cognitive skills, and also provide opportunities for entertainment and enjoyment. Parents also reported positive outcomes, including pride in their children's achievements and improved parent-child relationships. Additionally, able-bodied athletes who participate in multidisciplinary sports have learned to be more aware of differences and to accept and support people with intellectual disabilities. These results highlight the positive impact of sports participation on youth with intellectual disabilities and highlight the importance of comprehensive sports programs to promote social inclusion and personal development (Grandison, 2012)

#### **4.0 Summary**

The integration of young people with intellectual disabilities into sport is a complex process influenced by personal and environmental factors (Grandisson, 2012). Different approaches highlight different aspects of achieving the goal of improving inclusion in and through sports. Sport can improve fitness, health, and social interaction, but it also plays an important role in discussions about disability, identity, and belonging (Smith, 2015). Even more important, participating in inclusive sports activities can have lifelong implications for both, disabled and non-disabled participants. However, creating appropriate opportunities for participation in sport requires consideration of various parameters, such as type and severity of disability, sport experience, and sport structure (Nixon, 1984). The quality of integration can also be influenced by the ambiguity of invisible disabilities, social pressures, and mismatches between the structure of the sport and the abilities of the participants (Nixon II, 1989). Nonetheless the approaches mentioned here, unified sports, peer support programs and Facilitating the Participation of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities in Mainstream Activities.

have shown remarkable impacts and it is to be hoped that in the future, more opportunities arise so more athletes have the possibility to benefit from them. After all, a society that employs more inclusive values such as diversity, acceptance, respect and community is a society benefitting everybody.

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## EUEXIA

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