

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN OUTDOOR INCLUSIVE ACTIVITIES OF ADOLESCENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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Research has shown that adolescents with special needs often have fewer friends, are less accepted, and have a lower self-concept compared to their typical peers. This study sets out to explore the social participation of adolescents with special needs in various outdoor inclusive activities. It was carried out using a case study design to explore the phenomenon in a special needs centre for adolescents with special needs. Data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews with the parents, checklist, and observation of outdoor inclusive activities as the adolescents with special needs participated socially. Thematic analysis was adopted accordingly to analyse the data. The findings of the study have enabled us to discover effective practices and identify what works in supporting the participation of adolescents with special needs. It also provides insight to parental education specifically to embrace and cater to the social participation of adolescents with special needs in their outdoor inclusive activities which may transform the outlook of parents on adolescents with special needs.

Keywords: Social participation, outdoor inclusive activities, adolescents with special needs

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is an important transformative stage in life, especially for young people with special needs. Hence, there is a crucial need to support social participation of adolescents with special needs. Every individual in a community, especially parents of adolescents with special needs, plays a crucial part in the development of adolescents with special needs. It is their responsibility to ensure that the surrounding environment supports their development and can grow up with confidence as neurotypical children would (O'Connell et al., 2013). Health, social and educational professionals play an important role in supporting families of children with special needs (Chou et al., 2011; Hatton et al., 2010; Ward, 2001). A mutual understanding between all parties will make space for a more positive perception on adolescents with special needs' participation in outdoor activities in natural environments (Sanderud, 2020).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 2018 (UNCRC) is often seen as a starting point and motivation for the development of social participation. Prior to this, there were key requirements for adolescents and young people's involvement in the Convention on the rights of the child. It is essential to encourage an inclusive range of social interactions for adolescents as it may offer continuity and chance, boost self-esteem, flexibility and a sense of

individual personality and cultivate the sense of being loved and cherished. In Article 23, it is clearly stated that a mentally or physical disabled child must also enjoy a normal life, which also ensures the child's dynamic contribution to the community. Lack in social participation through outdoor activities might result in adolescents with special needs that are less equipped to deal with adults and friends in public circumstances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the social model, disability is the result of interaction between people living with impairments and an atmosphere complete with physical and communication barriers (Levitt, 2017). The social model focuses on the societal barriers to disabled people, it's a practical mission to pull off the barriers that caused or blocked their participation in the society (Hughes et al., 2012). An individual activity is not limited by impairment or disorder, but by the surroundings. Obstructions are consequences of an absence of social association. The social model is seen as a helping factor to transform the lives of countless disabled people (Lollar & Crews, 2003).

Bronfenbrenner introduced the "Ecological Systems Theory" to understand the complex relationship between the infant, the family, and society and how they impact a child's development. Bronfenbrenner's theory looks at how each one of these elements are related to the growth and development of people. based on the Ecological Systems theory. The current study explores how these different elements influence the progress of adolescents with special needs in the outdoor setting. Adolescents with special needs must be able to participate in different social settings with different social groups such as family, classroom, religious setting and peer groups in order for them to see themselves as a part of a community and successfully engage with others.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory discusses the incorporation of inner processes and environmental factors that leads to behaviour. Individuals learn from each other in the social context through imitation, learning or observation. There are three components of Social Learning Theory models which are Behavioural Determinants, Environmental Determinants and Personal Determinants (BEP). For behaviour, it involves the motor reactions, verbal replies and social communications. Whereas, environment comprises of physical settings, family and friends and other social influences. Furthermore, 'personal' under this model emphasises on cognitive abilities, physical characteristics, belief and attitudes (Wood & Bandura, 1989, Nabavi, 2012).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Adolescence with special needs often face a lot of challenges in realising their capabilities. Their experiences and challenges differ according to their impairment types which could be physical, sensorial, or intellectual. In addition to that, the severity of their impairment also affects their attempts and efforts of realising their true potentials and abilities because their skills may be limited to features or barriers related to their disabilities. For adolescents with special needs, learning to play can be as difficult to achieve as developing the ability to walk or talk which is a disadvantage when it comes to their development (Jones et al., 2018).

Adolescents with special needs often miss out on a variety of activities due to their social, physical or mental disabilities. This should not be a reason for them to be neglected in any manner. They too should have the freedom and rights to experience and enjoy the outdoors

without any barriers just like everybody else (Bundesgesetzblatt & Nomos, 2017). Involving them socially will develop and enhance their progress both mentally and physically. Therefore, social interactions with society and families can be so beneficial for children with special needs that require special attention and care. Adolescents with special needs gain more confidence to explore their potentials and be their true selves when they are able to meet others that are like them and people who are able to comprehend and appreciate, the way they are (Fatima Malik & Raman Marwaha, 2022).

There are significant gaps that need to be addressed in all areas of adolescence, also to observe and identify what works to support the wellbeing of the adolescents' lives. (Pijl et al., 2008). We must now recognise that disability is not a result of various medical impairments, but is, in fact, created by society's collective failure to adapt to, embrace and celebrate the varying levels of ability which we all have. The lack of one's ability to carry out responsibilities and function as a productive member of society may be caused by the person's current physical or mental condition or by the society's negative attitudes and environmental barriers. This impairment limits their participation in daily activities such as the ability to do tasks, or engage in social and recreational activities (Persons with Disabilities Act (Act 685).

In this study, the term "adolescents with special needs" refer to adolescents who are identified or known to have a long-term physical, mental, social, intellectual, or sensorial impairments which delays their effectiveness to both, participate and interact with others.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research investigates to what extent outdoor activities affect their social participation. Engaging in everyday life is a sophisticated process, as interests are created through communication in social environments (Barron, 2006; Bergin, 2016; Krapp, 2002; Renninger & Hidi, 2011). This study also examines the social behaviours of adolescents with special needs as they interact with members of the society and utilise the support given to them.

Observations were carried out to determine if outdoor activities have the potential to increase participation of adolescents with special needs. The potential benefits of outdoor activities will also be examined for the purpose of this study. Apart from relaxation activities, socialising is mentioned as a vital basis of interest in adolescence, as it activates emotions of strong engagement and a sense of belonging. Outdoor experiences are believed to have a great impact on adolescents with special needs and have a lasting influence on their minds (Coatsworth et al, 2005; Beames, Mackie & Scrutton, 2018).

Approaches like this improve any situation that aims to make adolescents with special needs the focus of their individual development through their participation in outdoor activities via the contribution of ideas, and analysing the purpose of their social participation independently together with all stakeholders such as teachers, coaches, parents, guardians, and the community itself. This gives recognition to adolescents of special needs and enables us to take part in the transformation of the adolescents with special needs in our community (Buelens et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is a case study that involved a specific group of people through in-depth exploration in a bounded system. The exploration on social participation of adolescents with special needs in specifically planned outdoor activities was hoped to open up the opportunity for transformation of these adolescents within the society. It has not only empowered adolescents with special needs but also the community that surrounds them (Haudenhuyse, 2017). The social participation was observed and analysed through the participation of stakeholders. The stakeholders are the adolescents themselves, parents, teachers/coaches, and volunteers who are involved in the outdoor activities planned for the adolescents.

Participants of the Study

The sample of this study was selected based on special characteristics which included participants who are in their adolescence and have some form of special needs. The participants' parents were involved as sample too as this serves as an indication on how the parents take a stake in the involvement of their children's social participation in outdoor environment.

Four adolescents with special needs and their parents were selected for this study based on their involvement with a particular organisation involving adolescents with special needs. The adolescents for this study have different disabilities such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, speech delay, Autism Spectrum Disorder, developmental delay, slow learner and so forth. These adolescents are from similar geographical locations and gather at a specific location for outdoor activities.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was used to select samples for the study. The founder identified suitable prospective participants with different types of disabilities for the study based on their previous experiences with similar events and activities. The prospective participants were contacted directly. Then, parents of the adolescents with special needs were asked for consent and interviewed for further information. Coaches/Teachers and volunteers involved in the activities gathered to provide information for data collection relevant to the activities held for adolescents with special needs.

Instruments

The three instruments that were used to collect data for the study are interview protocol, observation protocol and checklist. Observation and checklist were implemented to substantiate the interview which aided the analysis of verbalised data and provide further insight on the subjects (Opstoel et al., 2020).

Procedure of the Study

First, an organisation in Subang District that conducts programmes for adolescents with special needs were contacted. Then, approval to conduct research was obtained from the Founder of the organisation. Upon that, potential participants were provided with information sheets with a brief summary of the research prior to obtaining consent from them.

Next, the guidelines and structure of the study were relayed to the selected teachers and coaches who conduct the outdoor activities. They were also given an information sheet on the study which enabled them to provide the necessary information regarding the social participation of adolescents with special needs in the outdoor activities.

The activities observed for this study comprise Events, Arts & Craft and Gardening. For the events, the adolescents with special needs participated in an event in celebration of the “World Down Syndrome Day”. The activities held during this event were dancing, obstacles, football, and the drum circle. The second activity was the “Messy Art” which includes the adolescents with special needs joining the painting, drawing, stamping, glue art, and spray art activities. The final activity was gardening, which was participated with their neighbours/relatives and family. These planned outdoor activities have helped to determine if social participation in such activities assists or hinders the participation of adolescents.

The adolescents’ participation checklist was marked based on the abovementioned activities. Parents and volunteers who took on the role of observers were required to observe and take note of relevant details based on the items in participation checklist as and when the teacher or coach conducted the activities. Interviews with the parents of the adolescents with special needs were conducted after the observation and filling up of checklist for activities.

Data Analysis

Transcription of all the audio recordings into text was carried out immediately after the interviews were conducted. Prior to that, member check was conducted with parents. The researcher then read the transcriptions carefully and line-by-line to identify emerging concepts. The transcripts were analysed based on identification of keywords, merging of keywords to form new categories, and subsequently the emerging themes.

The data obtained from the checklist were analysed based on the selected participants. Information and analysis from the data provided a clear understanding on the activities participated by the adolescents with special needs that geared towards their social participation.

FINDINGS

In the qualitative analysis, data was first grouped into generative themes and then assembled to attain a common pattern of the final theme for each research question. According to the results, parents, teachers or coaches and people around these adolescents with special needs were focused on the benefits of outdoor activities for special needs adolescents. Some of which included better expression of emotion, establish adolescents’ potential, develop true self-image and opportunity to interact. Other participants who provided support to the adolescents with special needs during the outdoor activities also benefited from it.

Better Expression of Emotion

Emotion influences the life of human beings including adolescents with special needs. They too learn to express their emotions and allow them to flow explicitly. It is a signal of their state of mind which permits others to recognise their emotions and response accordingly. It is also a representation of their internal well-being which can be useful for identifying warning signals and positive indicators in adolescents with special needs as they participate in the outdoor activities. The following were revealed by their parents:

“...he enjoys the sound, and some movement activities...”

“...like acting out and those excitements like the lion “roar...”

“...I can feel that he is happy with outdoor activities and when he is back home he will behave as if is in returns of his enjoyment...”

“...He painted on the toys, he keeps playing and admire his artwork. He finds his own enjoyment through the session...”

(Parent 1)

“...and it is making him a happy child...”

“...For me, it is an achievement, he is physically active and he is very happy...”

(Parent 2)

“...because she finds it to be so much fun...”

“...I think the main thing is happiness, she is so happy after outdoor activities...”

“...It is the sheer joy of participating; you can actually hear the excitement...”

“...She actually feels included...”

“...The achievement is, she is actually happy, that is what a child needs most to thrive, whether they are special or a neuro typical...”

(Parent 3)

“...when people call up his name, he is very excited because people acknowledge him...”

“...So, he is very happy, and always smiling, when he wears the shirt, he knows early morning we are going here...”

“...You can see; he is quite excited...”

(Parent 4)

The adolescents with special needs seem to be more expressive with their emotions when they enjoy and participate in outdoor activities. The excitement that overflows when they were taken outdoors are an indication that they too need to experience the outside world. They expressed happiness and joy during their movement activities and while playing with paint as they create their artwork. For their parents who were also present in the outdoor activities, it is an opportunity for them to learn and witness how expressive their children can be during outdoor activities and all these will aid their development of abilities and talents. It is surely a fulfilling experience for parents who were physically present.

Establish Adolescents' Potential

Outdoor activities do not only provide adolescents with the opportunity to explore and establish their potential, but they also help them to build their inner strength, enrich their self-confidence and improve their mental health. Apart from that, being in the natural environment also allows adolescents to build their identity and redefine themselves.

"...I think he is also quite engaged with storytelling, like acting out..."

"...I was like "Wow", I believe it really happens because when someone you are comfortable with is not there, that's how the kids show their potential, so I think that's really important..."

"...The potential coming out, I was quite amaze, in fact we did not really practice. Some of them, really did a good job..."

(Parent 1)

"...So those kind of sports, that's where the social interaction happens..."

(Parent 2)

"...She learns how to deal with real life situations..."

"...coming back sharing the information..."

(Parent 3)

"...He tries to create his own notes, he has potential, he tries to write his own tunes..."

"...We notice that, piano is something he picks-up himself..."

"...He come and do one exercise, his level have established high, he participates well..."

"...And if you see at the centre itself, if you want to do like painting, he has some passion. So, we notice that he has potential..."

(Parent 4)

Outdoor activities have certainly increased the potential of adolescents with special needs to participate socially. The way they responded and participated in some of the activities was impressive. It was observed that some of them were able to repeat or picturise and share information about the activities with family and friends as they were able to remember details about the activities they participated in. They were comfortably engaging in outdoor activities and reaching their true potential. It is evident that these adolescents with special needs are able to reach new heights in their social participation if given the right opportunities.

Develop True Self-image

Adolescents with special needs may be different in many ways but they too need to develop a healthy self-concept of their true self-image. Recognising and acknowledging their true self-image enables them to live a satisfying and fulfilling life, which was another important factor for the parents and family members to understand about adolescents' true self and learn to

accommodate them in all the activities, especially in the outdoors, when attending activities or being together with them.

“...their abilities and self-interest. Sometimes, they are good in terms of verbal, or they are able to follow instructions, basically they are independent...”

“...doing his art work alone... I’m thankful to the volunteer as they give him the room to have his own creativity...”

“...Let’s say when parents are out of sight right, kids will actually give something different...”

(Parent 1)

“...he will stand up and move his body, I think yah, music, bands, he is incline to this kind of thing; sport, music, dance...”

“...His self-confidence, I will say self-confidence because it is very important you see...”

“...so this kind of participation it’s not about winning competition, it’s actually, building their self-confidence...”

“...I need a place in the society, that’s what, I can see now, he is receiving this love not only from his family but everyone around him, right, he is very confident, he doesn’t feel like something wrong with him...”

“...they have any sports activity, it’s actually motivate them, it boasts them...”

(Parent 2)

“...I just have to deal with it. I need to be better, learning how to play a game to win, practicing to make oneself better, these are qualities to be learnt...”

“...it gives her a sense of freedom and liberation I think...”

“...the need to want to do better, because when she realizes she is not good in something, she does practice to be better...”

(Parent 3)

“...I like to learn, and he has been able to cope up...”

“...we know that, he can grow up in a group of friends. He does have interest with some friends, the way he joins up, he knows...”

(Parent 4)

The adolescents' hidden abilities came to light when they socially participated with the volunteers and coaches they met. Which means, the outdoor activities have aided the development of their self-confidence and allowed them to be their original selves. It also helped them learn to deal with people and circumstances that they need to face in social situations. It was observed that when adolescents with special needs were participating socially in outdoor

activities, they exhibited bravery and did not visibly show nervousness or reluctance. Some were even more confident than neuro-typical adolescents. The smiles on their faces reflect the joy of freedom that comes with being able to express their true selves.

Opportunity to Interact

The equal rights of adolescents with special needs were acknowledged as they were given the opportunity to interact with others including their coaches, teachers, friends, and community during the outdoor inclusive activities.

“...as he sees leaves fall down, he will tell us tree, when he sees monkey, he is excited too...”

“...He will tend to ask more from (Founder), as mummy is not there...”

(Parent 1)

“...As long as he is happy with his life, and it’s helping him with his speech, and he is actually talking out loud with few words now...”

“...it will help the child in speech and language...”

“...So, it does help him, he is coming up with more sounds, he is trying to talk, because he is seeing, when he is in the activity outdoor...”

(Parent 2)

“...I think it is extremely beneficial because it gives her the opportunity to interact with others whether typical or special children, it teaches her how to communicate, it teaches her how to be part of a group, how to be a team player, those things that she will not be able to learn on her own/individually...”

“...I feel that it encourages communication, she will be like so and so did this, so and so did that...”

(Parent 3)

“...They improve on communication, when people call up his name, he is very excited because people acknowledge him...”

“...we do notice that, nowadays, you can see a lot of communication between siblings...”

(Parent 4)

The adolescents with special needs were found to be very engaging when they were given the opportunity to interact and be part of the outdoor activities. It has also enhanced their conversations with their siblings, founders, coaches, volunteers, and parents. It has somewhat assisted them in their speech and the increase in talking was visible during the outdoor activities. Some of them have even started to utter a few words, which is a tremendous development for them. These excitement and improvement that were observed personally by the parents do give some insight on their perspectives on outdoor activities for these adolescents.

DISCUSSION

The adolescents with special needs exhibited better expressions of emotions during the inclusive outdoor activities. Parents shared positive feedback during the interviews and some were overjoyed to be able to witness their adolescents with special needs enjoy themselves outdoors and socially engaged with the coaches and their friends. Heinz (2011) expresses that meeting people and attaining social networks, allow adolescents with special needs to express themselves better. Some of the ways in which they expressed themselves during the activity include smiling, looking at people, making eye contact, and even giving a handshake.

Parents showed great appreciation when they realised that their adolescents with special needs have cultivated their own potential when they were out socially participating in activities. Potentials were tapped by the teachers and coaches when the adolescents attempted to participate in the activity independently, which was a surprise to some of them. This indicates how powerful outdoor activities can be and how it can transform and assist the adolescents. This study has enabled us to determine how well they focus on the outdoor activities and try to initiate their potential based on it (Wood & Bandura, 1989). The social context has guided adolescents to prove their potential in a particular environment (Wheeler, 2020).

Initially, it was a challenge for the parents and teachers to enhance the true self-image of the adolescents with special needs as they participate in outdoor activities. However, as these adolescents participated in all the activities on a frequent basis, they developed their true self-image or their original self. Their true self-image or original self is developed based on how they present themselves in all the activities and express their wants, needs, and disagreement. It supports and contributes to how other people can engage with these adolescents as they build their self-image. Barfield and Malone (2013) shared that adolescent with disabilities, experience and explore themselves as they participate in outdoor activities or games. Their nature continually improves in their personal and physical self.

The outdoor inclusive activity has given the adolescents the encouragement and confidence they need to connect and interact with others. Parents and teachers have observed that their adolescents with special needs are able to have more conversations with their siblings and relatives. Runcharoen (2013) illustrated that adolescents with special needs can communicate better when they are able to exchange ideas, cooperate with each other and compete with their friends in the activities. This is evident when the adolescents respond to their friends as they engage in the activities together and when they invite others to play along with them. They are also able to speak more confidently when they meet new people as a result of the outdoor activities.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified the factors that have great influence on the social participation of adolescents with special needs in outdoor inclusive activities which must be considered a long-term intervention to improve participation. The themes observed through the analysis of the data have allowed us to have a better understanding of social participation of special needs adolescents. The findings show that involvement by parents to attain proper and reliable sources is the initial support that enhances adolescents' participation. Teachers also play a significant role in the lives of adolescents, especially when they are in the learning centre or outdoors during activities. The equal roles played by both parents and teachers and continual

support from teachers, friends and community will provide inspiration for these special adolescents to participate well in the social outdoor environments.

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