

Olvhøj, R., Jensen, T. K., Wienecke, J., Winther, H. (2022). Dream team – team sports in a community of adults with intellectual disability: How can participation in team sports develop the social competencies of people with intellectual disability?. *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 25(10), 2162-2177.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2097072>

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Dream team – Team sports in a community of adults with intellectual disability

How can participation in team sports develop the social competencies of people with intellectual disability?

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Participation in social communities is vital for all human beings. People with intellectual disability (ID) have fewer opportunities to engage and participate in social communities with peers and are therefore often exposed to loneliness and marginalization caused by social, psychological, and physical challenges. Previous studies describe how participation in team sports and other sports activities provides opportunities to build relationships, have influence, develop communication skills and thereby develop social competencies. Nevertheless, research enlightening how people with ID can develop social competencies through sports activities is very limited. This practice-oriented research project was conducted at a sports school, which offers daily sports and movement activities for adults with ID. The purpose of this study is to enlighten how participation in team sports at the school can develop social competencies in this target group. It was conducted through phenomenological and narrative inspired observations, which were analysed using theories about community, membership, bodily communication, and synchronization between individuals. The results show how team sport gives the students opportunities to experience membership in a social community, develop communication skills, and have synchronized experiences with others who have similar challenges. These experiences with synchronized energies, movements, and emotions, provide them with opportunities to experience valuable social moments with peers, which can form foundations for development.

Keywords: social competencies, membership, community, communication, movement, bodily communication, synchronization, intellectual disabilities

Introduction

The development of social competencies is important in order to function in social communities and face conflicts and challenges both alone and in social relationships (Cronin 1996; Deding, Rasmussen, and Rayce 2016; Gould and Carson 2008; Sheppard and Unsworth 2011). Being part of a social community in which members have a feeling of belonging is beneficial to developing social and personal competencies

(Goodwin et al. 2009; Parmenter et al. 2016). Social competencies are here defined as embracing various social skills, such as social awareness, cognition, communication, and motivation (Little et al. 2019). People with ID have fewer opportunities to participate in social communities and are at risk of being exposed to loneliness and marginalization, which leave this group with fewer options to develop social competencies (Blömer et al. 2015; Solish, Perry, and Minnes 2010; Brown et al. 2009; Sheppard and Unsworth 2011). Solish et al. (2010) state that people with ID rarely participate in sports and physical activities (Solish, Perry, and Minnes 2010), even though studies show that informants wish to participate in sports activities (Buttimer and Tierney 2005; Beart et al. 2001).

The scarcity of research literature about the meaning of sports for people with ID points to an unused potential to use team sports to develop social competencies.

Nevertheless, a study by Love (2016) concluded that autotelic activities combined with activities with interactions between the players of a team sport who share a common goal are highly preferred by the informants, who were all adults with Downs Syndrome (Love 2016). Other studies have also pointed to the benefits of the more playful methods of physical activities for people with ID (Ahler 2013; Eichberg 2015; Svendsen 2012).

Research also shows that sports activities with elements of the play have shown to be an arena for the development of bodily and non-verbal communication for people with disabilities (Ahler 2013; Eichberg 2015; Svendsen 2012). In team sports, there is a demand for communication in order to perform successfully as a team, providing the participants with an opportunity to interact and communicate with each other. This can form bonds between players, causing them to develop their social competencies (Blinde, Elaine M. & McClung 1997).

The context of the study

“Dream team, dream team, let’s go dream team!” Adam’s voice cuts through the air loud and clear while he walks up the court after he had a short meeting with the rest of his team. Adam is teamed up with teacher Michael and a fellow player John in a game of 3 versus 3 on the court. Adam, Michael and John have a brief talk to discuss tactics and provide their team with the team name “Dream team.”

This article provides an analysis of the development of social competencies of people with ID, illustrated by stories from movement practice at the school. Through ethnographic fieldwork with phenomenological inspired observations in various team sports (basketball, volleyball, and soccer), this article aims to answer the question of how participation in ball games can develop social competencies for people with ID. The article includes practice-based observations from these team sports, held at a sports school for adults with ID. The purpose of the study is to examine how daily participation in top-down initiated ball games can develop the social competencies of adults with ID. The analysis is based on theories about community, membership (Goodwin et al. 2009), synchronization, and bodily communication (Hart 2016).

Furthermore, the article will highlight settings that show the potential for social development for adults with ID: facilitating factors such as the role of the instructor, interaction with teammates, and the framing of activities. The article attempts to answer the following question:

How can participation in team sports develop the social competencies of people with intellectual disability?

Research Methods

This paper is part of a larger research study that attempts to answer how participation in sports and movement activities can enhance the development of life skills. The study uses physiological methods and inquiries into the physical health and development of the participants as well as their psychosocial development. This paper focuses on the development of social competencies and specific social skills.

Participants

The students apply to the school and are accepted based on their ID and their potential for evolving socially, athletically, and personally. They are admitted for one year at the school. The sports that this school provides are based on Adapted Physical Activity (APA) principles, and this article describes lived situations from team sports within the community. This means that the school comprises the community, and the team sports are provided within this community for a certain number of students. Thus, both community and team sports form the basis for the physical activities at this school.

The study investigates a sample of 20 adults, all diagnosed with ID. However, the extent and diagnosis specifications were not provided to the researchers by the school, and these were not considered necessary for the purpose of the study. The type of ID for example due to Downs Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and Autism etc. is therefore not identified. It is considered to be enough with the knowledge that the participants share the assembly point of their ID.

This study does not consider the individual development of each participant's social competencies. It focuses on possibilities and potentials in team sports through interactions between adults with ID. The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 48, and the sports school is based in Copenhagen (Denmark). All 20 participants were

recruited from the pool of 48 adults who participated in the larger study, in which both physiological and psychosocial assessments were performed. The 20 adults who constitute this sample all participated in the basketball, soccer, or volleyball activities, whereas the other adults at the school chose to participate in other activities, such as dance, CrossFit, or triathlon, which took place alongside the team sports in the study. This means that all the students who participated in the ball games were included in the study; thus, no further selection was made.

The school offers physical activity, sport, and movement daily from 9 am-2 pm and a wide selection of activities. Students choose every 2nd month between four different movement activities, in which they are compelled to participate in the following period, with participation five hours daily, four days a week. This study investigates a sample of 11 male and 9 female players; the researchers did not interfere or adjust the researched reality to ensure e.g. equal gender representation.

Researching by observations and lived stories

We wish to explore the lifeworld of the participants so as to gain an understanding of their participation. Based on this, we work with observational methods from a phenomenological inspired standpoint, which can help us understand the many actions, happenings, and unique moments of the individuals researched (Allen-Collinson 2017). We acknowledge that the participants' lifeworld is different from ours as researchers, and therefore it does not seem relevant to point out similarities between the researchers and the participants, as the focus is at the participants' assembly point of ID.

This article will describe many developmental moments through descriptions of embodied actions. By using participatory observational methods, we try to get close to the lifeworld of the studied participants. We desired to “bracket” our knowledge and presumptions about potentials, challenges, and opportunities when working with sports

and movement for a group of people with different resources, and thereby maintain a critical, open, and curious view of the world (Allen-Collinson 2017; Merleau-Ponty 2006). With one researcher collecting descriptions in the field and the other two reviewing the data afterward, we attempted to maintain a critical perspective on the data collected. This made us aware of the participants' "everydayness," their social constructions and their actions (Allen-Collinson 2017; Thorpe & Olive 2016).

Data analysis

When observing the three different team sports (soccer, volleyball, and basketball), the researcher sat in on the ball game sessions throughout all disciplines in order to be able to take photos or describe the interesting and determining exchanges between the players.

Throughout the observation period, the researcher kept a diary to remember moods, energies, and thoughts connected to what was observed. The diary notes were used to describe the situation more adequately and in depth, and to notice moments that had not come to our attention when observing (Phoenix and Rich 2016; Thorpe and Olive 2016; Kristiansen and Krogstrup 1999). We did not use video observations, since this could draw attention to the researcher, and we wanted to avoid participants either being in the camera's focus or hiding themselves.

Observations were most frequent in the first and second, and again in the fourth and fifth week, lasting three hours daily. The remaining weeks had two sessions of one-hour observations. The purpose of more frequent observations in the beginning and end periods was to gain insight into the dynamics of the team, social bonds, and communication between the players in the beginning and towards the end of their time as teammates.

The studied sports are all team sports and ball games in which the players must cooperate to complete the task of throwing/kicking the ball between them, and towards the goal (soccer and basketball), or to make the other team lose control of the ball (volleyball) to score points. The size of and how to handle the ball differs between the various sports, which is why this study investigates sports using both hands and feet.

Through these observations, *scenic descriptions* are produced. Here different perspectives can come to life, and the researcher acts as a storyteller who searches for the current meaning and experience in the moment and setting, instead of an all-time current truth (Thorpe and Olive 2016). The *scenic descriptions* are inspired by phenomenological and narrative methodological approaches. The descriptions illustrate bodily communication and emotional expression and speak to the senses of the reader (Brett Smith and Sparkes 2008).

During the observational periods, approximately 100 pages of observational notes were made. The research team used a thematic analysis to capture themes and developmental moments. The scenic descriptions used in the findings were chosen by the research team collectively and are all characterized as stories that feature elements of social competencies, communication, developmental potential, or challenges. After choosing the stories it became clear that theories about community and membership could elaborate these stories even more, which is why we have interpreted the stories using this framework. The stories are examples of recurring events and episodes that happened repeatedly, which is why the selected stories should be understood as representations of repetitive experiences to the observer.

Research involving adults with ID

People with ID are often living with established routines and are surrounded by trusted relationships (Kittelsaa, Wik, & Tøssebro 2015; Socialstyrelsen 2019). Caused by their

need for routines, trusted relationships and well-known faces, the researcher in the field used a great deal of time and energy to build a trustful relationship with the participants in this study (Gjærum 2010; Kittelsaa 2010). This was done by participating in the students' everyday school life for the first three weeks of their school year. The researcher participated in all aspects of the day so as to become familiar with the students as well as their routines. This provided the researcher with the ability to participate in the activities as an observer without being a person of interest, which can ensure the depth of the empirical material (Jarvis 1999).

When working from this position and with this particular group, a balance and fine-tuning is necessary (Allen-Collinson 2017). This balance has been kept by being a curious and critical researcher on the one hand, and on the other being a trustful adult with whom the participants feel safe.

Ethical Considerations

When performing research in a practical setting, an important aspect is to ensure that the research is ethically correct for all individuals participating in the project, according to guidelines by the National Ethics Research Committee. The practitioner researcher has both an enormous possibility and a challenge when exploring human life and experience in depth (Allen-Collinson 2017; Jarvis 1999). When doing research with this particular group of individuals, it has been important to obtain informed consent by which the participants could grasp and possibly understand the practical conditions of participating in the research project. It was important to the research group to ensure that the participants knew the time frame of their participation and that their identity was known only by the research team (Palmer 2016). Informed consent was obtained from the participant with ID in the presence of an adult whom the participant trusted

and knew; this could be a parent, an adult sibling, or an adult with a close relationship with them. In addition, the language used was adjusted to fit the participant with ID, so the extent, content, and possible challenges were explained in understandable language.

Due to the requirements of ethically correct research and anonymity, all the participants are anonymized and given different names, so only the research group knows their true identity (Brinkmann 2010).

The conditions of the project have been very clear from the beginning, understanding that none of the participants, employees, or relatives of the participants were to experience any negative consequences of the research group's presence in their everyday life at the school where the project took place (Palmer 2016).

Findings and analysis

These are presented within the four aspects of a social community.

Social Community

As this article illustrates aspects of the social community of team sports for people with ID in a specific practical setting, this analytical section will describe the many findings from the participatory observations through the theory of community, highlighting the four parts: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs and the opportunity to have a shared emotional connection. The sections of the analysis are built around three different voices: that of the practitioner, what's at stake in the story, and how theories can elaborate the stories further. This was chosen to ensure a practice-oriented structure.

About membership

The active participation in a community requires a certain set of social skills, a feeling of identity, and an ability to communicate with peers (Hermens et al. 2017). We have

included scenic descriptions of how the players organize themselves, and how the instructors attempt to facilitate an activity within the community. Experiences like this occurred several times, always at the beginning of a lesson:

Story No. 1: Kevin is juggling with a ball a few feet away from me. He is wearing a yellow Real Madrid soccer t-shirt and shorts, despite the rainy and grey day. He is not so tall, so his shorts reach below his knees. Elizabeth and Julie are passing a ball to each other. Elizabeth looks very skilled, wearing soccerboots and a long-sleeved green t-shirt with a local soccer club's logo on it. Everyone is juggling around as they wish. There are no rules at the moment, only the opportunity to start the lesson with ease.

Towards the end of the training David, one of the three instructors call all the players together, and they start to walk towards him, some are dribbling their ball while others carry the ball in their hands. "Okay, team, now it's time to play some interval-ball. Remember, today it is all about positive communication, nothing about bossing each other around." It seems like this message is intended for some of the more skilled soccer players: Greg, Kevin, Andy, and Josh because the trainer looks mostly at them while saying it. "It's about team spirit, so look up, get eye contact and pass the ball around. You are a team, so no solo-players today!"

(Soccer)

Throughout the observations, it became clear that the pep talk and verbalization from the instructors were not reassurance for the players of the feeling of belonging and membership. This scenic description from soccer illustrates an experience relating to this.

Story No. 2: Everyone is running in the center circle on the field. They are each dribbling a ball, most of them looking down with their eyes glued to their ball. A loud, clear whistle fills the air, and all eyes are suddenly looking up. They are searching, searching for contact. “Andy, I’m open,” “Julie, look at me,” “Kevin, Kevin!!” The soccer field is filled with voices calling each other, and balls being passed around. Sofie is standing on one side of the circle. She has one foot on top of her ball and is passively looking toward the rest of her team. Greg passes her, his eyes searching the crowd for a teammate who is available, not even glancing in Sofie’s direction. Greg gets eye contact with Andy, and each passes his ball to the other one. Sofie looks after Greg, and her shoulders drop. The corners of her mouth change from upward to downward, while she is looking toward her feet.

(Soccer)

Analysis of membership

Some kind of membership must exist in order to make the participants feel like part of the community, a feeling of belonging and emotional safety from being a member of an integrated whole (Goodwin et al. 2009). Goodwin et al. (2009) explain how a membership is not solely participating but must be combined with a feeling of belonging. The common ground for the participants in this study is their diagnosis of ID; thus, this is one aspect of the membership in this community. The instructor is encouraging the team to embrace their differences in physical skills when telling them that the aim of the lesson is team spirit. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to know what the participants are feeling, as the stories are based on the observer’s interpretations of their actions. In the first story, the instructors emphasize *team spirit* continuously to the players, which is a way to focus on the social element and motivate them to interact with one another, thereby encouraging the feeling of belonging to the team.

The second story illustrates that this exercise has the potential to encourage players to interact and possibly develop a bond with each other by participating in a synchronized experience in which they mirror each other's movements and emotions, thus connecting on another level, as when a successful pass is made such as Greg and Andy experience.

The feeling of being a member is perhaps not a matter of course, presuming that Sofie's facial expressions are signs of her feeling as an outsider in the group. This example could indicate that participation alone is not enough to feel membership. It is vital for the members of a community to feel that they have a connection with the other participants. That is not the case with Sofie in the story, illustrating that a social connection may be difficult to attain even when playing a team sport. If it happens, these connections have the potential to evolve, since social bonds develop over time through positive interactions, shared experiences, and the collective history of the group, with which the member must be able to identify (Goodwin et al. 2009, 104).

Having influence when participating in a team sport

To experience oneself as an integrated member of a community, there must be opportunities for the group to have some kind of influence and control over e.g. its settings and rules (Goodwin et al. 2009, 104).

When playing a team sport, players must accept the team, the content, and the rules of the game. In this way, participation in ball games includes a certain level of influence which is legitimately upon the players. When observing the different team sports, we observed situations in which the community built around the sport influenced the players. There were moments when the players tried to influence the community by

wishing to e.g. play against their instructors in soccer or to be the one who gave their team a name in basketball.

As the story below illustrates, moments were also observed when players voiced their opinions about the set-up, social partnership, or content, and thereby attempted to exert influence.

Story No. 3: The players stand on one side of the volleyball court all facing Anette, who presents the next technical exercise which they must perform together. The volleyball team is small, only 8 players, just enough to form two small teams. They all look towards Anette as she tells them who is on each team. Anette calls on Sandra to partner up with Adam, and the quiet atmosphere is shattered by Sandra's high-pitched voice saying "No! I don't want to be with Adam!" Anette replies, "HEY Sandra! That's not a nice thing to say! You know that! You should speak nicely to your teammates," while the whole team stands frozen to the floor. Sandra looks down, mumbling something to herself as she walks toward Adam.

(Volleyball)

We also observed this need for influence from players who did not wish to participate, placing themselves on the courtside. We observed several incidents such as the one described below. This illustrates how the players indirectly and probably unawarely, do have some influence on their own level and form of participation.

Story No.4: The energy is completely different after the half-hour long break. Sandra already sits on the courtside but looks sceptically towards Adam, who sits on the courtside with his arms crossed in front of his body. Susanne declares loudly that she won't be participating for the rest of the training.

Ida, one of the instructors, gathers the remaining part of the team, and they form a circle. The lesson starts with a warm up after the break. Anette, the other instructor, walks over to Adam, squats down next to him, and starts to talk. I can see that her face is serious, and she points toward the circle of players, who are now throwing volleyballs at each other in two rows. Adam stands up and walks toward Luke, who is standing alone with a ball in his hands.

Anette now turns to Sandra, who shakes her head even before Anette starts to talk. Anette moves on, squats down next to Susanne and starts talking to her with a relaxed face and smiling. Anette looks straight at Susanne, who shifts between looking at the floor and into Anette's eyes. Ultimately, she takes Anette's hand and walks over to the other players.

(Volleyball)

Analysis of influence

Story No. 3 highlights how the participants have a need to influence this social community when playing team sports. The story shows how the instructor Anette is the one influencing the team despite Sandra's attempt to find another partner, thus trying to have an influence on the situation. This points to the necessity of a competent instructor who has both a pedagogical understanding and the ability to facilitate a suitable social relationship between the players. Especially because the players might not have the necessary level of reflection to relate to the emotions of others when participating.

Story No.4 illustrates how the instructors continuously attempted to get the players to participate in some way. By participating, each player is invited to take part in a team sport in the community, thus gaining an opportunity to have influence. This is a

very important factor of membership, which is supported by the instructor's actions: inviting the players in, while still respecting their boundaries and acknowledging their difficulties in relation to their ID. On the other hand, the story may be used to understand how some players might be forming their own outsider community, of which they can be members as well. This is a different analysis, but an important point to make.

Cheering for your team and reaching common goals – about the fulfillment of needs

Another important factor for members within a community is that they have a set of common needs, goals, and beliefs (Goodwin et al. 2009). It is necessary for the needs of the individuals to match the needs of the community. In team sports, it may be said that a collective goal for each team is winning a match by scoring more points than the opposite team. Typically, the members of the teams also have a need to be successful on their own, to feel themselves as a valued player. We observed many moments when teams cheered motivationally for players who did well, scored points, or tried to, but failed. The scenic description below is one of many examples illustrating this.

Story No. 5: The team has challenged the instructors to a basketball faceoff and stated that they can score 10 times in all. Tony is the next one in the line of players. His eyes look straight at his instructor Peter, who looks back at him with a smile, which makes Tony smile too. Peter nods, and thereby sends Tony off. Tony dribbles the ball in slalom around the cones in front of him, throwing it to the other instructor Michael, who catches it. The room is quiet besides the sound of Tony's feet squeaking on the floor. Michael throws the ball back to Tony, who catches it, and dribbles up to the last red cone in front of the hoop. The team of students has already scored 9 times, which means that they need only one more goal in order to win the bet. If they win, the instructors

agreed before the competition started to do 10 push-ups as a consequence of losing. Suddenly the room is filled with cheers from the rest of the team, who have stepped out of the line to have a closer look at Tony's shot. Tony looks towards Peter, who still smiles at him, and he takes aim and throws the basketball towards the hoop. He scores and the whole team runs towards him while cheering, clapping, and laughing. They are cheering very loudly. Even Sandra participates in the cheering. She has been sitting on the side of the court the whole time because she did not want to participate. Tony starts to run back and forth on the court, waving his arms over his head and wearing a big smile.

(Basketball)

Analysis of fulfillment of needs

Story No. 5 is an example of how the team of basketball players can have a shared moment, with the possibility of feeling like a strongly connected social community when carrying out the common goal of beating their instructors. The cheering, clapping, and laughing reveal emotions of happiness and joy.

This goal might match the players' individual goals, which could be to score points and show off their skills, thereby being a valued member of the team. The individual team member can thereby have a chance to influence the result of the game by scoring points while achieving the team's common goals by contributing to a possible win. By being together and defeating the instructors, the players can feel like they belong on the team and the community.

In the story, there are moments when Tony has eye contact with his instructors and when he mirrors their facial expressions, an example of synchronized moments.

These can help him develop his bodily and social communication skills and thus his social competencies.

We have also noted that the rest of the team cheers, laughs, and applauds Tony when he scores the point. The simple gestures facilitate a communication form in which no words are spoken. It is purely the sound of joy and bodily expressions in each person's actions, which in turn benefits the whole team. It is clear by Tony's bodily actions of cheering and rooting for himself how the communication from the team reaches him afterward. We notice how Sandra, who has not been participating, suddenly participates by cheering for her team, underlining how participation in social communities can take many forms – both by bodily communication, facial expressions, and spoken words. Mirroring facial expressions is a typical sign of whether a person is listening or not, and by listening enters the emotional state of the speaker (Parmenter et al. 2016).

Synchronization and shared attention – about the opportunity to have a shared emotional connection

During all sessions of the ball games, we noticed how the players used their bodily actions, eye contact, and movements to communicate with each other. Individuals living with ID often have challenges expressing themselves verbally. Many use various forms of body language and sign language to communicate, and thereby accommodate their difficulties with verbal expression. These communication differences between the participants are eliminated when being a part of the community within the setting of team sports. This is exemplified in story No. 5 when Tony and his instructor communicate with their bodies and faces.

The following scenic description illustrates successful companionship in a team sport setting. Stories No. 6 and 7 from basketball are just two of many examples of this.

Story No. 6: Mona and Emily are standing with a basketball each, in front of the same hoop. They take turns shooting at the hoop as if they had agreed to this beforehand, even though they haven't spoken a single word. The room is filled with the sounds of basketballs bouncing on the floor and hitting the backboard. They take turns. Mona misses the hoop and runs after the ball, walks back with the ball in her hands and to the same position, next to Emily. Emily looks towards Mona, they have eye contact and I see them both smile slightly, still without a word. Emily faces the hoop once again, and takes a shot...

(Basketball)

Story No. 7: Arthur throws the ball towards the hoop. He scores and smiles toward Peter, who stands behind him. The ball slips through the net fastened to the hoop and starts to bounce away from the two boys as they share a quick look at each other. Peter, who holds his own ball in his arms, starts to run after it. Peter runs with his one arm stretched out trying to stop the ball, almost stumbling over his own feet. He manages to stop the ball, struggling to pick it up, since he already carries his own ball. He holds both basketballs and runs back to Arthur while smiling with his whole face. He hands the ball over to Arthur, who starts smiling as their eyes meet.

(Basketball)

Knowing that their current mood and emotional state is determining the social interaction of people with ID, we also observed moments where some players did not actively seek the companionship of other players but kept to themselves

Story No. 8: Mona sits on the floor, leaning against the wall with one leg stretched out and the other bent with her foot on the floor. She glances at her feet. The volleyball class has just started, and most of the players run eagerly towards the net of volleyballs. Sounds of the volleyballs and hands clashing in "high fives" fill the big

hall. Luke and Arthur are standing on either side of the volleyball net, throwing the ball at each other. Luke passes the ball to Arthur by an overarm throw, Arthur tries to use his forearm to receive it, but drops it. He runs after it, walks back to his place, and starts serving once again. Mona still sits leaned against the wall. Anette calls the team together, and all assemble in a circle next to the volleyball net. Mona still sits leaned against the wall.

(Volleyball)

Analysis of opportunity to have a shared emotional connection

Through eye contact and bodily communication, the players have chances to experience shared attention. This can provide them with the opportunity to form relationships with each other. It is moments of shared attention towards an action, person, or object, that can be determining for building a relationship between two people (Hart 2016). When two persons share a moment in a shared focus of attention, they can experience synchronization with each other. In such a moment, their facial expressions and gestures will be similar, and an important connection can take place in which their emotions and mental states can be mirrored and the relationship between the two can strengthen (Hart 2016). Through the moment of fetching the ball back in story No.7, it is possible that Peter and Arthur experienced a synchronization which could give them a feeling of togetherness and motivate them to participate together when doing other activities in the future.

Story No. 5 with Tony, his instructors and Sandra might also be an example of a moment of synchronization and shared moments between the team players. This situation also shows how synchronization can happen between players both on and off the court.

These observations are examples of how the players use their bodies to experience and communicate with their surroundings. When Mona and Emily interact in story No. 6, their most important communication is expressed through movements, energy, and emotional expressions. Emily looks toward Mona as she fetches the ball. It is almost as if her body is saying, *“I will wait for you, I want you here,”* finishing her statement by getting eye contact and sharing a smile with Mona.

Again, story No. 7 is an example of how communication can happen without words, by using only bodily movements and emotional expressions. When the two boys meet in a moment of eye contact, Arthur mirrors Peter’s facial expression, sharing his joyful moment. This use of body language, mirroring and eye contact allows people with different resources to communicate regardless of their verbal skills.

The observations reveal that not all players actively search for an emotional connection or even contact with the others on the team. Working with people with ID, we acknowledge that there is a large variety of resources and difficulties within this target group. Their emotional state on that day also affects our observations. The scenic description of volleyball (story No. 8) is an example of how some of the players withdraw themselves from the community. The large variety within the group is important to understand when working with developing social competencies.

In story No. 8, Anette gives Mona space, and after a while she walks over to Mona and talks to her, trying to convince her to participate. In these situations, the instructors can be seen as mediators, offering the players an opportunity to participate and feel the emotional connection, synchronization or shared attention. Observations like this illustrate how these processes may require an active form of participation in which

every participant must use their resources to join the team and the game, either physically, emotionally, or verbally. Regardless of the form of participation, this can create opportunities to experience social connection, shared attention, and synchronization, all of which assist in the development of social competencies.

These stories illustrate the complexity of building a community through and around team sports, also acknowledging that participation alone does not ensure that the participating player has an emotional contact with the other players. The stories also illustrate the importance of the top-down initiated community and the role of the instructors. When some students withdraw, the mandatory participation facilitated by the instructors can bring them back into the community.

Discussion

Participation in social communities is vital for the continuing development of social and personal skills, as stated in the introduction. It maintained that people with ID often have fewer opportunities to participate in social communities adapted to their resources, and therefore have fewer opportunities to build up a stable social network, than people of equal age without disabilities.

The empirical material analysed throughout this article illustrates different themes, which we must discuss and address critically. This chapter will elaborate on these points.

Membership in top-down communities provides stability

During the observations, we reflected upon the kind of membership in the different team sports. The memberships were often top-down initiated within this community, and as the stories illustrate, the instructors supported the players' continuing participation.

Reflections were especially based on whether or not the top-down facilitated

memberships and communities could provide the necessary development of social competencies, and if this could be transferred to the individual participant's everyday life outside of school.

An argument which supports such top-down facilitated participation in team sports, is based on the social difficulties which this group often has. By participating in ball games throughout five weeks, the players are provided with an opportunity to be together with their teammates repeatedly, potentially causing them to bond, feel safer and get to know each other within an exercise facility. This repetition could possibly minimize the conflicts caused by the insecurity of unknown teammates and the new space of the community and perhaps lead to relationships that could blossom within the community and become assets in other activities. Previous studies point to the unstable character of relationships and networks for people with IDs, which is why the advantage of mandatory participation should be highlighted. In addition, many people with ID are very spontaneous and controlled by their emotions. This can cause unstable participation in which their mood, mindset and daily energy level determine whether they wish to participate in the social community or not. This argument favours the method of top-down facilitated communities and supports that the instructors continuously invite the players into the activity, thus providing them with the opportunity to develop social competencies.

An argument opposing top-down communities is exemplified by several incidents in which conflicts occurred between players who were put into teams without they themselves having chosen their participation or teammates. People with ID may react strongly towards people whom they do not like, increasing the likelihood of conflicts. This is a relevant consideration to take into account when deciding how to facilitate social communities for people with varying resources. In addition, mandatory

participation is an unnatural situation, which can make it difficult to transfer skills learned in this setting to other social situations. To investigate this theme, ideally we should observe the participants outside of the studied environment. Further research should therefore consider also investigating everyday life outside the school, in order to understand the transferability of social competencies developed in the sport school setting.

Bodily communication can provide opportunities for shared emotional connection

The social community studied is comprised of the various team sports, and this article focuses especially on bodily communication and movements. Development of bodily communication may include mirroring, communication, and empathy, which are important factors in social competencies. Throughout the observations we noticed, how the players were encouraged to make eye contact before passing a ball and to look up and play the ball to each other. Throughout the exercise this was continuously repeated, encouraging cooperation between the players.

On one hand, we highlight that the participants are enrolled at a sports school with great focus on sport and movement, causing them to be potentially more familiar with their bodies, movements, and usage of body language. The ease of bodily communication which we experienced through these three team sports, can therefore not be expected to come naturally to all people with ID.

On the other hand, we can point to the bodily focus present in team sports as giving a large developmental potential for the players' communication skills. By participating in the synchronized moments, the players have many opportunities to experience emotional connections with each other, strengthening not only their

communication skills but also strengthening their empathy and ability to understand the body language and expressions of others (Hart 2016). The stories illustrate, how the players related to each other without verbal communication, thus minimizing their verbal differences. This was seen e.g. when being in pairs, sharing a hoop and having a playful mindset, like Emily and Mona in story No. 6, when the players found a successful way to ensure their cooperation by communicating through the body, facial expressions and gestures. This is similar to previous findings, underlining that a more playful set of activities might be beneficial for participants with various challenges and resources (Ahler 2013; Love 2016; Eichberg 2015; Svendsen 2012). The use of sport and movement can therefore be highly relevant for multiple groups of people with different communication skills and resources, both with and without disabilities, since there is an enlarged focus on bodily communication.

As with the top-down facilitated communities, it would be highly relevant to observe the students' communication skills outside of this studied environment in order to examine transferability.

Conclusion and Future Research

This article provides analysis of the development of social competencies of people with ID, illustrated by stories from movement practice at a school. The article presents practice-based observations from the team sports soccer, volleyball and basketball, from a sports school for adults with ID. The purpose of this study is to examine how daily participation in top-down initiated ball games can develop the social competencies of adults with ID. The analysis is based on theories about community, membership (Goodwin et al. 2009), synchronization, and bodily communication (Hart 2016). The findings indicate an advantage when focusing on the bodily communication in team

sports, the support of participation by the instructors, and the large potentials to experience membership.

Throughout the team sport activities the players have been exposed to social relationships, as the purpose of the community was autotelic, which has been shown as preferable for people with ID by previous studies (Love 2016). The experiences of synchronization, shared attention, and being part of a team point to the potential for developing a connection to a social community and thus developing social competencies. The players expressed emotions revealing joyful participation in the games, alongside with stories of difficult social situations in which the instructors had to act and guide the social relationship. This indicates the complexity of developing social competencies for people with ID.

According to the stories and analysis in this article, team sports and ball games might provide a valuable contribution to the development of social competencies for people with ID by developing their communication skills, their ability to mirror and synchronize with others, and their experience of being a team member, having influence and fulfilling needs.

This article contributes to the still growing field of research amongst people with a disability and especially in the field of sports for people with ID. This field has a great and unused potential, especially regarding research investigating long-term participation in sports and movement activities and the transferability of skills developed in the sports setting. This article indicates a potential for more research and suggests many possibilities to further investigate the relationship between skills used within the sporting activity and how these may be visible in other life situations.

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