

The Inclusive Practice Of Blind Soccer At The INEFJA¹ : Lessons From An Experiment

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to understand how the social inclusion of visually impaired people can be achieved through the practice of Blind Soccer. The aim is to contribute to a better approach to Blind Soccer that promotes the social inclusion of visually impaired players. The methodology adopted is based on a field study using an interview guide and direct observation of events at the point of production. The results show that Blind Soccer is an inclusive sport that is of vital importance to visually impaired people. Apart from the advantages it brings in terms of inclusion for people with disabilities, the practice of Blind Soccer leaves much to be desired due to the lack of financial means and qualified human resources, the non-existence of adapted sports equipment, the unsuitability of infrastructures, etc. The results show that the practice of Blind Soccer is very important for people with visual impairments.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion, visual impairment, sport, Blind Soccer, INEFJA

1. INTRODUCTION

Senegal, like other countries, has developed initiatives to promote people with disabilities, of which sport is one component. Studies (Landry, 1975; Bouchard et al, 1974) have shown that physical and sporting activity provides physical, psychological, cognitive and social benefits for all participants, including young people with disabilities. Deprived of the visual information that would make it easier for them to take part in sport, visually impaired people need specific adaptations and appropriate equipment to be able to take part.

All citizens, regardless of their individual characteristics, have the right to sport (UN, 2006) and mixed interactions or contacts (moments when normal and stigmatized people share the same social situation, in other words, are physically close to each other) (Goffman, 1975: 23) can play a significant role in the level of social inclusion. For visually impaired people, access to practice can be a means of social participation in open spaces where disabled and non-disabled people can interact and get to know each other better.

The National Institute for the Education and Training of Young Blind People (INEFJA) offers a wide range of sporting activities for people with visual impairments. Blind Soccer, a modern handisport discipline that uses a sound ball to make it easier for visually impaired people to play football, is one of the sports options on offer. Sanchez and Zanger (2007) consider that regular practice of Blind Soccer enables visually impaired people to further develop their hearing, improve their mobility, sense of direction and concentration, react more quickly and feel sportier. It is used at the INEFJA as an inclusive sport in the sense that it is a mixed sport between the 'able-bodied' and the 'blind'. When it is practiced in the company of able-bodied people, it helps them to change the way they look at people with disabilities. It is then the potential of the latter that is observed, rather than their disability. INEFJA is the only place where Blind Soccer is played in Senegal.

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Playing Blind Soccer enables visually impaired people to develop a number of qualities that can facilitate their social inclusion.

The main question structuring this research is as follows: how can playing Blind Soccer be a means of inclusion for visually impaired people at INEFJA? A qualitative field study provided some answers to this question.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research took place at the INEFJA, which served as the setting for the actual field survey, corresponding to the collection of data from the various stakeholders. The survey involved administering the interview guide to members of the technical staff (3), teachers (2), administrators of the institute (3) and Blind Soccer players (6), and direct observation of Blind Soccer sessions organized on Wednesday and Saturday evenings for competitions and leisure activities. The diversity of the players interviewed gave us a multi-faceted view of the phenomenon under study. The semi-directive interview technique was used to conduct the survey with all of the above-mentioned stakeholders, and fourteen (14) interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed. The information gathered through observation enabled a better understanding of certain aspects of the interviewees' discourse, fragments of which are included in the text to support the analysis.

3. THE BENEFITS OF PLAYING BLIND SOCCER FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Sport plays a very important role in the INEFJA's regulations. It enables the visually impaired to take part in activities aimed at functional rehabilitation, especially in terms of motor skills. According to a member of the management team, *"sport at INEFJA is as important as any other subject, and it's not something to be treated as a poor relation, but as a compulsory subject, because teachers are obliged to practice sport every week. At INEFJA we have coaches and a PE teacher for sports in general and Blind Soccer in particular"*. Dynamic and spectacular, Blind Soccer has many advantages and, for those who play it, helps them to acquire greater autonomy and independence in their daily lives. It also helps to create social links, promote diversity and develop self-confidence. Sport plays a role in improving the well-being of its participants. *"Sport transforms our self-image and the image we project to others. It changes attitudes and behavior"* (Palier, 2010: 5). It enables self-assertion and self-building in the eyes of others. According to the teacher we interviewed, *"playing Blind Soccer for the visually impaired is a form of self-affirmation. Blind people who play sport want to assert themselves like everyone else. They are an individual like any other and must practice sport in their own way and according to their own abilities"*. In this respect, the words of respondent 3, a disabled player, are quite eloquent: *"playing Blind Soccer replaces a sport that I'll never be able to do: football. Blind Soccer is a sport that suits my disability. I didn't think there were adapted sports like this"*. Playing this adapted sport has a social benefit, as visually impaired people are more independent and have easier access to a full social life. The increasingly sedentary lifestyle that characterizes the members of our so-called consumer societies has harmful effects on health, and playing Blind Soccer helps visually impaired people to combat certain illnesses more effectively. According to one of the Blind Soccer supervisors at INEFJA, *"to avoid becoming sedentary, putting on weight or catching a disease, playing sport is important. We needed to set up a system to enable visually impaired people to take part in sport, so that they don't become sedentary, put on weight or catch a disease, and sport is very interesting from this point of view. We're lucky enough to have the only Blind Soccer pitch in Senegal that meets the standards"*. Behind the organization of Blind Soccer competitions, there is a real desire to combat sedentary lifestyles, isolation, segregation and discrimination, and to enable all visually impaired people to enjoy the benefits of the sport. In the opinion of this member of the institute's administration, *"the organization of Blind Soccer championships will certainly bear fruit in the years to come, and we may have someone who understands more about the benefits of playing for the blind"*.

4. SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH BLIND SOCCER

Playing Blind Soccer can be a way of promoting the inclusion of vulnerable groups in community life. Sport brings together athletes, coaches, officials, participants and spectators from different social groups. A physical education and sports teacher interviewed explained that:

"Playing Blind Soccer is a step towards social inclusion in that it enables them to take part in a sporting activity like everyone else. It allows them to come into direct contact with their able-bodied peers and to exchange ideas. When the visually impaired pupils are out on the pitch playing Blind Soccer, there are able-bodied people there to watch and take an interest in what the visually impaired are doing. This meeting brings together able-bodied and non-able-bodied people, i.e. the visually impaired. As soon as they share an activity together, inclusion starts from there".

Playing Blind Soccer at INEFJA creates an environment conducive to awareness, tolerance, the creation of a harmonious society and the celebration of diversity. For this coach, *"integrating able-bodied people into the game of Blind Soccer necessarily means blindfolding them to put them on the same footing as visually impaired people. Blind Soccer is generally played at both national and international level by players who can't see, and as soon as there's someone who can see,*

they have to be blindfolded to improve balance in the game. The rules of the game state that outfield players must not be able to see anything apart from the goalkeepers". Blind Soccer is played in schools and universities with just 2 blind players in each team and the other 3 sighted players. They all play in the dark throughout the match. This promotes inclusion.

Coeducational Blind Soccer is an important way of promoting the social inclusion of the visually impaired. The INEFJA is aware of the contribution that sports can make to the social inclusion of its residents. From a segregated practice to a practice with others (Garel et Al, 1992), physical and sporting activities can play a revealing role and form the basis of a genuine personal project for young people who are often marginalized and lacking in prospects and initiative. Mixed sport involves bringing visually impaired and able-bodied people together to play Blind Soccer. The so-called "able-bodied" often come to the institute to play Blind Soccer with the visually impaired, with the aim of surpassing themselves by trying to adapt to the established rules and discovering *"the universally human essence of self and other"* (De Martino, 1980). Blind Soccer can be adapted for the visually impaired by having them wear a mask that covers their eyes. INEFJA is used to introducing sighted people to Blind Soccer and uses the sport as a way of raising awareness of disability. The sessions are divided into two parts: understanding disability and discovering Blind Soccer, which tries to project the sighted person as much as possible into the skin of a person with a disability. According to this PE teacher, who is also part of the technical team:

"Championships are organised here at INEFJA. We took the former footballing glories of Thiès and blindfolded them to show them the difficulties that blind people face on the pitch and also to show them that just because someone is blind doesn't mean they can't play. The able-bodied players managed to play well and score goals. But it wasn't easy for them because they automatically lost their bearings because they had been blindfolded. This mix only raises awareness on both sides and helps to better understand the blind. And it shows just how important it is to play with blind people. And it shows just how important it is to play with blind people."

An experience like this brings visually impaired people out of isolation and makes them forget their disability. Playing Blind Soccer helps to put disability into perspective and to play it down. The visually impaired rebuild a positive *"self-image"* in rewarding situations. For this visually impaired player: *"Playing together gives me a positive self-image. It helps me to like myself. I need to assert myself. It's a way for me to fulfil my potential. Blind Soccer lets you move around and express yourself. Blind Soccer has done something for me thanks to its different atmosphere. Jason Smith, double Paralympic champion in the 100 and 200 metres, in 2008 and 2012, adds: "Sport helps us to develop the right mental and social attitudes, it allows us to be like everyone else, to get involved in society. So we should be supporting mixed sports (rather than competition), especially for young people".* Sport can help in the gradual transformation of society towards *"better living together"*.

5. THE BENEFITS OF PLAYING MIXED BLIND SOCCER

Sport was first used as a means of medical treatment for disability. It was used for medical rehabilitation through functional re-education, the main discipline of which is physiotherapy. The treatment of disability should also be social, to better integrate or include people with disabilities in everyday life, rather than simply correcting a physical anomaly. Sport has proved to be a relevant means of bringing disabled people and the so-called "able-bodied" population closer together (Thiombane, 1983).

Playing Blind Soccer creates social links, especially when it is done in heterogeneous groups. It promotes encounters between "blind" and "able-bodied" people, with a view to the social inclusion of the former. This social mix is based on values founded on respect for rules, for others and for oneself. Playing together helps the visually impaired to feel valued again, to develop a spirit of surpassing oneself and to understand others who are different from oneself. For this visually impaired player:

"The benefit is first and foremost the joy or interest felt in relation to the activity carried out. It's an inner, moral satisfaction. Beyond this inner satisfaction, there's something else the body needs. Hearing the public rejoice over something I do in the field necessarily gives me satisfaction because people recognise my abilities. So I'm not blind in my hands or legs. Beyond my blindness, I show people that with my legs I can do something and that's self-affirmation. You can also get to know important people through Blind Soccer. Talking to people who play Blind Soccer at the INEFJA, talking to sighted people, it's a way of standing out and saying that I exist".

Coeducational activities help to promote the mental well-being of people with disabilities by creating social links. It helps to boost self-esteem, confidence in one's abilities and understanding, and enables them to measure themselves against the 'able-bodied'. With a view to mutual understanding, the institute's director believes that *"in general, what the able-bodied can benefit from this mix is quite simply a better understanding of the blind. In fact, when you're blindfolded and find yourself in total darkness for just a few minutes of the game, you better understand the other person who is in this situation"*

for ever. This helps the sighted person to understand and appreciate the visual handicap. The blind person also learns that it's normal not to be able to see, and that there's nothing wrong with that.

At Blind Soccer tournaments, players travel and meet other sighted people (coaches, players, etc.). They seek visibility and statutory recognition of their personal identity. Visually impaired players break with their social isolation at competitions. This gives them the opportunity to broaden their knowledge, to make other exchanges, to extend the limits of their knowledge of the world. They recognize their disability and no longer want to be ignored by sighted people. Through sport, they want to be known and recognized as people. *"I like to be known and recognized. I see Blind Soccer players as myself. We experience certain moments of emotion together, of a desire to share common things. There's something strong between us"*, explains one player. Practicing Blind Soccer strengthens both their "self- identity" and their social identity, and prepares them to take the next steps.

6. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN PLAYING BLIND SOCCER

Sports for the visually impaired at the INEFJA are still facing difficulties that are holding back its real development. The difficulties encountered by Blind Soccer relate to sports equipment, the training² of the players (coaches and/or trainers, players, officials, etc.) who are directly involved on the pitch, the quality of the infrastructure used to host the activities, etc. A number of problems are described by one of our key informants:

"The main problem with sports for the blind is equipment. At the moment, we don't even have Blind Soccer balls, and they're very expensive (50,000 CFA francs each) and they're not sold in Senegal. The referees have no equipment and the players have no shoes to play in. Training is also a problem. Apart from the Belgians who come every year to train us in sports for the visually impaired, we rely on our own experience and limited resources to fund and train blind players. The availability of coaches is a problem, as some of them hold positions of responsibility.

From an infrastructure point of view, there is still work to be done, because the pitch we have should have one-metre borders on all four sides. Unfortunately, when the ball goes out, we have to go and get it from the garden, which means we have to stop play and waste time.

In addition to the problems linked to the lack of qualified human resources in terms of quantity and quality for the supervision of Blind Soccer and the equipment necessary for its practice in acceptable conditions, the question of financing remains an equation to be solved for the promotion of handisport in general and sport adapted to the characteristics of the visually impaired in particular. In the words of the INEFJA sports manager, the financial situation is clear:

"Finance is a problem because without the support of the Belgians, Blind Soccer would never have existed here in Senegal. We don't have the support of the Senegalese state for the sport. Even with the organization of the Blind Soccer championships, which require a lot of resources, the INEFJA staff sometimes contribute financially, or it's the Belgians who come up with their own money to finance the championships because they know that the students love Blind Soccer. The Senegalese disabled sports federation doesn't provide the means to encourage people to take part in competitions. It's just there for the opening and closing of the championship. No budget has been set aside for supervising the sport. Even the members who have to coach the team have to pay their own way, and that's difficult. We receive very meagre financial support, which doesn't even allow us to reward our players. Despite all the difficulties, the pupils are still playing Blind Soccer "

These problems must be addressed by sports leaders and political decision-makers to enable visually impaired people to benefit fully from sport, in the name of the right to sport for all and the consolidation of the process of democratizing sport.

7. CONCLUSION

Today, people with disabilities are at the heart of a new dynamic: inclusion. The concept of inclusion may be fashionable, but social inclusion is still a challenge. The INEFJA is firmly committed to this dynamic of inclusion, particularly through the practice of Blind Soccer. The institute implements special educational and sporting strategies, using different and adapted situations that take into account the abilities, qualities and differences of each individual. Playing Blind Soccer is an important part of the INEFJA's program, and forms part of a structured life plan that is seen as a positive factor in the acquisition of a degree of motor and social independence.

The implementation of sport within the INEFJA, particularly through the practice of Blind Soccer, fosters a process of transformation in social relations between disabled and non- disabled people. This process of transformation is at the heart of the unconditional acceptance of disabled sportspeople into society. The sports offered at INEFJA, and in this case the inclusive sport of Blind Soccer, are centered on developing the individual's capacities by affirming their difference and sharing common values with the sporting community. Promoting a sports policy for all by adapting sporting activities to different types of disability to facilitate openness to the outside world is a key element in the successful social inclusion of people with special needs.

² Training and expertise are the guarantee of ethical intervention that respects the specific needs of each individual

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