

THE EFFECTS OF LIMITED ACCESS TO SPORT ON CHILDREN'S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL SOLUTIONS FOR INCLUSION

Vasile CHASCIAR, Ph.D., Cnd.,
University of Craiova,
chasciarvasile@yahoo.com

Denisa Ramona CHASCIAR, University Assistant Ph.D., Cnd.,
Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania,
denisaramonachasciar@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Limited access to sport can significantly influence children's social development, affecting their relationship skills, social integration and emotional health. This article examines the impact of economic, cultural and infrastructural barriers on children's participation in sports activities. Through an analysis of the literature and data collected from recent studies, the negative effects of sports exclusion and educational solutions that can facilitate inclusion are identified. The results highlight the need to implement adapted educational programs that integrate sport as a tool for social development. In conclusion, the article provides practical recommendations for public policies and educational frameworks, emphasizing the importance of equal opportunities in access to sport.*

Key words: *access to sport; social development; educational inclusion; equal opportunities; education through sport.*

Theoretical foundation

Children's participation in sport plays a crucial role in social development, being recognized for its benefits on interpersonal relationships, emotional health and social inclusion. Recent studies show that sports activities not only develop physical skills, but also contribute to the formation of skills such as collaboration, conflict management, and leadership (Eime et al., 2023). These skills are essential for the harmonious integration of children into diverse communities and for preparing them for adult life.

A modern theoretical framework that supports these conclusions is that of Positive Youth Development (PYD), developed and applied by Holt et al. (2021). This theory highlights the fact that sport can provide opportunities for personal growth, character formation and the adoption of important ethical values, such as respect and fair play. In addition, research has shown that well-organized sports programs that emphasize inclusion and active participation can prevent social exclusion and

marginalization of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2020).

In Romania, recent studies show that the lack of adequate sports infrastructure is a major barrier to social development through sport. According to research conducted by Popescu and Ionescu (2024), only 25% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds participate in organized sports activities, and the participation rate decreases dramatically in rural communities. This is an acute problem, given that physical education and sport contribute to reducing social disparities and creating a sense of belonging (Association for Inclusive Education, 2023).

At the international level, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified inequalities in access to sport. The European Commission's report (2022) highlighted that school closures and the suspension of sports activities have had a negative impact on children's development, especially in terms of social skills. In this context, public policy recommendations have focused on funding free sports programs and creating equal opportunities for all children.

Another important aspect is the use of sport as a tool for social inclusion for children with special needs or for those who are marginalized. Studies by Eime et al. (2023) show that participation in sport contributes significantly to reducing stigma and integrating children with disabilities. Local initiatives, such as those of the CaiacSMile Association in Romania, demonstrate that adapted sports can remove psychological and social barriers, supporting community integration (Eurosport Romania, 2021).

Moreover, UNESCO (2023) published a detailed report on the benefits of sport in inclusive education, highlighting that integrating sports activities into school curricula can increase students' motivation and support the development of an equitable society. This report recommends the creation of partnerships between schools, local communities and sports organizations to facilitate equal access to physical activities.

In conclusion, recent literature clearly supports the fact that sport is an essential tool for children's social development. Modern theoretical models and applied research underline the need for systematic interventions to remove barriers to access to sport and promote social inclusion. Through appropriate educational policies and funding of sports programs, children can benefit from a safe and constructive environment for development.

Research

This research explores the impact of limited access to sport on children's social development, using a mixed methodological approach that

combines quantitative and qualitative analysis. The study, carried out between 2023 and 2024, focused on identifying the main barriers that prevent children from participating in sports activities and investigating how these barriers affect social skills, with the aim of proposing effective and adaptable educational solutions.

In order to understand this phenomenon, the research aimed to identify the economic, social and infrastructure factors that limit children's access to sport, to explore the relationship between the lack of these activities and children's social development, as well as to assess how existing educational solutions can be optimized to support inclusion through sport.

In order to obtain a detailed picture of the subject, the research was conducted on a representative sample of 1,200 participants, selected from urban and rural backgrounds. The group of participants included primary and secondary school students, parents and teachers, thus ensuring a diversity of perspectives. The selection process used the random sampling method to guarantee the representativeness of the data collected. In addition to this quantitative component, the research also integrated a qualitative dimension by conducting 60 semi-structured interviews, designed to deepen the subjective aspects of the phenomenon studied.

The tools used for data collection were carefully chosen and validated in advance. The quantitative questionnaires were structured in four sections: respondent profile, access to sports infrastructure, frequency of participation in sport and perception of the role of sport in social development. For the qualitative component, the interview guides have been designed to allow participants to express their opinions and experiences in detail. These tools have been applied electronically in urban areas, and in rural areas, researchers have organized assisted sessions to overcome technological barriers.

The collected data were analyzed through a rigorous process, using statistical methods for the quantitative component and thematic analysis techniques for the qualitative one. The statistical processing was carried out using the SPSS software, and the qualitative analysis was based on the identification of emerging themes from the interviews, thus providing an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives.

This methodological approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the topic, taking into account the diversity of conditions and experiences. However, the research has some inherent limitations, such as the exclusive focus on the Romanian context, which may influence the applicability of the conclusions in other geographical or cultural contexts. In addition, the qualitative component can be influenced by the subjectivity of the participants, which requires a cautious interpretation of the data obtained.

This research provides a well-founded framework to analyse the relationship between access to sport and children's social development. The applied methodology provides a solid basis for identifying needs and outlining viable educational solutions, adapted to both local conditions and universal educational principles.

Results

The research highlighted multiple barriers that limit children's access to sports activities and highlighted their significant impact on social development. The quantitative analysis showed that only 32% of children regularly participate in organized sports activities, while the rest, although they express a desire to get involved, face significant obstacles. Among the major barriers identified, economic barriers were the most common, reported by 64% of parents. These include costs associated with sports equipment, participation fees, and transportation to sports facilities.

The qualitative component of the research offered a more nuanced perspective on the difficulties encountered. Parents in rural communities pointed out that the lack of adequate sports infrastructure and programs available nearby is a major obstacle. Also, physical education teachers reported the lack of material resources in schools, as well as a low interest on the part of local authorities in financing and developing sports activities.

Another notable result is the strong link between participation in sports and children's social development. Over 78% of teachers have noticed a significant improvement in children's ability to collaborate, communicate and manage their emotions within sports teams. In contrast, lack of involvement in sport was associated with a feeling of social isolation, reported by 45% of the students interviewed, especially in disadvantaged backgrounds.

Interviews with sports coaches highlighted an acute need to adapt sports programmes to encourage the inclusion of children with disabilities or from low-income families. One coach said: "Sport should be accessible to everyone, but the reality is that without financial support and adequate infrastructure, many children remain excluded."

In terms of solutions, 62% of parents and teachers supported the need for free sports programs, financed by local authorities or non-governmental organizations. Also, the idea of partnerships between schools and sports clubs was well received, being considered a viable way to ensure equal access to sport.

The thematic analysis of qualitative responses highlighted three main themes: the lack of sports infrastructure, the prohibitive costs of sports activities and the positive impact of sport on children's social skills. Each of these themes reflects the need for public policies that address these

issues and promote sport as a means of development and social inclusion.

Conclusions

The research highlighted the many challenges children face in accessing sports activities and the significant impact these limitations have on their social development. The main barriers identified include economic constraints, lack of adequate infrastructure and insufficient sports programmes in schools, especially in rural areas. These barriers reduce children's opportunities to participate in activities that not only improve physical health, but also contribute to the formation of essential social skills, such as effective communication, collaboration and the development of self-confidence.

The lack of access to sports was associated, according to the data collected, with an increased tendency of social isolation among children. Especially in disadvantaged communities, the absence of sports activities has been flagged as a factor limiting integration into groups and children's ability to interact positively with their peers. This is aggravated by the passive attitude or the reduced involvement of some local authorities, which do not prioritize the development of sports infrastructure or the financing of accessible programs.

Despite these difficulties, the research results highlight the enormous potential of sport to function as a catalyst for social inclusion and the harmonious development of children. Participation in sport provides not only a platform for recreational activities, but also an educational context that supports the development of ethical values, empathy and conflict management skills. Organized sports activities can also help reduce social disparities by creating equal opportunities for children from different backgrounds.

To address these issues, it is essential to implement coherent and well-planned interventions. A starting point would be to expand free or subsidized sports programmes so that children from low-income families can participate without facing economic barriers. In addition, there is a need to develop sports infrastructure, especially in rural areas, by building fields, gyms and other facilities to support physical activities in local communities.

Another crucial aspect is the revision of educational policies to integrate sport as a central element of the curriculum. It is not enough for physical education to be a marginalized discipline; It must become a pillar of children's social and personal development, by organizing attractive, interactive activities adapted to the diverse needs of students. Teachers and coaches have a key role to play in this transformation, and their training should include strategies to promote inclusion and support children from vulnerable backgrounds.

The importance of community involvement in the promotion of sport must also be recognized. Parents, non-governmental organisations and the private sector can work together to create sustainable initiatives that support equal access to sport. Partnerships between schools, sports clubs and local authorities are another viable solution, through which resources can be effectively directed to programmes that benefit from a wide base of participants.

Finally, this research provides a detailed perspective on the challenges associated with limited access to sport, but also on the opportunities for change. The conclusions drawn suggest that sport is not only a recreational activity, but a powerful educational and social tool, capable of improving social cohesion and supporting the harmonious development of children. However, future research should explore in more detail the specific impact of different types of sport on social development, as well as examine how different cultural and economic contexts influence access to sport and its benefits.

References:

- Eime, R., Harvey, J., & Charity, M. J. (2023). Sport participation: Building cultural and social capital in children. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 16(3), 225-242
- Fraser-Thomas, J. L., & Côté, J. (2020). Youth development through sport: Perspectives and practices. *Human Kinetics*
- Holt, N. L., Tamminen, K. A., & Black, D. E. (2021). *Positive youth development through sport: Applications and critical reflections*. Routledge
- Lipscomb, S., & Smith, J. (2022). Breaking barriers: Economic challenges in youth sport participation. *Journal of Sport and Society*, 47(4), 101-118
- Popescu, A., & Ionescu, M. (2024). Access to sports in disadvantaged communities in Romania. *Romanian Journal of Educational Research*, 19(1), 45-67
- Asociația pentru Educație Incluzivă. (2023). *Educația fizică și sportul pentru incluziune socială*. București: Editura ASE
- UNESCO. (2023). *Inclusive education through sport: A global perspective*. UNESCO Publishing
- Comisia Europeană. (2022). *Raport privind sportul și incluziunea socială în Uniunea Europeană*. Bruxelles: Comisia Europeană.
- Eurosport România. (2021). *Cum contribuie sportul la rezolvarea problemelor sociale?* https://www.eurosport.ro/alte-sporturi/cum-contribuie-sportul-la-rezolvarea-problemelor-sociale_sto8319715/story.shtml.