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Inclusive Coach between Theory and Practice

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Abstract

In the first part, the study (through a pedagogical approach) outlines the theoretical characteristics of an inclusive coach, after clarifying the concept of inclusive sport. In the second part, the study present the data from a survey conducted on 70 Baskin (Integrated Basketball) coaches working with 53 Baskin clubs in Italy. Baskin is an inclusive sport in which people with disabilities (of various types) and people without disabilities play together in the same team, through a series of rules and roles that allow everyone to participate, based on the principles of accessibility and equal opportunities.

Through a questionnaire for baskin coaches, the analysis focuses on the following topics: 1. Education; 2. Motivation and interest in working in the field of inclusive sports; 3. The skills of the inclusive coach; 4. Any training needs. The aim is to clarify which training, such as skills, must embrace an inclusive coach in order to provide an innovative university education.

Keywords: inclusive coach, sport, education, inclusion

Introduction

Before addressing the topic of the inclusive coach, and therefore inclusive training, a conceptual introduction is needed, as the first part of this essay, to clarify what we mean by inclusive sport and present a theoretical model. The model and inclusive sport would be meaningless without the coach, who provides a practical understanding of the theoretical and methodological aspects, and ensures that all the people involved have the same possibilities of expression, regardless of their health conditions. This theoretical first part is essential to outline the basic aspects of what we define as the inclusive coach, in terms of skills and characteristics, with specific focus on the training required. In the second part, the study presents the data from a survey conducted on 70 Baskin coaches working with 53 Baskin clubs in Italy, (total of 4072 athletes, including 350 with disabilities, Baskin Census, 2015)¹. These are affiliated with sports promotional bodies and participate in regional championships. The coaches were given a questionnaire to fill out (sent and returned via e-mail), which was divided into ten items with the aim of shedding light on the following topics: 1. Education: to establish whether this was in the field of inclusive education, motor development-sports, neither of these, or both; 2. Motivation and interest in working in the field of inclusive sports; 3. The skills of the inclusive coach (to be listed - multiple choice - from some suggested items, divided into three macro areas: inclusive education skills, cross-sector skills, technical and sporting skills); 4. Any training needs.

Baskin is a practical realization (one of many possibilities) of inclusive sport model. Baskin (or Integrated Basketball), is a sport in which people with disabilities (of various types) and people without disabilities play together in the same team, through a series of rules and roles that allow everyone to participate.

We have examined and approached this research through the lens of Special Education. Italian pedagogical studies over the last decade (De Anna, 2009; Cunti, 2011; Moliterni, 2013; Magnanini, 2015) have sought, from an educational perspective, to establish the scientific and methodological prerequisites for creating a series of sports activities that are educationally based and oriented, accessible and truly practicable, not merely for socialization or recreation purposes, but that preserve the essential characteristics of sport.

An educational approach means care for individuals in every aspect, with focus on building relationships, autonomy, motivations and interests, promoting growth and encouraging people to face challenges. This is why sport is a privileged area... but why inclusive?

Special Pedagogy is centered on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the socio-cultural context in terms of education and creation of a common world (Canevaro, 2000; de Anna, 2014). It is a short step: if education for all is an attainable goal (proven by the events in Italian schools in the 1970s, de Anna, 1998), then why not try to make a sporting activity that is accessible and enjoyed by all? In other words, why not make it a practical example of inclusion, fully mindful that inclusion is not merely putting people together, but building a working system in which each one, in their own specific way, can make their own contribution to the realization of the system. Is this a utopia for sport?

Article 30 of the 2006 UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities not only reaffirms the right of persons with disabilities to engage in sport, but suggests their doing so in "mainstream" rather than "exclusive" activities, where not only physical but also structural

¹ Baskin Census 2015, in www.baskin.it (last access October 2017)

accessibility is possible. Structural, in this case, refers to a series of "reasonable accommodation" measures (to use the terms of the convention) in order to make training sessions functional and the "game" truly played by and adapted to all². This does not only mean adapting traditional sports but also creating new activities that can meet the needs of people with disabilities to be with others, including people without disabilities, and to compete in a welcoming sports environment where everyone's abilities are valued. This need is also reflected by the success of the European integrated sports project promoted by the Italian National Educational Sports Centre (CSEN), which organised events and competitions in 12 Italian cities in May 2015, with the participation of over 5,000 athletes (with and without disabilities) in integrated sports (www.csen.it).

The inclusive sports model, which I will try to explain briefly, is the result of work conducted in the Inclusive Teaching and Education Workshop at the Foro Italico University of Rome (directed by Prof. de Anna and Prof. Moliterni). Through publications, seminars, conferences, master's programs and the creation of a sports association for students with and without disabilities (ACEMIS), it has focused on creating a positive dialogue between physical education and the educational sciences, making a major contribution to the development of Integrated Sports. We have tried to bring the educational and training methods tested in inclusive educational environments (tutoring, cooperative approaches and task culture, to give some examples) to the sporting world, through the theory-practice circle, so that they could become new tools for operators in this sector. This model is aimed at paving the way for developing concrete proposals for inclusive sports.

Integrated sport for inclusion

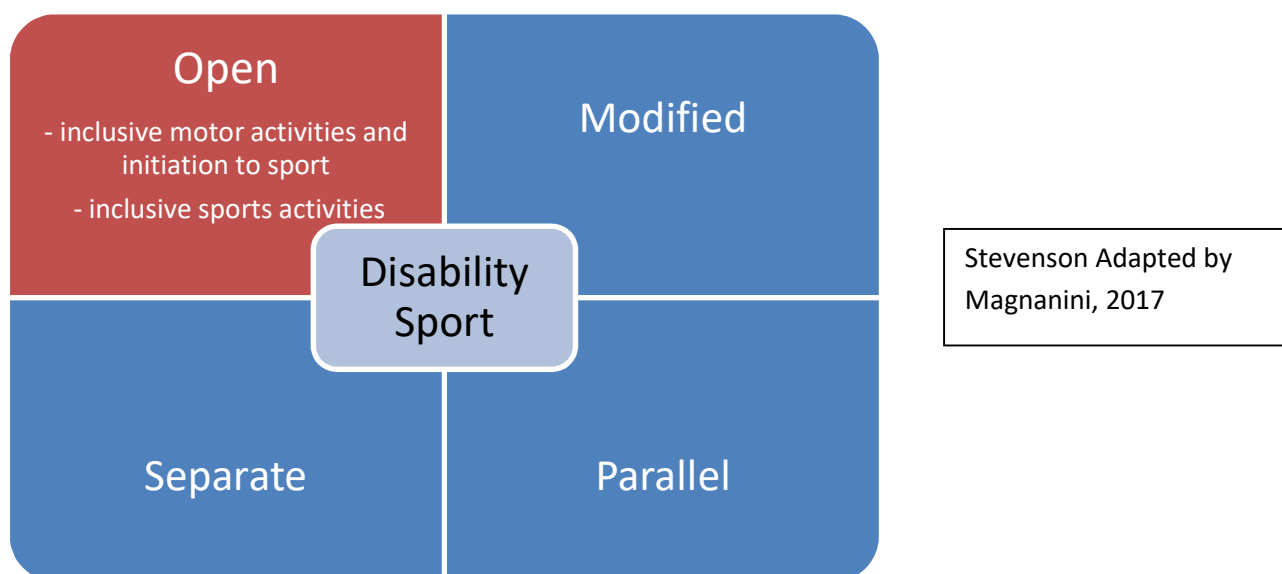
Internationally, Great Britain has been most active in this field, together with scholars from Australia and Ireland, seeking to develop sporting practices for people with disabilities, with significant consequences for the training system in terms of full participation by the athletes, overcoming the concept of sport adapted (Wilhite, Mushett, Goldenberg, Trader, 1997; Sherrill, 1998; Sorensen, Kahrs, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2009). Goodwin and Peers highlights that "mainstreaming, within a sport context, refers to the participation of all youth within sport programs designed for, and made up mostly of, those who do not experience disabilities" (2012, 189). Some youth sport programs have endeavored to remove disabling barriers in order to integrate a wider variety of athletes into the same activities. Examples included integrated youth cricket... where all youth people play together (189).

Starting from Integration continuum for sport participation (Winnick, 1987), David Tillotson and Ken Blach (1996, in Fitzgerald, 2009) produced the inclusion spectrum, which create a circular format and provided more detailed explanation and examples of each approach. The different strategies for participation could be adopted but that no one strategy is superior to another.

The inclusion spectrum provides an activity-center approach to the inclusion of pupils who have different abilities in physical activity (Stevenson, 2009, 125). Abilities, not disabilities.

Our model, pedagogically based, focuses in the direction of OPEN ACTIVITIES, with the aim of expanding them.

² *International Paralympic Committee, the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Bonn, 2012, p. 7.*



They can be divided into inclusive motor activities and initiation to sport on the one hand, and structured inclusive sports activities on the other. All come under the model of "integrated sport".

A study of the pedagogical and sports literature (Le Boulch, 1991; Parlebas, 1997; Arnald, 2002) has enabled us to identify the elements (keywords-indicators) that characterize its basic structure.

These are composed of educational principles and sports principles, confirming the dialogue we mentioned earlier: Principles of Special Education: 1. Accessibility, 2. Acceptance, 3. Education for all, 4. Equal opportunities, 5. Active participation, 6. Cooperation, 7. Diversity as a resource. Principles of sport: 1. Play, 2. Fun, 3. Comparison-competition, 4. Rules-coding, 5. Competitive spirit, 6. Professionalisation, 7. Official and commonly accepted rules.

We can therefore summarize the criteria for integrated sport as follows:

1. The centrality of the person;
2. The participation of people with different health conditions and various disabilities;
3. Roles defined on the basis of skills and not disabilities,
4. Rules with possible exceptions, therefore including flexibility,
5. Codified spaces,
6. Competitiveness,
7. Competition,
8. Enjoyment,
9. Active participation with equal opportunities;
10. Adaptation of equipment and materials, if necessary, but not of the objectives.

We can therefore define integrated sport as a series of gymnastic, game, exercise or movement activities practiced together by able-bodied people and people with disabilities (of various degrees), whether recreationally or professionally, for the purpose of competitive challenge, where each player, through relatively intense physical effort, improves their own potential, based on equal opportunities and active participation, through flexible rules that allow for individual characteristics. This definition clearly reflects the three elements of special education that ensure the inclusiveness of sport: accessibility (to places, but especially to activities), active participation and equal opportunities (ensured by the rules). The principle of active participation brings us directly to training and how it should be organised.

We have developed some "pedagogical" phases for this, which we believe should characterize the moments of any training considered to be integrated. Training in itself is already an educational challenge, because it calls for commitment to strive to achieve continuously improved results, which have consequences for the entire well-being of the individual.

Training can be divided into five phases, each comprising targeted exercises: 1. Acquaintance and acceptance (building relationships); 2. Building confidence; 3. Cooperating in small or large groups (including personalised exercises if necessary), 4. Playing (technical training), 5. Thinking together.

In step 4, coaches can use the STEPS methods if the conditions of the athletes require special modifications. The STEPS formula provides a framework for coaches to make changes to their coaching in the areas of SPACE, TASK, EQUIPMENT, PEOPLE and SPEED. Not all athletes require the same adaptation, so special attention is required in assessing needs and skills in order to organize the most effective training plan.

It is essential to turn activities into an inclusive way and to create a specific activity for everyone.

It is very important the phase in which the involved people get to know each other and, as well the phase in which all the activities and strategies are addressed towards a cooperative approach to working, and so not only based on the exclusive adaptation of the activity. It must be stressed that training sessions are carried out together, at the same times and in the same places, with assistance from one's companions, if necessary, and with personalized moments for particular roles or needs. Throughout the phases we have described, it is essential to remember that training in technical movements can be reinforced by a climate of trust and collaboration, knowledge and the creation of meaningful relationships, all of which are elements obtained through appropriate pedagogical training. Point 5 is fundamental, because it allows both the players and the coach to monitor their own activities.

Inclusive coach: a definition

The complexity of the management, organisation and planning of an integrated sporting activity calls for specific reflection on the coach, in terms of the skills that need to be acquired.

The Italian educational literature has followed up the crucial key role of the trainer as educator (Mantegazza, 1999, Farne 2008, 2010; Milani, 2010, Isidori, 2017) and so did the foreigner literature in this sector (Siedentop, 1994; Launder, 2001; Armour Robyn Jones, Potrac, 2004; Caplan, 2007). However regarding the inclusive coach, the literature is quite poor. There are some guides that teachers can use in order to make their job inclusive but there are none for trainers. To this extent it is significant to recognize the importance of the jobs conducted by M.F. Block, among which, we want to cite: *A teacher's Guide to including students with disabilities in general physical Education* (2007).

The scarcity of studies shows how little is spreaded the inclusive sports activities are.

That is why we want to start giving some theoretical background information, which can clarify how the coach can become educationally inclusive.

I am not referring to a professional figure who works exclusively with people with disabilities in sports (there are various university training courses for these professionals, such as those in

Germany and Denmark), but a new type of coach, capable of working in an "integrated" group, able to combine pedagogical/educational and technical/sports skills to effectively orchestrate a group composed of multiple performance levels and various functional characteristics, inspiring everyone to achieve their best. An inclusive coach must be able to design a training plan tailored to specific needs and must be able to recognise strengths and build on them. Thus, at every stage of its design (observation of reality-needs analysis; drafting objectives, definition of the action plan, implementation of the activities and evaluation) the coach should always view the tasks from both the technical-sports perspective and the educational perceptible, in order to make the most appropriate choices for the group.

Inclusive coaches do not need to be experts on various types of disabilities, they are not doctors, but they must know the people they work with, who happen to have disabilities. They need to know the most useful methods and educational principles for managing groups and achieving significant progress in learning. They must be prepared for uncertainties and the possibility of failure with the variable of disability. This puts them to the test and makes them question their work, in the attempt to lead everyone involved to possible levels of autonomy, even when simply understanding the direction of the basket poses a complex challenge for a person with autism, which calls for a process of continuous generalisation of learning.

Inclusive coaches must be competent coaches, capable of intervening in any situation. Their defining aspect, to emphasise its particularity (I won't dwell on training theories here, as you are all experts on them), is that their knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills enable them to design inclusive training plans, based on pedagogical and inclusive principles, without neglecting the principles of sports and transforming the sessions into therapy, but allowing them to be occasions of growth for all.

In coaching terms, an 'inclusive coach' has the ability to positively and effectively coach a group of people who may have very different needs. A good coach will always be working inclusively because they want everyone in their session to improve. In a session of non-disabled people, there will be different needs within a group, but with disabled athletes, the differences may be highlighted (eg the use of totally different equipment or the length of time a swimmer can stay in the water without getting cold).

An inclusive coaching session cannot be planned without knowledge of the individuals that make up the group. Some strategies that support one person may further exclude another (eg one individual may feel self-conscious when performing individually while another finds group tasks too challenging). Sessions can be made inclusive during their delivery, though, by working with the athletes and discussing with them what is working (or not working) for them.

Some disabled people need little, if any, change to the coaching process and can easily articulate and communicate their needs with the coach. In an individual coaching session, coaches can comfortably discover the best coaching techniques and experiment with adapted equipment and coaching styles, working with the athlete to achieve maximum results.

In a group coaching session, there may be additional issues as athletes may have very different needs and there is not as much time to devote to individuals. There is no magic formula for inclusive coaching, and some athletes have combined and complex needs. The key is to keep communicating with those who are being coached (Quik Guide: Inclusive coaching).

With regard to what we have said so far, we can list eight points defining these professional figures (from general to specific). They must: 1. Have a solid educational background; 2. Know the best ways to assess problems in their professional field, 3. Possess knowledge and technical, theoretical and methodological skills, to be gradually consolidated in their chosen field of operation: specific knowledge of sport. 4. Have a capacity for continuous research in their field; 5. Possess refined communication skills, knowing how to interact with people with communication difficulties; 6. Possess the ability to create meaningful relationships, never based on dependence but on help; 7. Have knowledge in the field of education and inclusion, and of integrated teaching methods; 8. Have the ability to constantly combine technical and special teaching skills in order to plan for full active participation and equal opportunities for all in terms of accessibility.

We have underlined the characteristics that all inclusive coaches must have, and we realise, perhaps, that many of them are qualities that every coach should have!

Research on Baskin coach: education, skills and training needs

This is clear from the research we have done on Baskin coaches. The sport is growing, both in Italy and abroad. It is the only sport that truly allows everyone to participate, based on the principles we described earlier. Currently, until there is a more organised system, to train a Baskin team you simply need to attend the courses organised annually or upon request by the Italian branches of the Cremona Baskin Association, which supervises and organises the entire Baskin movement nationally and internationally, together with the regional delegates. The theoretical and practical course includes a weekend to get to know the game, the rules and the roles, and play it on the court. Aspiring coaches must then develop their knowledge through an internship in a Baskin club and submit a proposal for a training plan to the Association, which will assess its suitability.

Baskin is a sport invented in Cremona in 2003 whose objective is to create an activity literally everyone – girls, boys, the able and those with physical or mental challenges to overcome – can participate in and enjoy to the fullest extent of their abilities (Bodini, Capellini, Magnanini, 2010).

The men who came up with baskin are Antonio Bodini, an engineer by profession and father of a disabled daughter and Fausto Capellini, a P.E. teacher at a local junior high school in Cremona. The idea is simple yet ingenious: a sport inspired by basketball but with modified rules that allow anyone to take part in the game in a meaningful way. No longer do people have to adapt to an existing sport but finally we have a sport that is constructed so that it can adapt to the diversity of those taking part.

Baskin is not an activity that allows some to play and have fun while other “help out” from time to time; baskin makes sure that everyone gets a chance to play a decisive role in the game, each of them making their own contribution and giving their all. In this sense it is no mere game, but an authentic sport with no room for paternalism, where everyone can use their abilities to the maximum in order to win.

From our analysis of the general data from the questionnaires (2016), an identikit of the typical Baskin coach has emerged:

Male (55 out of 70), aged between 30 and 45 years old, from Northern Italy (where the sport is more widespread, with the highest concentration in Lombardy and Piedmont), with a

degree in Physical Education, a diploma from a Physical Education College or a Master's degree in Sport and Physical Education (60 out of 70). This data allows us to make an initial consideration regarding the interest of PE graduates in this specific activity.

With regard to the four areas of exploration mentioned earlier, we can briefly present the following significant elements, through a quantitative and qualitative analysis. With no intention to generalise, we present an initial examination of a new and growing phenomenon.

1. Education

a) 60 PE Degrees, b) 5 Degrees in Education Sciences specialising in support activities, c) 5 High school diplomas.

Of these, more specifically: a) 24 have taken courses in the inclusion and education of people with disabilities (15 in universities, 5 with associations and 7 CIP courses for sports educators for disabilities [3 with Form'Univers]) and 30 people have taken courses for coaching and technique courses in basketball organised by the Italian Olympic Committee. 6 people state that they only possess a PE degree (three-year course).

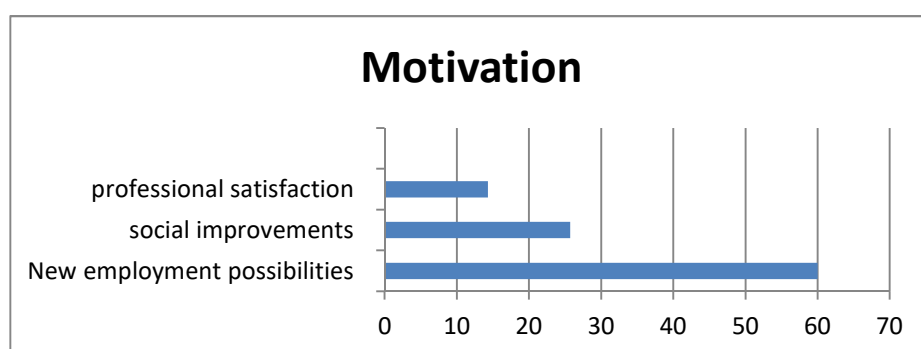
b) 3 of them have taken disability sport education courses organised by the Italian Paralympic Committee (CIP).

c) 4 have taken courses for basketball coaches, and 1 has taken a course on inclusion (sports education organised by the CIP).

In general, we have: 30 profiles with courses in the field of inclusion; 40 profiles with courses in the field of sport.

2. Motivation and interest in working in this specific field

The analysis of the responses highlighted three basic areas around which all the indications from the sample examined gravitate:



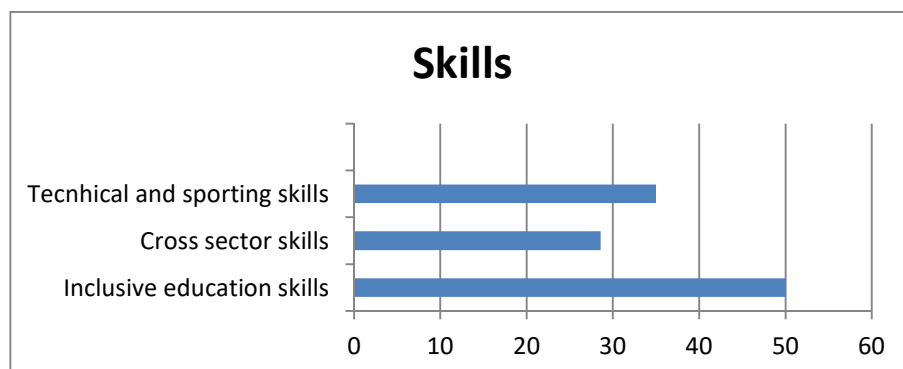
a. New employment possibilities (60%);

b. Confidence in the idea of creating new sports opportunities for people with disabilities, in terms of social improvement (25,71%);

c. Interest in a new sports model that can provide innovative professional satisfaction (14,29%).

3. Skills that inclusive coaches must possess

From the recurrence of certain key elements in the responses examined, these can be summarised as follows (divided on a proportional basis):



Trainers could choose among the following skills (indicated within brackets the choice percentages):

- Inclusive education skills (50): the ability to manage diversity (71,43), to build effective relationships in an integrated group (85,71), to include everyone (100), to plan for all (100), to place education at the heart of their sports projects (42,86), to resolve conflicts (50), to use inclusive educational methods (92,86), to observe, interpret and respond to the needs of the athletes (100), and to make assessments (94,14);
- Cross-sector skills (28,57): the ability to communicate effectively (97,14), to take risks and to bear frustration (100), willingness to listen and adapt (100), and creativity (92,86);
- Technical and sporting skills (21,43): the ability to organise training with people of different skills and levels of ability or complexity (92,86), the ability to organise an effective teaching programme that respects the learning speeds of the athletes (100), the ability to set feasible targets (85,71), the ability to assess the possibility of increasing technical skills and improving athletic performance (42,86), the ability to evaluate training times and methods (35,71), the ability to draft a schedule of planned activities with detailed organisation of the sporting activities (92,86), the ability to select appropriate exercises and motor sequences (100), the ability to make technical adjustments to their programmes (92,86), and the ability to observe and evaluate (95,71).

4. Possible training needs

70% of the sample stated that they did not consider themselves adequately trained and felt they lacked methodology.

It takes more than mere good will to manage such a complex new activity involving several variables, from specific technical knowledge to management of an integrated group. These require special training, which is not acquired through experience alone but above all through specially designed training courses.

Conclusion

The research has highlighted important theoretical aspects in order to define the inclusive coach figure, emphasizing- through the presentation of some data- how a specific education would be needed in order to conjugate- in the field of inclusive sport but as well in the sport in general- the technical sporting skills with those relational-educational. This can be carried out through a constant and cooperative dialogue between sport discipline and educational discipline. The results – despite being conducted upon a limited sample - are the first unequivocal data of a widespread need on the territories, meaning that the coaches need to be provided with a sound preparation. They, especially, feel the primary need to implement (100% of the sample) the ability to manage diversity, to plan for all, interpret and respond to the needs of the athletes, the ability to communicate effectively, the ability to set feasible targets, the ability to observe and evaluate.

It is important to implement educational and communicative skills. Working with people in the sports field involves fundamental relational aspects useful for sport but especially for individual life.

The aspects highlighted so far have repercussions on the educational courses for physical education students, which already, in live with the Dublin descriptors, not only develop skills in “physical literacy” but also across a broader range that also includes teachings from the pedagogical sciences.

We believe, therefore, that graduates with a sports degree should have the option of choosing a Master’s course in Integrated Sport that covers all the aspects we have presented so far. This may open up new career opportunities.

However, this new approach to understanding and practicing sport requires further theoretical, cultural and methodological examination, in a course of studies following the master’s degree in Sport and Physical Education.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to acknowledge.

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