

STRATEGIES FOR THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF YOUTH THROUGH SPORT ACTIVITIES

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Abstract. *The research aims to find out the opinions of 120 specialists and experts and also the opinions of a group of 245 young people aged between 16 and 29 years, participants in the project “Strategies for the future, strategies for youth”, which is now in the sustainability period. Following the application of the questionnaire, some issues related to the type of activities performed during the project, the impact of the project activities on young people and specialists, the possibilities of continuous implementation of the activities, the efficiency of the action plan resulting from both the implementation of the project and the methods used in the project on social integration with the help of sport activities were highlighted. After analysing the results obtained from applying the questionnaire, we have drawn some conclusions: the most useful activity to increase the level of social integration of young people or prevent their social exclusion is represented by sport activities. The opportunities for youth to practice a sport or different sport activities should be raised up to the next level, which is called lifestyle. Team activities are more attractive and increase the level of social inclusion. Specialists in the field should cooperate more and be more dedicated to youth education. Special programmes of motor activities for young people with disabilities, as well as unified sport activities, should be organised and implemented.*

Keywords: *youth, sport activities, social integration.*

Introduction

The main functions of socialisation are: keeping social life as normal as it should be, ensuring the continuity and cohesion of social groups, ensuring the stability and functionality of social structures. Socialisation can be viewed as a process through which a person is guided to develop their own behaviour in agreement with the standards of their group.

The ideal for integrating youth into society consists in developing a more complex personality of an adolescent with more needs, aspirations, ideals and personal activities, guided by every single thing that involves a part of the system of moral values in a society.

Social integration through sport can be considered as an interactive process of discovering, assimilating and practicing sport values such as fair-play, teamwork, team spirit, devotion, dedication, competence, competition, commitment, tolerance, non-violence, etc. Sport or, more exactly, its systematic practice in an organized environment aims to achieve this process of social integration.

By its increasingly obvious quality and sociability (potential interaction with people from different backgrounds in relatively easy material and environmental conditions), the football game can increase the social inclusion ability and combat exclusion among young people in risk categories generated by disabilities or the economic situation (Grigore & Badea, 2017, p. 89).

Social inclusion through sport activities involves several aspects: the legislative one – related to the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reducing and the Strategic Action Plan for the period 2015-2020; the pedagogical one – related to adapting the requirements, strategies and programmes for children and young adults at risk of social exclusion; the social one – related to the importance of the relationships and interactions between teenagers who are in risk situations or at risk of social exclusion, but also to the programme coordinators, teachers and their groups.

“Sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs aim to teach life skills to youth within a physical activity context. An explicit objective of most SBYD programs is that youth learn to apply, or transfer, life skills beyond the sports program.” (Hemphill, Gordon, & Wright, 2019, p. 390)

Relevant aspects deeply connected to school- or professionally-oriented personal effectiveness, such as communication style, response capabilities, reactivity particularities (simple reaction time, differentiation reaction time), vigilance efficiency, behavioural stability in monotonous or disturbing settings, perceptual motor accuracy and learning ability, eye-hand coordination, etc., were studied by Pelin, Mitrache and Ciolcă (2016, p. 71).

Topic Addressed

The research is based on the results of the project “Strategies for the future, strategies for youth”, which mainly aimed to increase the level of social inclusion and combat exclusion for teenagers in social categories at risk due to their physical disabilities or the economic status through specific strategies based on sport activities. Also, through counselling and training activities, the project has directly contributed to improving the knowledge of a large number of specialists in physical education, sport and physiotherapy, as well as of the regional authorities, private sector and civil society, parents and legal guardians of the young people in the target group (TG), who have gained new specific knowledge. Sport activities also continue throughout the 5-year period of sustainability.

During the project, the analysis of the main and secondary needs of the target group has taken into consideration the creation of the long-term strategy and methodologies through which the social inclusion of young people can be achieved. The methodologies designed within the project provide specialists with the opportunities and the specific theoretical instruments generated by sport, as well as the methodological indications to reach the desired effect, in terms of social integration by practicing different sports (basketball, football and gymnastics) suitable for children and youth in risk situations, but also for people with physical disabilities.

The project indicators are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Project indicators*

Indicators	Total planned value
The number of young adults, direct beneficiaries of the project:	245
- Of which, the number of Romani young adults	62
- Of which, females	95
- Of which, males	150
- Of which, the number of professionally evaluated and counselled young adults	145
- Of which, the number of young adults with special educational needs, motor and mental disabilities	24
- Of which, somatically and functionally tested	222
- Of which, tested from a psychomotor point of view	89
- Of which, psychologically tested	125
- Of which, participants in gymnastics activities	23
- Of which, participants in football activities	219
- Of which, participants in basketball activities	220
The number of specialists/employees providing services for children and young adults in different vulnerable groups, who have acquired new knowledge and specific skills:	120
- Of which, the number of professionally counselled and guided specialists	120
The number of studies/investigations	6
The number of information campaigns	2
Interactive sessions between TG respondents, School inspectorates and PP/P1	2 (30 participants)
Scientific communication session at the University	1 (15 participants)
Interactive sessions with the parents of young adults in the main TG	4 (40 participants)

The research aims to find out the opinions of 120 specialists, experts and parents, and also the opinions of 245 teenagers aged between 16 and 29 years, participants in the project “Strategies for the future, strategies for youth”, which is now in the sustainability period . The questionnaires were applied to each target group.

Results

Following the application of the questionnaire, some issues have been highlighted as research directions:

A. Type of activities performed during the project

For 93.87% of teenagers in the target group, the sport activities performed during the project (football, basketball and gymnastics) represented a beneficial response to their needs (Figure 1).

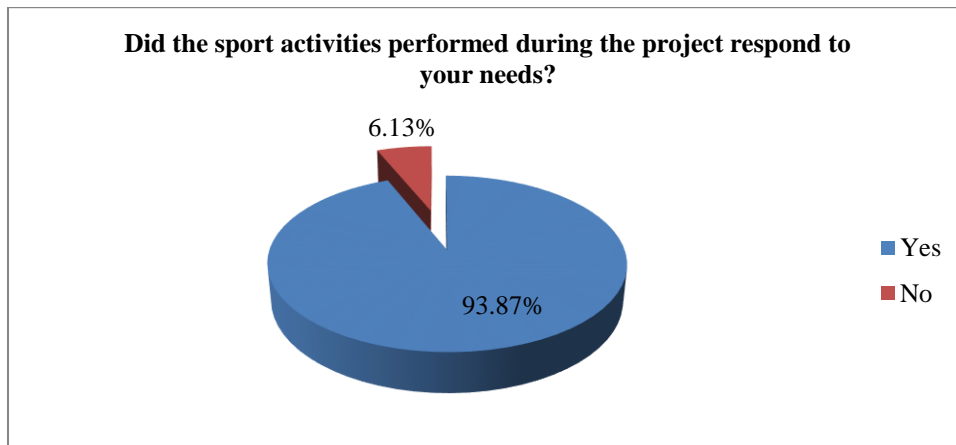


Figure 1. Did the sport activities performed during the project respond to your needs?

One hundred twenty-one teenagers in the target group (49.38%) wanted such sport activities to take place. The majority (77.14%) opted for practicing sport games such as handball, volleyball or tennis and wanted much more sport competitions. "Team sports provide children and youth in general more opportunities to develop both physically and socially, and physical activities performed with other children allow them to develop social skills by interacting with other colleagues." (Sopa & Pomohaci, 2016, p. 352)

The basketball game consists of a series of player actions in the various phases of attack or defence, which are applied while fighting with the opponents, by observing the rules of the game. The game techniques reflect the possibility of chaining the means, and their use is ruled by reason under the ever-changing conditions of the fight with one's opponents and the collaboration with one's partners. (Ghițescu, 2016, p. 114)

The questions asked to specialists in the target group referred to both the need for implementing projects exclusively designed for children/teenagers at risk of social exclusion and whether these activities could meet the needs of the current Romanian society. Most specialists (88.34%) believe that the projects exclusively designed for children/teenagers at risk of social exclusion are a necessity for the youth (Figure 2).

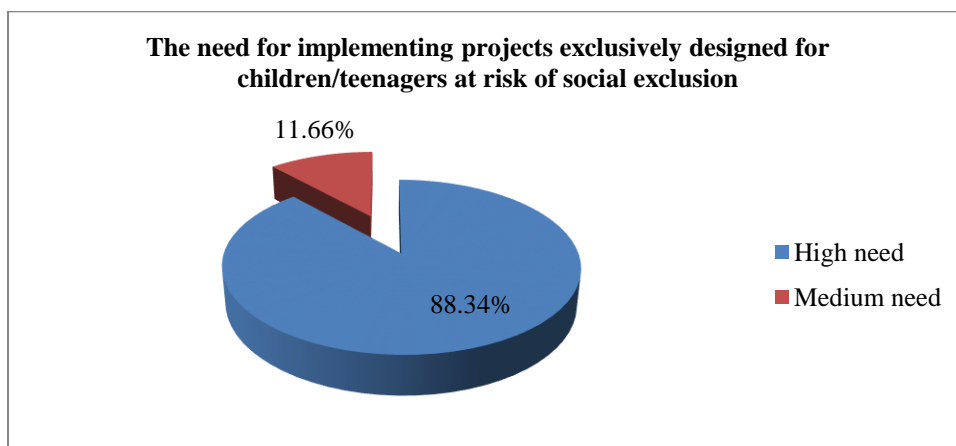


Figure 2. The need for implementing projects exclusively designed for children/teenagers at risk of social exclusion

According to the project specialists, 22.33% of them think that these social integration activities do not meet the needs of the current society, but 77.66% consider that these activities support the Romanian youth and also give arguments for their opinions (Figure 3). The number of projects promoting long-term free sport activities for the youth at risk of social exclusion should increase. Poverty prevents a lot of teenagers from practicing a sport and thus reaching performance.

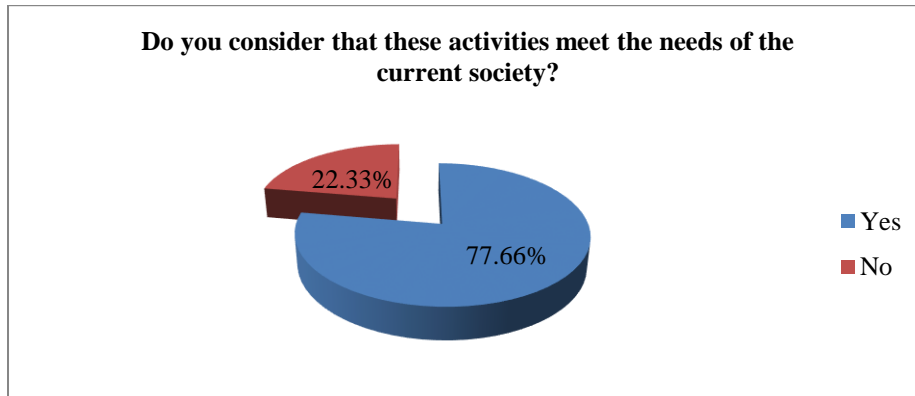


Figure 3. Do you consider that these activities meet the needs of the current society?

B. The impact of project activities on young people and specialists

Most of the teenagers involved in the project (87.75%) believe that the topics addressed in the focus groups during the meetings with experts and the counselling meetings are very useful in everyday life and for social inclusion.

Young adults think that training courses and the discussion with specialists are also useful, but sport activities are the actions with direct involvement and immediate effects. Thus, they can receive immediate feedback on their level of participation and the interaction between members of the main target group, which is why they consider motor activities as the actional essence of the entire project. Young adults tend to evaluate their actions through quick feedback by relating to their own needs, and motor activities provide them with optimal support to meet these needs (according to the results of the study performed in 2016 by the Foundation for Education, within the project "Strategies for the future, strategies for youth").

All specialists involved in the project (100%) participated in workshops, focus groups, symposiums and interactive sessions and responded that all the information acquired during the project implementation has helped them very much in their professional and relational work with teenagers to accomplish the "mission" named social inclusion (Figure 4).

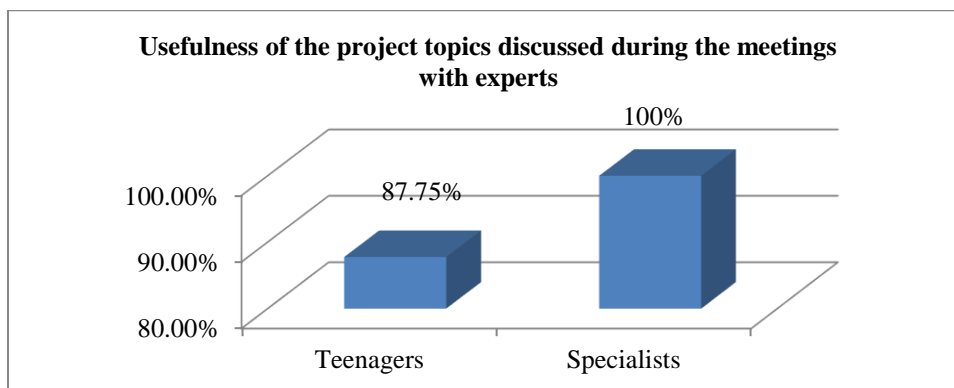


Figure 4. Usefulness of the project topics discussed during the meetings with experts

The majority of teenagers (88.9%) were pleased with the consultancy provided by the project experts. For specialists, the percent was 100 (Figure 5). Each specialist assessed in a positive way the content of the methodologies designed within the project and the methodological indications offered in relation to the different categories of vulnerability of the youth who took part in the project.

The methodologies contain a wide view on the methodological sequence of the actuation systems, providing exercises that can be performed at both beginner and advanced levels within the work programmes aimed at integrating young adults at risk of social exclusion through sport activities.

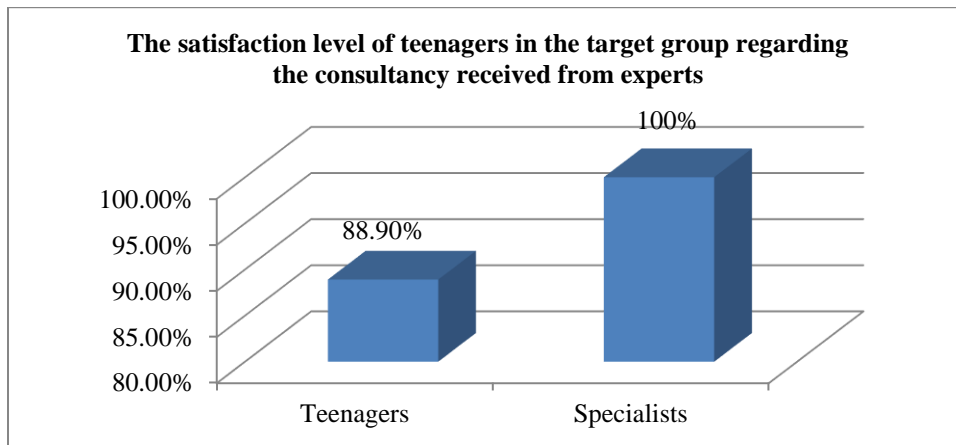


Figure 5. The satisfaction level of teenagers in the target group regarding the consultancy received from experts

In physical activities, certain positive attributes of personality are developed, providing a favourable environment for the acquisition of social skills, values and behaviours. [...] The systematic practice of sport activities in an organized environment achieves this process of integrating those with problems by supporting the socio-educational side, a therapeutic one. (Grigore & Stănică Gavrilăscu, 2017, p. 407)

All teenagers in the target group were helped by the sport activities carried out during the project to integrate more easily into society. 93.87% of adolescents spent their time in an agreeable and useful way with the help of these activities, 98.36% developed friendship relationships, 35.5% said that the activities specified above contributed to maintaining their health status, and 2.44% were sufficiently motivated to practice a sport to achieve performance (Figure 6).

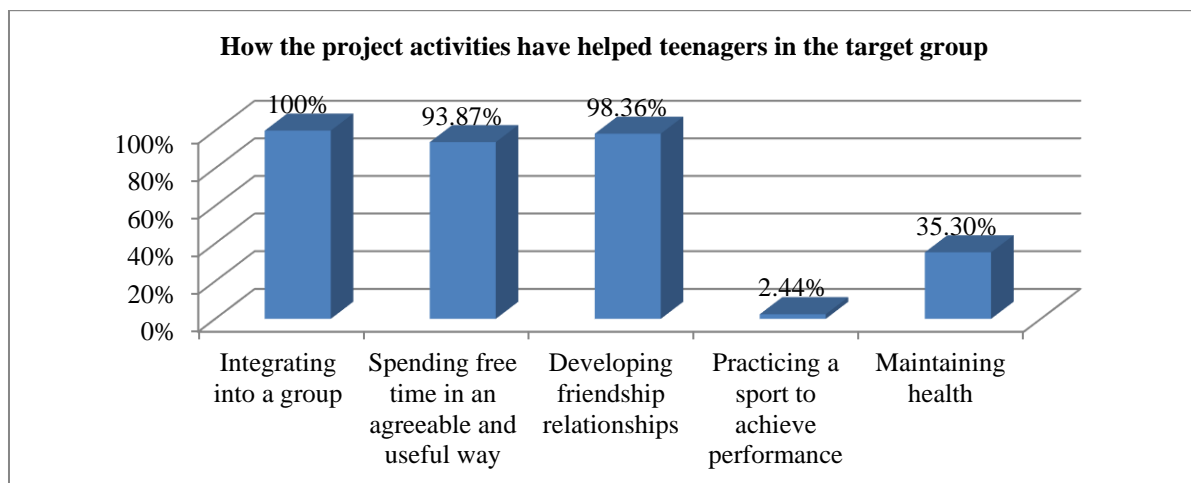


Figure 6. How the project activities have helped teenagers in the target group

C. Possibilities for the continuous implementation of activities

The commitment of teenagers in the target group to practice the project-related activities is shown in the following statistics: 81.6% monthly, 51% weekly, 28.61% occasionally and 2.44% daily (Figure 7).

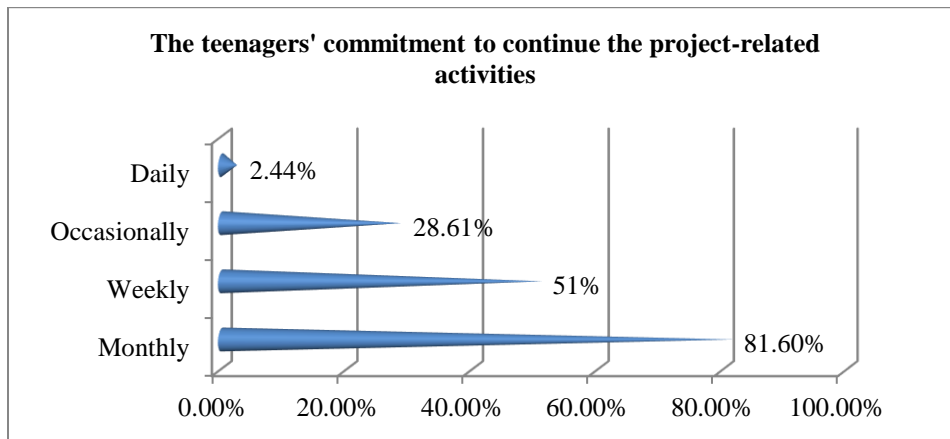


Figure 7. The teenagers' commitment to continue the project-related activities

Regarding the project specialists, all 120 said that, taking into consideration the very nice and useful experience for the personal and professional activity they had during the project, they would recommend to other organizations and institutions to collaborate with the National University of Physical Education and Sport and the Foundation for Education for other projects. Even though all 120 specialists believed that sport activities would prevent children and teenagers from social exclusion, 80% said that these activities might reduce school dropout, while 20% responded in the negative (Figure 8).

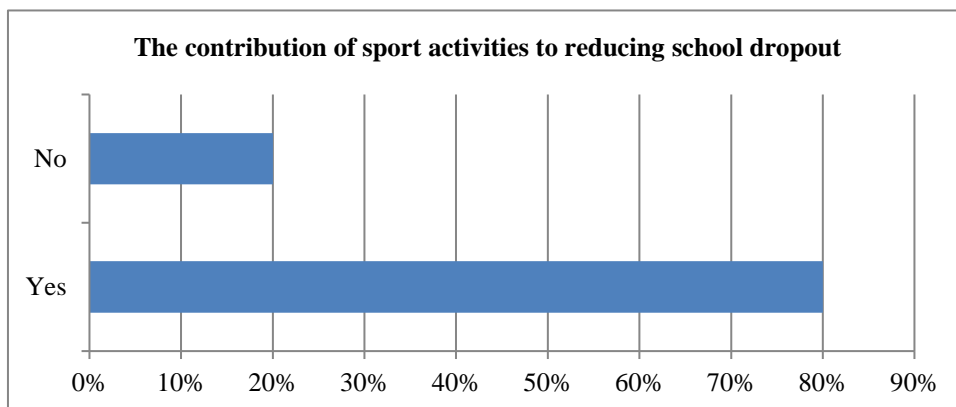


Figure 8. The contribution of sport activities to reducing school dropout

Conclusion

According to the results obtained after applying the questionnaire, we have concluded the following:

- Sport activities remain the most useful activities to increase the level of youth integration, prevent social exclusion and reduce school dropout.
- Opportunities for adolescents to practice a sport or different sport activities should be developed and increased until they become a lifestyle for youth people, taking into consideration that they are very dedicated to this type of activities. Their predominant preferences in the field of sport are: football, basketball, handball, volleyball and tennis. Team activities are much more attractive and help increase social inclusion.
- Teenagers with mental and physical disabilities also prefer gymnastics. Special programmes of physical activities for young adults with disabilities and unified sport activities should be designed and implemented.
- Specialists in the field should cooperate more and be more devoted to youth education, offering them a multitude of strategies, programmes and projects.

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