

COACHES' PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE SPORTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

IL POTENZIALE PEDAGOGICO DEGLI SPORT INCLUSIVI: UNO STUDIO ESPLORATIVO SULLE PERCEZIONI DEGLI ALLENATORI

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Double Blind Peer Review

Citation

Petrini, M. (2025). Coaches' perceptions of inclusive sports: an exploratory study. *Giornale italiano di educazione alla salute, sport e didattica inclusiva*, 9 (2).

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v9i2.1463>

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gsdjournal.it

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-510-8

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study conducted on a sample of 113 coaches involved in inclusive sports, aimed at investigating their perceptions of educational processes and social-relational dynamics. The focus is specifically on "modified" sports activities, which involve adapting rules, equipment, and operational methods based on athletes' functional abilities, inspired by the principles of *Universal Design for Learning*.

Il contributo presenta i risultati di uno studio esplorativo condotto su campione di 113 allenatori impegnati negli sport inclusivi, volto a rilevare le loro percezioni sui processi educativo-formativi e sulle dinamiche socio-relazionali. Nello specifico, l'attenzione si concentra sulle attività sportive "modificate", che prevedono l'adattamento di regole, strumenti e modalità operative in base alle capacità funzionali degli atleti, ispirandosi ai principi dell'*Universal Design for Learning*.

KEYWORDS

Sport coaching; Universal Design for Learning; inclusive sports; diversity; relationships
Allenamento sportivo; Universal Design for Learning; sport inclusive; diversità; relazionalità

Received 30/04/2025

Accepted 29/05/2025

Published 20/06/2025

Introduction

In recent decades, the relationship between sport and disability has undergone a profound transformation, driven by significant cultural, social, and pedagogical changes that have progressively redefined the concept of inclusion itself (Kiuppis, 2018; Sibilio, 2023). Traditionally recognised as a powerful educational tool, sport has increasingly become a space for fostering equal opportunities, active engagement, and the valorisation of differences (Bocci, Ciardi, 2016; Giaconi *et al.*, 2021; Borgogni, Giraldo, 2023). A key normative reference is the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UN, 2006), which, in Article 30, affirms the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural, recreational, leisure, and sporting activities on an equal basis with others. This recognition has fostered pedagogical reflection on how to create meaningful and accessible environments that place the individual at the centre, respecting all their uniqueness. Historically, Adapted Physical Activity and the Paralympic model, introduced by Ludwig Guttmann, represented a major turning point by shifting the focus from rehabilitation to performance, autonomy and recognition (Gomez Paloma, Sgamberulli, 2012; Petrini, 2022). However, with the evolution of inclusive and educational thinking, the need to move beyond integration toward full inclusion has emerged – an approach in which people with and without disabilities take part together. Theoretical frameworks have evolved accordingly. One of the earliest and most influential models was Winnick's *Integration Continuum for Sport Participation*, which classified opportunities for athletes with disabilities along a linear scale based on the degree of integration, ranging from regular sport without modifications to segregated adapted sport (Winnick, 1987). Although foundational, the model has been criticised for its hierarchical structure, as it implicitly assigns greater value to more integrated forms and marginalising those that do not fully align with conventional standards (Kiuppis, 2018).

An evolution of Winnick's *Integration Continuum* is represented by the *Sport Inclusion Spectrum*, which recognises the equal pedagogical legitimacy of different forms of involvement based on individual needs and contexts (Black, Williamson, 2011; Grenier, Miller, Black, 2017; Kiuppis, 2018). The spectrum outlines five configurations:

- Separate activities: activities designed specifically for persons with disabilities, typically delivered in dedicated settings and involving only participants with similar functional profiles.

- Parallel activities: similar activities carried out simultaneously by separate groups, where persons with and without disabilities engage in the same type of sport but in distinct groups, often with different rules or intensities.
- Reverse integration activities: activities originally developed for persons with disabilities, in which persons without disabilities are also intentionally included, fostering mutual learning and cooperative interaction.
- Open activities: activities in which persons with and without disabilities participate together, with little or no modification to rules, equipment, or environment. These activities are naturally inclusive and accessible to a broad range of abilities.
- Modified activities: activities that are specifically adapted to accommodate diverse functional abilities, involving changes to space, rules, tasks, equipment, or instructional methods to support equitable access.

The core innovation of this model is the shift from a sport-centred to a person-centred perspective. Inclusion is no longer defined by the structure of the activity but by the subjective value it holds for the participant, respecting autonomy and freedom of choice (Kiuppis, 2018). Inclusion thus becomes a dynamic, context-based relationship rather than a fixed condition. This study focuses on modified activities, where sports practices are specifically adapted to promote accessibility and meaningful involvement for athletes with and without disabilities. These activities are often characterised by intentional changes to rules, roles, or equipment, with the aim of creating equitable conditions that support cooperation, autonomy, and the recognition of individual differences within a shared team environment. These team-based activities are characterised by their cooperative and formative nature and allow for mutual engagement without resorting to separation. An emblematic example is Baskin, a sport structured around inclusive rules where roles are assigned based on athletes' functional abilities – such as movement, balance or upper limb function. Its design reflects the principles of both the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (WHO, 2001) and *Universal Design for Learning* (Gilbert, 2019; CAST, 2018; Grenier, Miller, Black, 2017), integrating attention to individual functioning with strategies that promote accessibility, engagement, and active involvement. In this type of sport, there is no separation based on gender or disability: each participant contributes according to their abilities, fostering meaningful and cooperative interaction within a shared team environment. Despite their pedagogical relevance, empirical research on modified activities remains relatively limited. Most existing studies tend to focus on

separate or parallel models of sports engagement (Goodwin, Watkinson, 2000; Kiuppis, 2018), while modified and shared practices – particularly those implemented in inclusive team sports – are still underexplored. In Italy, two key initiatives in the field of inclusive sport are the Ente Italiano Sport Inclusivi (EISI), which promotes Baskin, and Special Olympics Italia, which develops unified activities involving persons with and without disabilities. Both organisations pursue an educational vision grounded in accessibility, cooperation, and the empowerment of all participants. Building on these premises, this study explores the pedagogical potential of modified inclusive sports by analysing the perceptions and experiences of coaches – key figures in educational practice and privileged observers of the social and relational dynamics that emerge in such contexts. A structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of coaches engaged in modified sports activities, with the aim of identifying challenges, enabling factors, and possible directions for fostering a meaningful and sustainable culture of inclusion in sport.

1. Methods

1.1 Aim of the study

This exploratory study aims to investigate the perceptions of coaches involved in inclusive sports, with a specific focus on their educational role and the socio-relational dynamics that emerge from inclusive sports practices. The objective is to explore the pedagogical potential of these disciplines through the lived experiences and narratives of coaches, who act as both key agents and direct observers of these processes.

1.2 Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of 113 coaches active within the Italian inclusive sports context, selected through *purposeful sampling* (Suri, 2011) to include individuals with direct experience in inclusive sports disciplines. Eligibility criteria required participants to be engaged in sports activities explicitly oriented toward the inclusion of persons with disabilities and to be of legal adult age. Data collection was conducted online, supported by a sector representative who facilitated contact with potential participants.

Of the respondents, 69% identified as male (n = 78) and 31% as female (n = 35). Age distribution showed a concentration in the middle age range (35-64 years: 66%), with fewer participants in the younger (18–24 years) and older (over 65) age groups (8% each). Figure 1 presents the detailed distribution by age and gender.

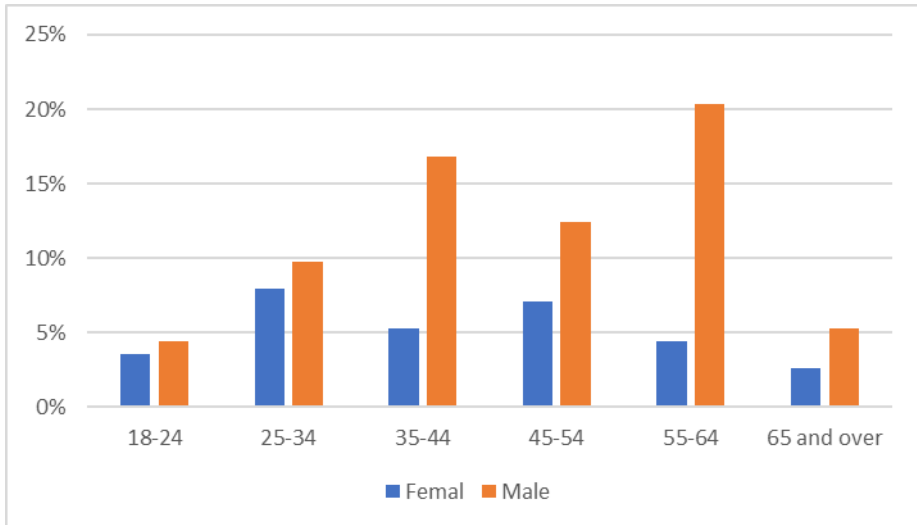


Figure 1 - Age and Gender Breakdown of the Sample

Regarding educational qualifications, the sample was heterogeneous, with 46.9% holding a university degree (17.7% a Bachelor's degree and 21% a Master's degree) as shown in Figure 2.

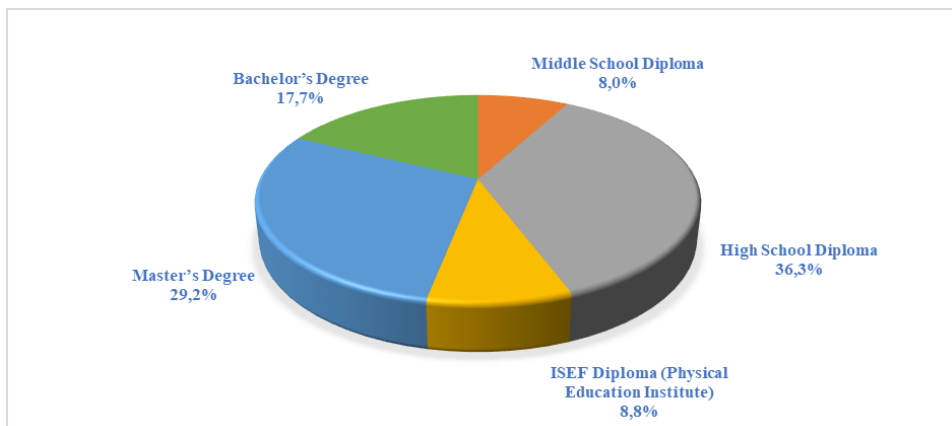


Figure 2 - Educational Qualifications of the Sample.

Furthermore, 26.5% of participants had an academic background in sports sciences, while 10.6% held degrees in social, psychological, or pedagogical fields (Figure 3).

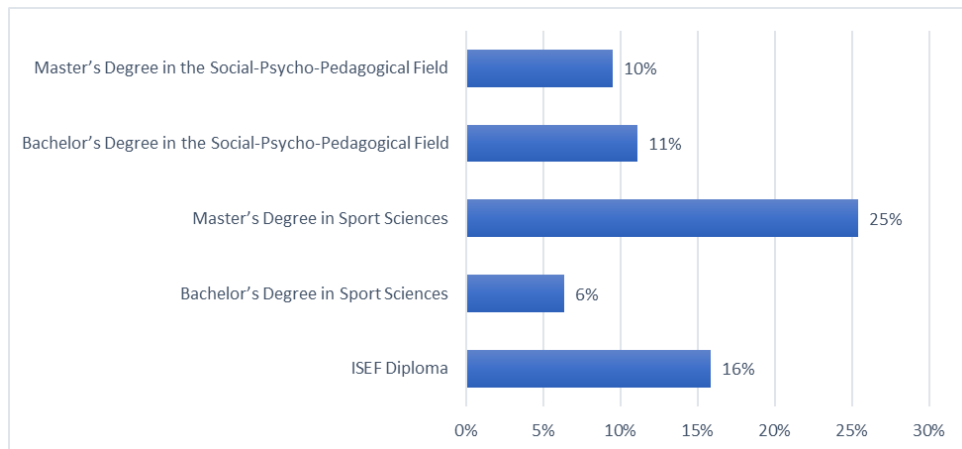


Figure 3 - Participants holding degrees in the social-psycho-pedagogical or sports-related fields

In terms of coached disciplines, Baskin was overwhelmingly predominant, with 94.7% of participants working as coaches within this discipline. The remaining 5.3% were involved in coaching other inclusive sports, such as Inclusive Gymnastics, Inclusive Boccia, and Inclusive Soccer. This finding highlights the centrality of Baskin within the Italian inclusive sports landscape, a discipline founded in 2003 in Cremona to allow individuals with and without disabilities to compete together under a flexible and evolving set of rules that values each participant's abilities. Baskin's growth has been supported by the establishment of the *Ente Italiano Sport Inclusivi* (EISI), officially recognized by the *Italian Paralympic Committee* (CIP) in 2019 as the first national body dedicated to promoting inclusive sports. As for professional experience, 13.3% of coaches reported less than one year of experience, 58.4% between one and five years, and 12.4% more than ten years, suggesting a sector in progressive expansion. Regarding operational contexts, 45.1% worked mainly in non-competitive settings, while 36.3% operated in competitive environments, and 15% worked across both. This distribution reflects the primary objective of inclusive sports: prioritizing participation and integration over performance. Most participants also reported prior coaching experience in conventional sports such as basketball, soccer, volleyball, and athletics, indicating a transversal skill set that could enrich inclusive coaching practices.

1.3 Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered between December 2024 and the first quarter of 2025. The average completion time was approximately 25 minutes. Participants were provided with an information sheet on data protection, in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR 2016/679). The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, organized into two sections:

- The role and training of coaches in inclusive sports;
- Educational and relational dynamics within inclusive sports practices.

This study focuses exclusively on the open-ended responses to explore in depth participants' meanings and experiences, consistent with a qualitative approach aimed at identifying variables not initially anticipated during research design phase (Trinchero, 2004; Saldaña, 2009).

1.4 Data Analysis

Textual data were analysed through inductive qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA software (Giuliano, 2004; Saldaña, 2009; Rositi, 1998). Each participant was assigned a unique code (C1, C2, C3, etc.), where "C" stands for Coach. The analysis followed the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), articulated in two main phases:

- *Open coding*, identifying significant text segments and assigning symbolic and descriptive codes, which were subsequently organised into preliminary conceptual categories;
- *Axial coding*, reorganizing codes into thematic families to explore interrelationships among categories.

Throughout the process, analytical memos were drafted to support critical reflection and enhance interpretive rigour. The use of MAXQDA ensured systematic coding, traceability of categories, and transparency in the analytical procedure.

2. Results

The results of the qualitative analysis are organised into two main thematic areas, corresponding to the structure of the questionnaire: the first concerns the representations of the coach's role and the key competencies; the second focuses on the educational and relational dynamics observed in the practice of inclusive sports. The responses were coded through an inductive approach and organised into sub-themes that emerged during the analysis phase, based on line-by-line coding of the textual contents. Each subsection presents the main recurring themes, accompanied by a selection of significant quotations, chosen to synthetically yet expressively represent the variety of viewpoints that emerged.

2.1 The Role and Training of the Coach

2.1.1 The Multiple Roles of the Inclusive Coach

The analysis of responses regarding the role of the coach in inclusive sports reveals a complex and multifaceted vision of this figure. The main code, titled “Roles of the Inclusive Coach”, was developed through eleven subcodes (Figure 4), reflecting the multiple functions perceived by the coaches: team builder, communicator, educator, facilitator, role model, teacher, leader, coordinator, innovator, support provider, and trainer.

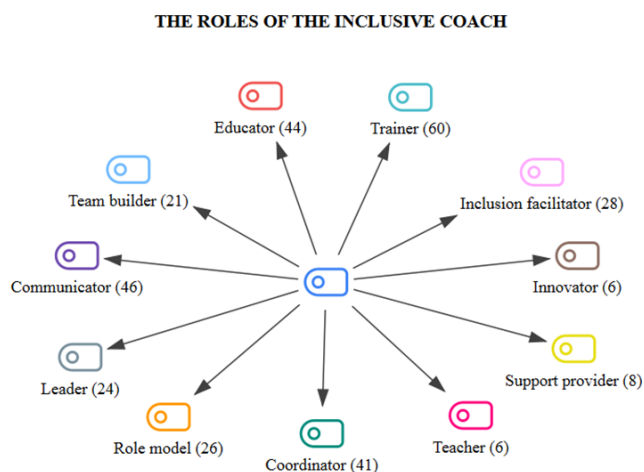


Figure 4 - Codemap of the Inclusive Coach's Roles

Many responses explicitly reflect this multifaceted nature:

“The coach must be a motivator, a good listener, an inspirer, and must possess specific technical skills related to the sport discipline” (C13).

“In inclusive sports, the coach is an educator, a reference point for the team and for parents, an aggregator, a motivator, and a professional who must have a passion for sport” (C24).

These roles emerge as interconnected dimensions that overlap and reinforce each other, creating a complex professional figure. In this sense, the coding process highlighted conceptual intersections among the subcodes “trainer”, “facilitator” and “coordinator”. The organisational dimension is closely linked to the technical one, as it involves managing time, space, and roles based on the athletes’ differences, as stated by some coaches:

“Managing a very heterogeneous group (many athletes with and without disabilities and their families) requires skill, commitment, and consistency, especially at the organisational level to reconcile all needs” (C84).

“The coach must personalise objectives and approaches, read the needs, and stimulate the growth of each individual” (C1).

Other responses emphasise the educational function of the coach, seen as a reference point both ethically and athletically. As C103 noted:

“The coach is not just responsible for the game. In addition to training in terms of rules and technique, they must teach responsibility, altruism, fair play, humility, and compassion. They must give each athlete proper attention, make them feel involved, and help them feel accepted”.

Frequently, the responses refer to the concept of care, a foundational and transversal pedagogical category, which, in the context of inclusive sports, assumes multiple and situated meanings (Bruni, 2024). The coach is often described as someone who teaches “care for oneself”, “care for others”, and for the environment in which action takes place. This educational perspective intertwines profoundly with the sporting value of respect, which is never unidirectional but unfolds relationally and in multiple forms – respect for teammates, opponents, referees, the coach, the rules of the game, and one’s own body. From this perspective, care and respect become converging value axes that guide the coach’s actions not only on a technical level but above all ethically and educationally.

Sports teaching thus becomes an opportunity to educate for responsibility, self-awareness, and reciprocity in interpersonal relationships and in relation to the environment. Furthermore, some coaches mentioned the role of “innovator”, referring to the experimental and project-based nature of inclusive sports. In this sense, the coach is described as a field researcher, capable of finding creative solutions, adapting the context, and managing problems in real-time. Inclusion is thus achieved not only through declared values but through concrete and operational choices.

2.1.2 Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills for Inclusive Sports Coaching

The analysis of the responses highlighted a set of competencies, knowledge, and skills deemed essential for effectively fulfilling the role of coach in inclusive sports. These dimensions appear to be strongly interconnected and oriented toward managing the educational and sporting complexity inherent in inclusive contexts, partially reshaping the approach compared to traditional coaching. The main areas that emerged are summarized below:

- **Technical-Specific Competencies:**

In-depth knowledge of the practiced sport discipline, including regulations, techniques, and tactics, aimed at ensuring high-quality technical intervention. As the following quotations show, technical-specific competencies are closely linked to those concerning inclusion and disability.

“It is necessary to know how to read and understand the difficulties related to roles 1, 2, 3, and 4, analyze them, find a key to understanding, and work to develop and enhance them, integrating them into the basketball dynamics of role 5. All of this must be done respecting individual differences and personal timing, with an educational, motivating, and aggregating perspective” (C9).

“At the technical level, coaches must be very well trained to enable improvement and to allow each player to give their best” (C3).

- **Organizational Competencies:**

The ability to plan and manage training sessions, matches, and activities that promote the participation of all members, enhancing different individual abilities. According to C5:

“Organizational skills are necessary for planning activities, educational project design, programming inclusive training suited to all ability levels, and event management”.

- Social-Relational and Communication Competencies:

Skills in building positive relationships, mediating conflicts, and promoting cohesive and respectful group dynamics, as some coaches underline:

“Empathy first and foremost. Without it, you cannot work in this field” (C52).

“The ability to observe and understand athletes. To adapt communication depending on interlocutors and actively engage athletes not only during drills but throughout the training process” (C17).

- Psycho-Pedagogical Competencies:

The capacity to accompany the personal growth processes of athletes, supporting motivation, self-efficacy, and emotional well-being, as evidenced by the following statements:

“I believe that psychological, educational, and communicative training is necessary for coaches. Often, while interacting with autistic youngsters, I question whether I have found the most appropriate communicative approach. Sports training alone, in my opinion, is not sufficient to operate in a Baskin context” (C37).

“Beyond technical competencies, a coach must acquire psychological knowledge and skills to manage critical situations that may arise during activities” (C92).

- Life Skills:

Development and promotion of transversal competencies such as flexibility, creativity, resilience, leadership, innovation capacity, and team building, considered crucial in inclusive sports contexts, as supported by these accounts:

“Among the abilities required of a coach are: empathy, flexibility, problem-solving, and collaborative leadership to enhance each individual” (C4).

“A coach must be empathetic, creative, strategic; they must understand the mindset of each player, be able to listen, discover and strengthen each individual’s potential, and possess patience and imagination” (C79).

“Flexibility and adaptability are fundamental” (C4).

“Patience and resilience are especially needed when things do not go as planned” (C17).

“They must adapt, make real-time adjustments, and quickly find solutions” (C41).

- Knowledge about Disability:

Understanding of different functional profiles, specific needs, and the main theoretical models for interpreting disability (Townsend *et al.*, 2022), as stated by C98 and C23:

“What needs to be strengthened is surely the training on disability issues, especially for those, like me, coming from a purely sports background without prior knowledge in this area”.

“Knowledge of rules, group organization, communication skills, flexibility of thought and action, empathy, planning, relational skills, and basic knowledge of major disabilities are crucial”.

- Knowledge and Competencies on Inclusion:

Mastery of theoretical models of sports inclusion and practical skills for implementing strategies that promote the effective participation of all athletes through significant adaptations, role assignments, team balance, and the enhancement of functional and personal differences. As the following quotations show:

“Skills are needed to grasp the essence of inclusive sports: acting in respect of everyone’s needs, valuing what each athlete brings, while also stimulating discovery and innovation. Training should be accessible, varied, and comprehensible at all levels, simultaneously” (C16).

“An inclusive culture based on the centrality of the person and helping relationships is crucial. Empathy, the ability to enhance everyone's resources, and the use of appropriate verbal and non-verbal language are important” (C32).

“It is necessary to be able to communicate through accessible languages and manage complex group dynamics. The coach in inclusive sports is both a technical and social facilitator” (C56).

- **Ethics and Professional Responsibility:**

Adherence to principles of equity, respect, care, and responsibility, interpreting coaching as an educational practice aimed at promoting the rights and dignity of every individual, as C57 and C2 write:

“The ethics of inclusive sport require an approach that combines sensitivity and respect in relationships, without giving up healthy competitiveness on the field. The coach becomes a reference point, capable of building meaningful relationships of trust and esteem with athletes”.

“It is important to know the regulations and adaptation techniques for inclusive sports and the ethics and values underpinning inclusion”.

- **Propensity for Self-Improvement:**

A critical-reflective attitude oriented towards continuous learning, permanent training, and the improvement of professional practice, as C36 states:

“Continuous training is indispensable to maintain updated professional skills by attending training courses and workshops to stay informed on best practices in the field of inclusive sports. Moreover, networking is important, that is, collaborating with other professionals to exchange knowledge and resources”.

To support the conceptual structure that emerged, the mapping of connections among the competence areas, developed through MAXQDA based on qualitative data analysis, is presented in Figure 5.

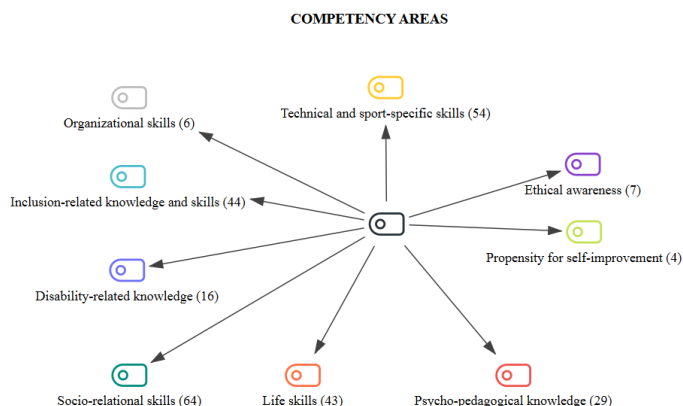


Figure 5 - Codemap of the Competency Areas for Inclusive Sport Coaching

2.2 Conditions, Challenges, and Transformative Processes in Inclusive Sport

2.2.1 Barriers

The coaches' responses highlight a plurality of obstacles that, at various levels, affect the organization and development of inclusive sports practices. The reported barriers can be grouped into four main domains: systemic-structural, professional-organisational, communicative-relational, and psychological-attitudinal.

From a systemic and structural perspective, coaches emphasize the challenges posed by limited financial resources and the lack of equipment specifically adapted to the needs of inclusive sports. Beyond the insufficient funding to support activities, the frequent lack of properly equipped fields, adequate spaces, and adapted materials is cited. Additionally, infrastructural barriers such as the inadequacy of sports facilities, parking accessibility issues, and, in many cases, the absence of dedicated transportation services emerge as critical issues. This represents a concrete obstacle for families, particularly those with people with disabilities who cannot autonomously access sports activities. The limited cultural visibility of inclusive sports is also perceived as a significant constraint. Several coaches note that these disciplines are still often mistakenly associated exclusively with people with disabilities and are undervalued and underrecognized in the general sports landscape, being perceived as less engaging. The low media and institutional investment further reinforces prejudices and stereotypes, thereby limiting participation and dissemination. As coach C24 remarks:

“Despite progress, barriers persist and concern inaccessible sports facilities, lack of suitable equipment, transportation issues, high costs of specialized equipment, but also prejudices and stereotypes about the capabilities of people with disabilities, poor awareness and information about the value of inclusive sport, and insufficient collaboration between schools, sports organizations, and public institutions”.

On the professional and organizational level, a significant shortage of qualified figures is noted: not only coaches but also referees, tutors, volunteers, and assistants trained in the specificities of inclusive sports, partly due to the relatively recent development of these disciplines. Some participants emphasize that the limited presence of a structured professional community makes it difficult for coaches to engage in peer discussions and exchange best practices.

On the communicative and relational level, difficulties in managing interpersonal relationships within teams are reported, especially in cases where tools and strategies to foster truly accessible and balanced communication are lacking. Inclusive contexts, in fact, require a relational and linguistic approach capable of welcoming and valuing differences, something not always automatic or easy to implement in sports settings. Moreover, many respondents identify the uncritical transposition of conventional sports logics into inclusive contexts as a barrier, where excessive competitiveness can disrupt the climate and relationships within the team. As coach C44 highlights:

“Managing competitiveness is delicate and can be a challenge for both able-bodied and disabled athletes, just as it happens in non-inclusive sports. Indeed, some athletes ask to train without participating in matches”.

Finally, some barriers have a psychological and attitudinal nature: fears, resistance, insecurity, or prejudiced attitudes that may involve athletes, families, coaches, and volunteers alike. For instance, some responses emphasize that an assistentialist or overprotective approach risks undermining the educational quality of the process and the genuine participation of athletes with disabilities, hindering their development of autonomy and self-esteem.

Overall, these barriers reveal that inclusion in sport cannot be taken for granted but must be actively supported through coordinated, multi-level efforts involving material and human resources as well as cultural and relational models. As coach C45 states:

“These barriers require a coordinated and multifactorial approach to be effectively addressed, including training, funding, awareness-raising, and the implementation of specific policies”.

The set of barriers that emerged from the analysis was graphically represented in a conceptual map created with MAXQDA software (Figure 6).

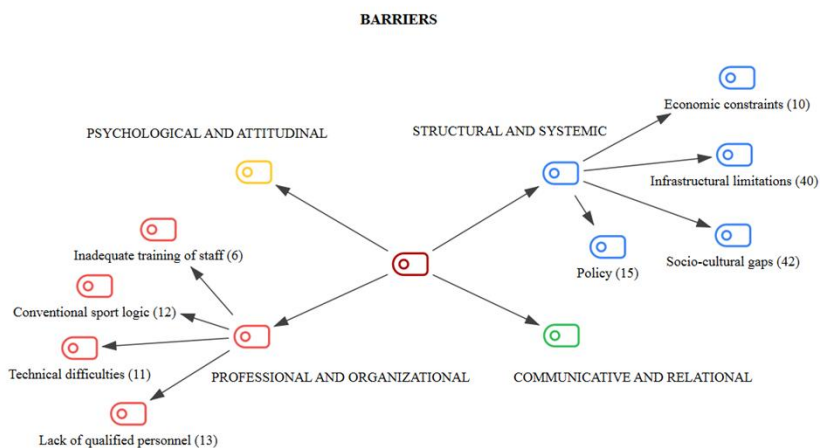


Figure 6 - Codemap of barriers to inclusive sport practices

2.2.2 Facilitators

The qualitative analysis revealed numerous facilitators that, at different levels, contribute to making inclusive participation in sport effective. At the systemic and institutional level, the cultural recognition of the value of inclusion and the commitment of local authorities, schools, and community organizations are highlighted as central elements. The availability of funding, the existence of supportive policies, and the adoption of adapted sports regulations are considered fundamental for ensuring the accessibility and continuity of inclusive practices.

At the professional and organizational level, the importance of specific training for coaches and staff, as well as the availability of appropriate equipment and technologies, is particularly emphasized. The presence of qualified figures – coaches, educators, assistants, and volunteers – is identified as an essential resource for ensuring the educational and technical quality of inclusive sports programmes. Among relational and social facilitators, the spirit of teamwork, a positive climate, and the establishment of collaborative networks among schools, families, and associations are noted as crucial. As Coach C8 states:

“School-based projects and specific events about inclusive sports certainly help to promote and develop their dissemination”.

These elements foster mutual trust and cohesion, reinforcing the sense of belonging and the sharing of goals. Finally, the personal and family dimension plays a significant role. The active involvement of families and the quality of inclusive communication are recognized as key factors in supporting the autonomy and participation of athletes, fostering a truly welcoming environment. As Coach C57 highlights:

“The involvement of parents, caregivers, and individuals with disabilities themselves in decision-making processes is crucial to ensuring that everyone's needs are considered and respected”.

The conceptual map illustrating the network of identified facilitators is presented in Figure 7.

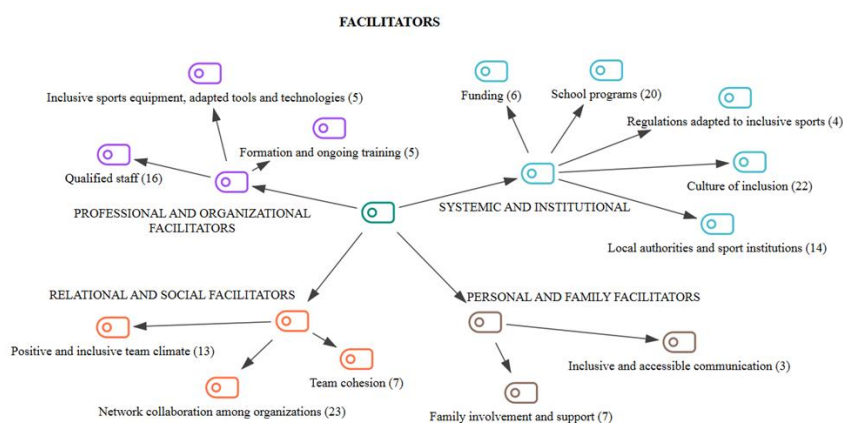


Figure 7 - Codemap of facilitators for inclusive sport development

2.2.3 Educational and Relational Dynamics

The analysis of responses concerning the dynamics among athletes in inclusive sport contexts highlighted the presence of complex and deeply interconnected educational and relational processes. These dynamics extend well beyond the technical dimension of sports practice, activating transformative educational paths and promoting the construction of meaningful bonds. From an educational perspective, many coaches emphasised how inclusive team sports foster the development of autonomy and a sense of responsibility among participants. In several cases, these aspects are closely linked, as they contribute to the conscious

assumption of one's role within the group. Furthermore, the development of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence is often reported, especially among athletes with disabilities, who feel recognised and valued for their specific contribution to the team. This is confirmed by the following testimonies:

"Inclusive sport increases athletes' possibilities to extend and consolidate their relational networks. It helps athletes to get to know themselves better, to discover parts of themselves that would struggle to emerge without sport. It teaches them to overcome obstacles and difficulties, to express themselves through what they can achieve on the field" (C108).

"The relational dynamics that develop are extremely significant. I have seen athletes with difficulties flourish and gain greater self-awareness, both in sports practice and in their relationships with teammates. Sport becomes shared life: an experience filled with emotions, successes, and defeats lived together. Athletes support and help each other, with the common goal of growing and achieving the best possible performance together" (C83).

The educational process is described as profoundly experiential: inclusive sport becomes an educational environment where fundamental values such as respect, equity, and solidarity are learned through active participation and engagement. In this context, several coaches highlighted the importance of positive role models represented both by the coach and by teammates, who become behavioural points of reference and promoters of peer learning dynamics. As C64 affirms:

"Clarifying roles within the team helps set expectations and promotes collaboration. During training sessions, athletes learn to support one another, creating a sense of community. Examples include mentoring between more experienced and novice athletes. Open communication and feedback can improve individual and collective abilities, fostering an environment where every opinion matters".

On the relational level, the observed dynamics extend beyond functional collaboration for games or training sessions; they foster the building of deep bonds, based on mutual trust, friendship, and a sense of belonging. In many cases, these relationships continue outside the sports context, generating opportunities for socialisation. The team is often described as a cohesive and supportive community, where every member actively contributes to constructing a collective identity. Differences are not perceived as obstacles but as resources that strengthen group cohesion. As C108 notes:

“For some athletes and families, the moment of training and the game represents a (sometimes the only) moment of social interaction for the player. This has enormous value and meaning from an educational and social perspective”.

Inclusion is described as a co-constructed process, made possible by shared actions that enhance participation, cooperation, and interdependence among team members. Task division, group problem-solving, and mutual support emerge as authentic engines of the inclusive process. Communication plays a central role, understood both in its verbal and non-verbal dimensions, and is constantly adapted to favour understanding, accessibility, and reciprocity. While conflicts do occur, they are often described as valuable opportunities for constructive confrontation and growth when managed within a climate of respect and mediation. As summarised by some coaches:

“Managing conflicts and personal growth is decisive: diversity, while a strength, can generate differing opinions or misunderstandings. In such contexts, the ability to manage conflicts through dialogue, negotiation, and mediation is essential to transform tensions into opportunities for growth” (C77).

“The team has the power to make diversity disappear and to promote a spirit of collaboration that transcends individual limits... there is no paternalism, only collaboration and mutual respect within and across roles” (C12).

“The motivations that lead non-disabled athletes to choose inclusive sports like Baskin are varied and complex, but rarely linked to pity. Instead, the choice often stems from the desire to challenge themselves, to contribute to a cause of social redemption, and to become role models for those who might otherwise face prejudice or lack privileges in daily life” (C28).

The conceptual map illustrating the interconnections between educational and relational dynamics is presented in Figure 8.

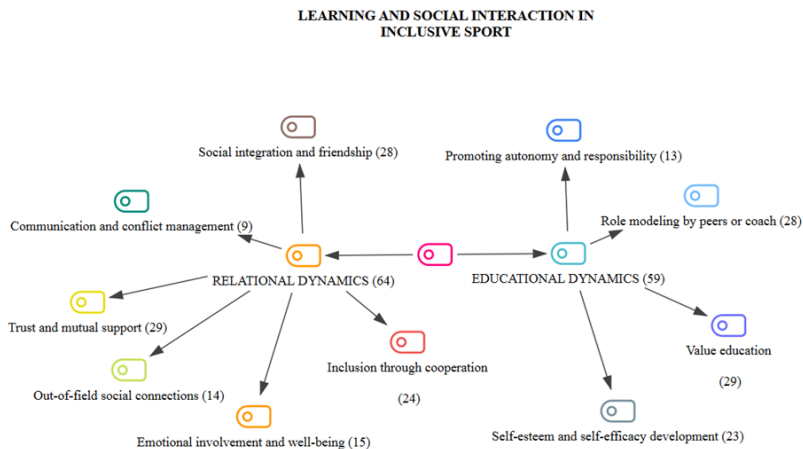


Figure 8 - Codemap of educational and relational dynamics in inclusive sports

3. Discussion

This study confirms that, in inclusive sports, the coach's role assumes a multifaceted and transformative configuration, going beyond the traditional functions of guide, technician, and motivator described in previous literature (Côté, Gilbert, 2009; Lyle, Cushion, 2017). While emerging roles such as facilitator, educator, aggregator, and role model largely overlap with established profiles, their enactment becomes a key factor in enabling or hindering inclusion (Canevaro, 2010). The inclusive coach facilitates participation when fully aware of the educational value of their action, promotes the development of life skills, builds a positive relational climate, and maintains the balance between differences, avoiding medicalised or supportive but limiting approaches that risk reproducing subtle forms of ableism (Goodley, 2014). The skills needed to operate in these contexts are deeply interconnected: technical-tactical and inclusive dimensions must advance together, requiring the coach to adapt strategies and tools to athletes' diverse needs while maintaining an inclusive balance. Inclusion is not an additional level superimposed on traditional coaching, but rather demands a profound rethinking of how sport itself is conceptualised and practised. Organisational, socio-relational, psycho-pedagogical, and ethical competences emerge as crucial alongside technical expertise, reflecting an educational approach in which sports training and citizenship education intertwine. Among the key

facilitators identified, the school stands out as a crucial channel for spreading an inclusive sports culture. Introducing inclusive practices from an early age, making them familiar and accessible, appears strategic for embedding values of equity, respect, and collaboration. Moreover, embedding inclusive sports within formal school curricula could represent a structural strategy for promoting early socialisation practices based on diversity, equity, and cooperation. Alongside schools, the commitment of local institutions, the availability of resources, and the presence of professional networks are fundamental enablers. Nevertheless, significant barriers remain: structural issues (lack of accessible spaces, transportation, equipment), shortage of trained professionals, cultural resistance, and persistent assistentialist attitudes continue to hinder full inclusion. Such barriers are not only material but also deeply embedded in organisational models, relationships, and cultural representations of inclusion itself. Regarding educational and relational dynamics, the findings highlight how inclusive sports function as privileged spaces for peer education, mutual support, and collective growth. Continuous interaction between athletes with and without disabilities fosters autonomy, responsibility, self-confidence, and a strong sense of belonging (Lepore-Stevens, Schugar, 2023). Reciprocity, positive interdependence, and conflict management emerge as key social skills, nurtured not through direct instruction but through the everyday experience of collaboration and shared goals. Overall, the results confirm that inclusive sports are not merely physical or competitive activities but authentic educational and transformative contexts, where meaningful experiences are co-constructed, cultural barriers are dismantled, and the very meanings of sport are redefined. Importantly, technical and inclusive dimensions cannot be separated: they constitute two inseparable faces of a single educational process. Building technically valid training sessions inherently involves adapting to functional and relational needs, making technical management a primary tool for realising genuine inclusion. Without strong technical expertise, inclusion risks remaining a declared intent without tangible impact on athletes' experiences. Furthermore, the educational and relational dynamics outlined by the coaches emphasise the centrality of cooperative learning processes, where peer education plays a crucial role. Inclusive sports foster mutual support within teams, promoting an educational model based on trust, positive interdependence, and shared responsibility. Mutual support goes beyond technical assistance, embodying a process of reciprocal growth in which every athlete becomes a resource for others, contributing to collective learning and the construction of an authentic culture of

inclusion. Reciprocity and care categories are expressed both technically and emotionally, reinforcing a profound sense of belonging that transcends individual differences. This perspective highlights that inclusive sport is not a mere adaptation of traditional sport but rather a deep redefinition of its educational, relational, and cultural meanings. Inclusion, in modified sports activities, is built through intentional practices and conscious technical and relational choices, capable of transforming diversity from a vulnerability into a lever for collective growth. In conclusion, promoting an inclusive sports culture means rethinking the coach's role, investing in specialised training, and supporting environments that enhance not only participation but the full valorisation of each individual as an active, competent agent in the co-construction of meaning.

Conclusions

Inclusive sports practice represents a privileged laboratory for special pedagogy: a concrete context in which each participant builds relationships, shares experiences, and develops transversal competencies through meaningful engagement (De Anna, 2009). Within this dynamic and cooperative framework, the educational and relational dynamics that emerge offer valuable insights for exploring the delicate balance between specialisation and inclusion, as well as between diversity and equity (Morsanuto *et al.*, 2023; Paloma, 2019). The inherently collaborative nature of these inclusive sporting experiences suggests that, through their dynamism, innovative pedagogical models may emerge, with potential applications extending to broader educational fields. Among the limitations of this study, it should be noted that the sample consisted especially of coaches engaged in Baskin, a specificity that may restrict the generalisability of the results. Future research should seek to expand the scope by involving coaches operating within school-based inclusive sport projects, allowing for a comparison between the dynamics observed in formal (school) settings and those found in non-formal contexts. Particular attention should be devoted to coach training, the development of inclusive pedagogical tools, and the strengthening of networks between schools, local authorities, and sports associations, in order to foster a truly accessible and participatory culture of sport for all (O'Rourke *et al.*, 2023). Ultimately, inclusive sport reaffirms its role as a fertile ground for educational innovation, offering promising directions for the evolution of special and inclusive pedagogy. The findings confirm that inclusive sport is not merely a setting for physical activity, but

an authentic educational laboratory where diversity is celebrated, transversal competencies are cultivated, and the coach's role is redefined as that of a facilitator of transformative experiences. In this perspective, inclusive sports practices not only promote personal and collective growth but also contribute to the construction of a more equitable and participatory educational culture (Bocci, Ciardi, 2016).

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