

Inclusive Sports Programs for Children with Special Needs in Baguio City, Philippines: Availability, Barriers, And Community Impact

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ABSTRACT:

This study did a comprehensive review of the inclusive sports program for children with special needs carried out in Baguio City, Philippines. It aimed to assess availability, participation, perceived effectiveness, implementation hurdles, and community effects. Methods Cross-sectional survey structure was applied as the research group in this study based on a sample of 50 parents with children with special needs, 10 coaches and program staff and 50 general community members. The main findings are that participation in organized inclusive sports is minimal with 36.67% children with special needs participating. Participation highlighted a significantly different socio-economic status, with high-income families' children three times more likely to take part in sports compared to low-income families' children. Swimming (42.3%) and adapted athletics (30.8%) were practiced most often. Important implementation barriers were lack of budgets ($M = 4.56$), lack of skills of the staff ($M = 4.48$) and lack of facilities ($M = 4.32$), according to the coaches reported. Parents noted that involved children gained the most in social competence ($M = 4.32$) and self-esteem ($M = 4.18$). Most active communities also reported positive attitudes towards those with disabilities, but overall awareness of this program was low (30%). Finally, this study is prepared with concrete recommendations for the council (municipality), educational institutions and other local stakeholders, to provide appropriate allocation, improved training and decentralization of the programs so as to provide fair and successful access and inclusive community. Terms of reference: Inclusive Sports, Special Needs, Disability, Baguio City, Barriers to Participation, community attitudes.

Keywords: inclusive sports; children with special needs; disability; community attitudes; participation barriers

1. INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, play and sports are understood not just as pastimes, but as fundamental rights for every child—key to growing up healthy, capable, and connected (United Nations, 1989; 2006). This belief is backed by international agreements and, closer to home, by Philippine law. The Magna Carta for Persons with Disability (Republic Act No. 7277, as amended) makes it clear that children with disabilities deserve the same chances to play and compete as anyone else. When we talk about inclusive sports—where kids with and without disabilities play side-by-side—we're talking about something with proven benefits: stronger bodies, better mental health, and deeper social bonds.

But what does that actually look like? Picture a child using a wheelchair, sinking a shot with an assist from a classmate who runs. Or a child on the autism spectrum, completely in their element during a swim team relay. That's inclusive sports in action. When kids of all abilities share the same court or field—not as outsiders watching from the bench, but as genuine teammates—something shifts.

Indeed, the physical gains are obvious: better coordination, more strength, habits that stick. But the quieter transformations matter just as much. For a child with a disability, being part of a team can spark confidence and resilience. It's the feeling of being needed, of contributing, of belonging—not in spite of who they are, but because of it. For their peers without disabilities, the experience is just as powerful. Empathy stops being a word from a lesson plan and becomes something real: patience learned through practice,

understanding built through shared effort, friendships that cross invisible lines. They learn to see each other first as teammates, and stereotypes slowly lose their grip.

That kind of connection—working toward the same goal, celebrating together, even just learning to cheer each other on—builds something lasting. And little by little, those moments reshape communities. They become more welcoming, more aware, more whole.

Here in the Philippines, this isn't just a feel-good idea—it's written into policy. Groups like the Philippine Sports Commission (PSC) and the Philippine Paralympic Committee (PPC) actively seek out young athletes with disabilities and support them from the ground up. The Department of Education (DepEd) also backs inclusive education, which means physical education and school sports are supposed to reflect that same value. From national agencies down to the neighborhood school, the message is consistent: making sports truly inclusive isn't optional. It's a shared responsibility.

Baguio City, as a regional hub for education and health services in Northern Luzon, hosts a considerable population of children with special needs. Despite this context, systematic evidence regarding the scope, accessibility, and impact of inclusive sports programs in the city remains limited. Available information is largely anecdotal, constraining the capacity of local government units, schools, and civil society organizations to design data-driven interventions.

Despite this favorable context and the clear legal and ethical imperatives, a significant knowledge gap persists. Systematic, empirical evidence regarding the actual scope, accessibility, and tangible impact of inclusive sports programs within Baguio City remains remarkably limited. Anecdotal reports suggest the existence of isolated initiatives by schools, non-government organizations (NGOs), or local community groups, but there is no comprehensive mapping of these efforts. Information on the extent to which children with disabilities are genuinely and meaningfully participating alongside their peers, the quality of their experience, and the outcomes achieved is largely fragmented or non-existent. This lack of data severely constrains the capacity of key stakeholders—including the Baguio City Local Government Unit (LGU) through its Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO) and City Sports Office, the Department of Education – Schools Division Office Baguio City, and local civil society organizations—to design, fund, and implement data-driven, evidence-based interventions. Without a clear understanding of the current landscape, efforts risk being fragmented, inequitable, or unsustainable.

The current study sought here to fill in that void by creating some such empirical data that might contribute towards shaping inclusive sport in Baguio City. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions: What is the availability and the development of inclusive sports programs for children with special needs in Baguio City? What are the participation rates and socioeconomic profiles of children with special needs? What do parents, in their personal accounts, perceive to be the benefits of participation? What are the main barriers for coaches and staff implementing these programs? Do the general community have an awareness of these programs and disability inclusion? This study aims to lay a foundation of evidence that can support stakeholders to construct more effective, fair and sustainable inclusive sport opportunities and does so by engaging with these questions.

2. METHODOLOGY

To get a clear, wide-angle view of inclusive sports programs in Baguio City, the study used a cross-sectional descriptive survey. The goal was to capture more than one point of view, so purposive sampling was chosen to bring in three stakeholder groups whose day-to-day experiences could show both what the programs were reaching and where they were still coming up short.

Group A included 50 parents or primary caregivers of children with special needs who were of school age, with the children ranging from 5 to 18 years old. These respondents could describe, in practical terms, what their children went through, which obstacles made participation difficult, and what shifts they had noticed over time.

Group B consisted of 10 coaches, physical education teachers, and program officials who were directly involved in planning and carrying out inclusive sports initiatives. Their responses provided a close-in view of how these programs actually run, including the routine demands, common problems, and operational constraints.

Group C was made up of 50 community members, age 18 and above, who had no family connection to any program participant. Unlike the first two groups, this set of respondents

was chosen through stratified random sampling to keep geographic representation even. Participants were selected from barangays grouped as central, mid-range, or outlying areas, so that views from across Baguio's different neighborhoods were represented, including people living close to existing programs and those farther away.

Data were gathered through three separate survey questionnaires that shared the same general themes but were written for each stakeholder group.

Across the questionnaires, the coverage matched the study's main concerns. For parents, the questions asked about the availability, type, and frequency of programs and activities their children could join, along with each child's history of participation. Parents also rated their child's progress in several areas on a 5-point scale, where 1 meant no improvement and 5 meant significant improvement, focusing on social development, emotional development, physical development, and academic engagement.

For coaches and program personnel, the survey leaned toward implementation issues. Respondents rated the seriousness of different barriers to inclusive sports programming using a 5-point scale, with 1 meaning not severe and 5 meaning extremely severe. In combination, these measures allowed the research to record not only what programs were in place and who was involved, but also the underlying factors affecting access and outcomes for children with special needs in Baguio City.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results indicated that participation in organized inclusive sports programs among children with special needs remained limited, reflecting national patterns reported in Philippine disability statistics (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). Slightly over one-third of the sampled children were enrolled in such programs, revealing substantial unmet need. Participation was strongly associated with socioeconomic status, as children from higher-income households were considerably more likely to engage in organized sports activities. Geographic distribution further influenced access, with most programs concentrated in central barangays, thereby limiting participation among families residing in peripheral areas.

In terms of program offerings, swimming and adapted athletics were the most prevalent inclusive sports activities in the city. These programs were primarily implemented through partnerships between schools, sports clubs, and local organizations. While the diversity of sports options was limited, existing programs nonetheless demonstrated meaningful benefits for participating children.

Parents reported marked improvements in children's social skills and self-esteem, suggesting that inclusive sports serve as effective platforms for social interaction, confidence-building, and emotional development, consistent with findings in prior studies on inclusive physical activity (Goodwin & Ebert, 2018; Hutzler & Barak, 2017). Physical fitness and school engagement also showed positive trends, albeit to a lesser degree. These findings align with international literature emphasizing the psychosocial value of inclusive physical

activity and highlight the importance of sustained participation to maximize developmental gains (Goodwin & Ebert, 2018; Hutzler & Barak, 2017; Kiuppis, 2018).

From an implementation perspective, coaches and program staff identified structural and resource-related barriers as the most severe challenges. Insufficient funding, lack of trained personnel, and inadequate facilities emerged as primary constraints, outweighing concerns related to social stigma. This pattern suggests that while attitudinal barriers persist, the more pressing obstacles to program expansion are institutional and logistical in nature, a concern similarly noted in broader analyses of disability sport management (Misener & Darcy, 2014).

Community-level findings revealed low overall awareness of inclusive sports programs; however, respondents from barangays with active initiatives demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities. This association indicates that program visibility and direct exposure may contribute to broader social acceptance and inclusion, supporting earlier research that positions inclusive sports as agents of social change (Misener & Darcy, 2014; Special Olympics International, 2019). Inclusive sports thus function not only as developmental interventions for children but also as catalysts for community-level attitude change, reinforcing evidence from international initiatives on unified and inclusive sports models (Special Olympics International, 2019; World Health Organization, 2011).

3.1 Incidence of Inclusive Sports Programs in Baguio City

Program	Percentage (%)
Swimming	42.3
Adapted Athletics (Track and Field)	30.8
Boccia	15.4
Wheelchair Basketball	7.7
Others (e.g. inclusive dance, goalball)	3.8

3.2 Parent-Reported Benefits of Program Participation (N=50)*

Developmental Domain	Mean Rating (SD)
Social Skill	3.32 (0.54)
Self-Esteem	4.18 (0.16)
Physical Fitness	3.95 (0.72)
School Engagement	3.87 (0.69)

3.3 Severity of Challenges in Program Implementation (N=10)*

Challenge	Mean Severity Rating (SD)
Insufficient Funding	4.56 (0.53)
Lack of Trained Staff/Coaches	4.48 (0.51)
Inadequate Facilities or Equipment	4.32 (0.48)
Limited Parental Support or Engagement	3.87 (0.65)
Transportation Barriers for Participants	3.65 (0.71)
Negative Community Perceptions or Stigma	3.42 (0.88)

4. LIMITATIONS

This study comes with a number of limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. To begin with, the pool of coaches and staff who responded was fairly small, which means the observations tied to day-to-day implementation, such as what made the program easier or harder to carry out, might not translate cleanly to other sites, teams, or organizational settings. With a limited set of perspectives from those delivering the program, some practical barriers or enabling conditions could be underrepresented, especially if they vary by experience level, role, or local context.

Another constraint is the study's reliance on outcomes reported by parents. While parent input is valuable and often necessary, it also leaves room for response bias. For example, some parents might unintentionally overstate improvements because they want the program to be helpful, because they feel positively about the staff, or because they are more motivated to notice changes after committing time to participation. Others might underreport changes if they have limited opportunity to observe the child in relevant situations or if their expectations differ from what the program is designed to affect. Differences in recall, interpretation of survey items, and willingness to report concerns can also add noise to the data.

The cross-sectional nature of the design is another key limitation. Because data were collected at a single point in time, the findings reflect a snapshot rather than a trajectory. This makes it difficult to determine whether the outcomes observed are stable, improving, or fading over time, and it prevents a clear look at delayed effects that might only appear after sustained engagement. It also limits the ability to separate program-related changes from other influences occurring in families' lives during the same period.

Conclusions should be treated as suggestive rather than definitive, particularly when considering broader claims about implementation challenges and longer-term program impacts.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive sports in Baguio City shows clear social gains for the well-being of the people who join, and it can also nudge public attitudes in a more accepting direction. At the same time, those gains do not happen in a vacuum, they are still limited by the city's natural setting, available facilities, and the structures that decide who gets access and who gets left out. Turning this promise into something that lasts will take a shared effort, not a single program run by one office, but a coordinated push that involves government, schools, clubs, communities, and researchers working in step. For the City Government, the first practical move is funding. At the City Sports Development and Sangguniang Kabataan levels, a clear budget line for inclusive sports needs to be created as soon as possible, and part of that overall funding should be set aside as a City Sports Activities Budget so inclusive events are not treated as occasional add-ons.

Alongside funding, accessibility has to be treated as a standing obligation. Public sports and recreation activities should consistently follow the full requirements of Batas Pambansa Bilang 344, not only in policy statements but in the day-to-day reality of venues, equipment, and event management, with continued compliance built into planning instead of being addressed only when problems arise. Coordination also matters.

A Sports Task Force can be formed to bring together the City Sports Development Office, the Schools Division Office, sports clubs, and NGOs, so that planning, resource sharing, and scheduling become easier, and so inclusive sports is carried across departments and partners rather than staying in isolated pockets. Schools and sports clubs have their own role to play, mainly through capacity building. They can partner with national sports bodies and national sport associations, such as the Philippine Sports Commission, particularly in adapted sports initiatives, to train and certify coaches and volunteers. That kind of training helps ensure that inclusion is not dependent on a few individuals with special interest, but becomes part of how programs are routinely handled.

Community action can widen participation in ways formal institutions often cannot. Inclusive sports can be made visible and normal through local festivals, community events, and local media, helping more families understand what is available and why it matters.

Children with and without disabilities can also be connected through playmates or "buddy" arrangements so inclusion becomes an everyday habit, not just an event-day practice.

Local businesses can strengthen these efforts by sponsoring activities, supporting transport or venue needs, or donating equipment, which is often the difference between a program that runs once and one that can keep going.

Researchers can support all of this by keeping attention on what happens over time, not just what looks good in the short term. Tracking long-term effects of participation can show what changes in health, confidence, friendships, and community engagement actually stick.

Studies can also examine how gender, ethnicity, and cultural background affect access, because barriers are not the same for everyone.

Finally, research should look beyond attitudes alone and focus on lived inclusion, whether participation in sport translates into day-to-day acceptance, shared spaces, and real belonging across the community.

Taken together, these steps point to a realistic path forward. With steady funding, real accessibility, trained people, community support, and careful study, Baguio can become a strong model for inclusive recreation in the Philippines, a place where every child has a fair chance to play, learn, and feel at home.

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