

RAISING DISABLED HEROES IN SPORT: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Since 1960s, the involvement of people with disabilities in sport has increased significantly. However, their participation in sports is considered tough compared to their able-bodied peers. Previous studies indicated that limited access to facilities and lack of opportunities were among the challenges faced by this group. Hence, the researchers feel obligated to continuously gain/increase current knowledge especially in the area of sports and disabilities. The objective of this study is to focus on the experiences of student-athletes with disabilities in sport. In order to obtain relevant data, the researchers have recruited ten Malay and Indian goalball student-athletes with vision impairment from Setapak, Kuala Lumpur using the purposive sampling. They are between 14-19 years old and have represented their schools in various competitions. They won several medals at the state and national level tournaments. All data has been transcribed and analysed using thematic approach. The study revealed three main challenges faced by the student-athletes: i) pride in exclusivity, ii) maintaining their interest in sport after completing school and iii) creating public awareness about their involvement in sport. This study proposed for a better outlook on sport and people with disability in Malaysia.

Keywords: disability, goalball, school, sport, student-athletes

INTRODUCTION

There have been a significant number of enrolment in special education classes in Malaysia. This show increased awareness especially among parents who have children with disabilities over the years. Their participation in special education is vital in preparing their children for the outside world. This development has opened many opportunities for disable people to engage in many activities particularly in physical activities and sports. From the total number of students' enrolment in special education as illustrated in Table 1, there is a potential pool of talents that can be groomed as athletes:

Table 1: Student Enrolment in Special Education (2015 – 2017)

Level	Number of Enrolment
Primary	3831
Secondary	2547*
Post Secondary	3
Total	6381

*Figures for secondary and secondary vocational special education.

Note. Data for special education from EPRD, Ministry of Education (2017)

However, the substantial number of students with disabilities in the existing system, as indicated in Table 1, does not necessarily guarantee a large production of quality talents in sport. Although the participation in sport and adapted physical activities are mandatory in the curriculum, it has only attracted a small number of disable students in sport particularly after completing formal secondary education. This is evident through the participation of athletes with disabilities in three previous Paralympics as indicated in Table 2:

Table 2: Malaysia's Participation in previous Paralympics

Paralympic Hosts	Number of Athletes
Beijing (2008)	11
London (2012)	22
Rio de Janeiro (2016)	19
Total	52

Note. Data for Malaysia from <https://www.paralympic.org>

Based on Table 2, the number of athletes with disabilities that qualified for the Paralympics are comparatively small. This fact alone should have triggered an alarm for the education and sports authorities in the country into finding ways to help and promote athletes with disabilities to participate more actively in sports. Nevertheless, the focus now should be on the challenges and prospects faced by these athletes throughout their playing career in school, regardless of their interest and abilities. This study attempts to explore the challenges and prospects in grooming these student-athletes and keeping their continuous interest and participation in sport.

The exploration and research related to athletes with disabilities are highly needed, especially after the exemplary performance of the Malaysian paralympian athletes in the 2016 Rio Paralympics. Over the years, the research in sports and disabilities has been extremely dominated by the field of sports sciences, aiming at improving performance among athletes with disabilities. The social-based sports research look neglected from the main stream agenda.

This paper begins with a brief but concise introduction on the nature of this research. Next, the objectives of this paper will be described, followed by the literature review in which the researchers elucidated some basic ideas of this research based on past and existing studies. After describing the methods used, the results or findings of this study will be explained followed by discussion and conclusion. All data obtained in the research are through the qualitative approach.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

1. To describe the experience of student-athletes with disabilities in sport.
2. To examine the challenges encountered by student-athletes with disabilities in sport.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a) Barriers in sports

For many years, dimension of barriers, challenges and opportunities faced by people with disabilities particularly in physical and sports activities have been the focal interest amongst Western and local researchers. These dimensions have been approached by both quantitative (Shield, Synott & Barr, 2012; Kang et al., 2007; White & Duda, 1993; Temple, 2007) and qualitative researchers (Rimmer et al., 2004; Less et al., 2005; Buffart et al., 2009). Among local researchers, those dimensions have been studied rather recently (Omar Fauzee et al., 2010; Meera Abdullah et al., 2013; Nizam et al., 2017; Wilson & Khoo, 2013). The existing studies suggested there are a few barriers faced by people with disabilities in relation to sport activities. In the Malaysian school context, Muhammad and Alfa (2016) found some obstacles faced by special need students in schools such as facilities, readiness, and resources. Unfortunately, they stated nothing in relation to the special needs students in sports. In the study participated by wheelchair dependents, barriers in sports participation are related to attitude and motivational aspects, apart from limited physical conditions caused by existing physical injury (Buffart et al., 2009). In contrast, the study conducted by Rimmer et al. (2004), states that factors of natural environment and economics have greatly influenced the participation of people with disabilities in physical and sports activities.

b) Inclusion and exclusion in sport

Apart from barriers in sport, it is also important to analyse the current research relation between the inclusion and exclusion aspects in the context of sport and disability. The dimensions of inclusion and exclusion in sports are not new. They are related to one another. In a broader context, they are considered by many countries as development agenda which is taken seriously. For example, the UK government is very critical in overcoming issues of exclusion through the establishment of social exclusion unit. It was due to the high number of social exclusion in the country (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) as compared to other nations in the European Union (EU). In the Netherlands, the study suggested that inclusion and exclusion were determined by few mechanisms namely socialization, disposable income, accessibility (to sports facilities), structure and culture, and ability and talent (Elling & Claringbould, 2005). Those mechanisms reflected in all sports participation among people with different social status and position. In the context of people with disabilities, Cavaliere and Watkinson (2010) states that the meaning of inclusion has been conceptualized through interesting themes such as getting entry to play, feeling like a legitimate participant and having friends.

METHODS

In order to obtain relevant data for this study, the researchers have employed the case study method and qualitative research design. Unlike other approaches, the qualitative research design explores issues mainly from the perspective of the research participants. The research data is predominantly in the form of words, photo, sentences, impressions and symbols. For this study, the researchers have collected data through in-depth interviews and analysed them using thematic approach. All respondents were recruited using the purposive sampling. Ten goalball student-athletes with impaired vision categories of B1, B2 and B3 from Setapak, Kuala Lumpur were selected. They were considered as high-profile student-athletes who have participated in numerous local and international tournaments.

For the purpose of this study, online application of ERAS was made through the Educational Planning, Research and Development (EPRD) and Ministry of Education (MoE) Malaysia. Other relevant documents such as research proposal, interview guide and request letter were attached in the application. Applicants will be notified within seven days of the

application date. Next, an authorized letter will be given. The authorized letter was then submitted to the State Education Office (SEO). Finally, the approved letters were given to participating school and permission will be given on the approval of the school principal.

Researching student-athletes with impaired vision

The participants of this study are unique and exclusive. Firstly, they are under the category of special needs students with impaired vision. Secondly, they are student-athletes who represent their state and country in various tournaments. Thirdly, they attend special education schools that catered for students with impaired vision. Based on these criteria, the researchers considered the participants as vulnerable individuals or groups. According to Liamputtong (2006), cited in Baidruel and Nurazzura (2017), vulnerable individuals have limited options particularly in making decision, conserving freedom and self-determination. Taking into account the nature of the research participants, the process of attaining data is different than able-bodied participants. The brief information of research participants is indicated in Table 3:

Table 3: Background of participants (N=10)

	19	1
	18	3
Age	17	3
	16	1
	14	2
	Male	6
Sex	Female	4
	B1	4
Types of disabilities (*Blind)	B2	4
	B3	2

Note. Data of research participant from fieldwork study between March to April 2018

To ensure this study abides by the research ethics, the researchers have strictly observed four fundamental principle of research: (1) respect of person and informed consent (2) nonmaleficence and beneficence (3) justice and (4) including participants in co-constructed research (David, Gallardo & Lachlan, 2012). The omission of these principles can deem a research finding as worthless and considered fictitious journalism (Aroni et al. & Morse et al. cited in Tobin and Begley, 2004). To protect their privacy, pseudonyms are used throughout this study. All sessions of in-depth interviews were conducted in Bahasa Melayu and audio-taped with the consent of the school authority and guardians.

RESULTS

Student-athletes with disabilities who participated in sports faced many challenges that needed attention. The results of this study has revealed three interesting findings: i) the pride in exclusivity, ii) maintaining interest in sport after completing school and iii) creating public awareness about their involvement in sport.

i) The pride in exclusivity

Being exclusive in sport is an unescapable process to all participants. The researchers found it was due to the nature of the goalball sport itself which was exclusively designed for and played by them. In other words, this sport is not played by the able-body athletes in school. Thus, eliminating the inclusion process in goalball is almost impossible:

This sport is catered for those with visual impairments as there are three types of blindness – B1, B2 and B3. Indeed, we heavily rely on our listening abilities because the ball used for this sport produces sound that allows us to move accordingly.

(Naquib, 18 years old)

Apart from the exclusive nature of the sport, the researchers also found that the student-athletes were so attached to one another. The harmonious relationship is obvious, particularly on the field, in dormitories and in classroom:

Of course we support our friends who competed against others. No one else will support us, but us! We practice, compete and live in the same hostel. We look after each other, talk about our progress in many aspects especially in sports.

(Ikmal, 19 years old)

These two excerpts showed the exclusive nature of their sports. It is an enjoyable experience for them, as they take pride in being attached to their own similar group while playing. Thus, the exclusion process is indispensable in order to preserve their group identity.

ii) Maintaining their interest in sport after completing school

Secondly, the findings revealed the importance of maintaining their interest in competitive sport particularly after completing secondary school education. The researchers found that their interest in sport are consistent and strong. They want to continue their participation as national para-athletes. Their engagement in sport is determined by the circumstances after completing school:

I really want to continue sports after completing high school. It's also cool to continue representing the country in the future. However, everything depends on the situation. If the priority is to continue study, then I will continue. It is up to fate and circumstances at that time.

(Mageswary, 17 years old)

However, the uncertainty after leaving school and the need to pursue higher education might also lead to the lost of talents among student-athletes with disabilities. Life after finishing school meant a completely different scenario for them:

I really aspire to continue my studies after completing my secondary education from this school. Maybe I will further my study in the field I'm interested in. Sports probably at that time will be the second important thing after study. I do not rule out the possibility of completely abandoning sports if the situation at that time urges me to focus more on studies.

(Maniam, 18 years old)

While these excerpts signaled their ambitions after leaving school, the path of student-athletes with disabilities should be aligned properly since the pool of talent amongst athletes with disabilities is distinctively small.

iii) Creating public awareness about their involvement in sport

The third challenge is to create public awareness about their engagement in sport. It is not an easy task because the media and other non sport-oriented organizations gave less coverage and importance on their struggles and achievements in sport as opposed to normal athletes. Based on the interviews with participants, it is their coaches and teachers who are responsible in promoting their existence to the public:

Every year, our teachers or coaches will invite outsiders (NGO, Corporate people) to the school. They assist us in doing physical activities especially outside the school compound.

(Hijratuddin, 18 years old)

Apart from the role played by the coaches and teachers to make the general public aware of their presence in sport, the role of elite para-athletes and the mainstream media are equally important. When the elite para-athletes compete in multi-sport events and won, it prompted media coverage to highlight their stories:

After the victory of Ziyad and his colleagues in the Paralympics, society has started to notice our presence. In the main stream media, they have started highlighting these athletes' contributions. It is very gratifying to contribute to the nation through sports.

(Harisah, 17 years old)

The excerpts showed some of the challenges faced by the student-athletes and the prospects in shining the spotlight on them for public awareness.

DISCUSSION

In school, both abled-bodied and disabled students participate in sports. However, student-athletes with disabilities faced several struggles in order to compete with their normal half. These student-athletes are the future prospects and considered as heroes in spite of their disabilities (Hilvoorde & Landeweerd, 2006). Their exclusive participation in competition is meaningful because they represent a small part of their community. As a result, they become more visible to the public thus accomplishing the purpose of their participation. The promotion of goalball as a unified and inclusive sport can be made to create awareness on disabled athletes by engaging able-bodied athletes in the sport. This interaction can be seen in certain countries such as the US, Cuba and Brazil ("Unified Sport," n.d.; Fesser, 2016 & "Sport opens school," n.d.). In addition, the sense of exclusivity among people with disabilities can also be seen in entrepreneurship area (Muhammad & Nurazzura, 2017). While doing business, the exclusivity can be seen through their group solidarity.

Apart from having pride in exclusivity, it is also challenging for disabled athletes to maintain their interest in sports (Rimmer, 2005). This is the reality after leaving school for most of the student-athletes. There are always the likelihood of either keeping their active participation (competitively) or abandoning the sport activities that they were previously attached to. If they chose the latter, there will be another sporting hero who will unconsciously disappear from the system. Thus, finishing school and pursuing higher education could jeopardise their sports participation in their future.

Additionally, it is also challenging for these student-athletes to be heroes in their community unless more initiatives are created to make the public aware of their participation especially in sports (Rimmer, 2005). In spite of their exclusivity, the image of athletes with disabilities continue to evolve as they have contributed to the success story of the nation (Wilson & Khoo, 2013). Therefore, commendations about their accomplishments are highly needed, especially in school. Hence, the creation of public awareness signifies their firm presence in the current system.

There is a logical link between Becker's (1973) theory and the challenges and prospects of student athletes with disabilities in sport. Participating in sports helps fulfill their biological needs. The goalball sport is a platform to overcome anxiety among student athletes with disabilities. Thus, participating in goalball means fulfilling their meaning, purpose and significance in life and is considered as an act of heroism to overcome challenges faced in their daily lives. In the case of this study, similar types of meaning, purpose and significance are foreseen in the student athletes with disabilities. Their purpose is more than just meeting their biological needs but to also contribute significantly to society. Furthermore, they look forward to continuously participate in sport as well as create public awareness on their group's existence while enduring strenuous physical training and competitive matches.

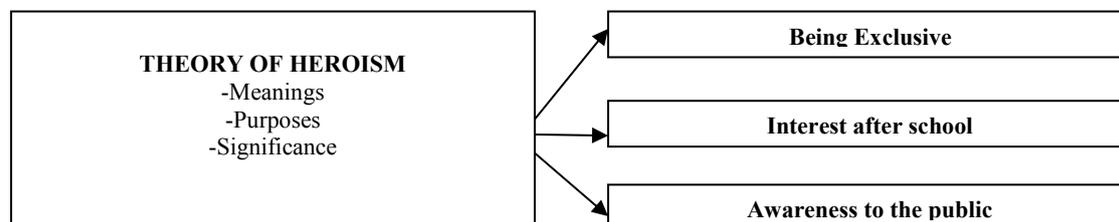


Diagram 1: Earnest Becker's Heroism and Student-Athletes with Disabilities

In order to understand the theory of heroism and the challenges and prospects of student-athletes with disabilities, Diagram 1 is used to illustrate the overall picture. The pride in being exclusive, maintaining their interest to compete in sport and creating public awareness regarding their sport are indispensable to the meanings, purposes and significance of student-athletes with disabilities in the social system. In spite of the many barriers and challenges faced, these student-athletes are the nation's future prospects that should not be ignored.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has accomplished its task to highlight and examine the experiences and challenges faced by student-athletes with impaired vision. The experiences and challenges are conveyed through the research findings. Furthermore, the main objectives have been critically elucidated in this research.

This study has two potential impacts. Firstly, due to the shortage of credible research in the area of sport, disability and school in Malaysia, the researchers hoped that a new understanding and approach on student-athletes with disabilities can be created and explored. By approaching the topic qualitatively, the Ministry of Youth and Sport together with the Ministry of Education can plan their programmes accordingly to fit in with the needs of these student-athletes. Secondly, this study is vital as it is related to people with disabilities. They are also part of the human capital in the country. By looking at the challenges and prospects of student-athletes with disabilities, the stakeholders and relevant authorities could further improved the existing practice and policies related to them. Indeed, managing student-athletes with disabilities is never an easy task. Therefore, relevant authorities namely schools and sport administrators need to understand and address the challenges encountered by them and list down potential prospects created by these heroes. Future research is also needed to look into the similarities and differences of challenges and prospects amongst this group of students. As this research only focuses on student-athletes with vision impairment only, it is recommended that the future research in sport and disability focuses on the participants of different types of disabilities and sports. Indeed, the future of para-sports in Malaysia is thriving and encouraging.

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