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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPORTANCE OF ADAPTED PHYSICAL AND SPORTING ACTIVITIES IN SOCIAL INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN CONAKRY (GUINEA)

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Abstract

This cross-sectional research aimed to identify the factors explaining the social exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities and to demonstrate the importance of sport in the social integration process of this vulnerable group. A survey, conducted through interviews, was carried out with twelve parents or guardians of people with intellectual disabilities and seven sports leaders or managers. The results revealed that genetic anomalies, birth complications, and beliefs related to witchcraft or curses reinforce the stigmatization and isolation of people with intellectual disabilities within community spaces. To deconstruct this phenomenon, the practice of sport promotes socialization, improves their well-being, and transforms perceptions of disability. These results suggest promoting accessible, adapted sports activities for vulnerable individuals, while encouraging them to better understand their own personality within a framework of genuine belonging to a supportive and inclusive community.

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Introduction:-

In many societies, differences observed at birth have very often constituted a form of social condemnation. Numerous generations of men and women have thus found themselves marginalized due to their perceived mental or physical abnormality (Boué et al. 2024).

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Disability limits participation in social activities due to functional impairment or deficiency. Thus, according to the World Health Organization, a person with a disability is defined as anyone whose physical or mental integrity is progressively or permanently diminished, either congenitally or as a result of age, illness, or accident, such that their autonomy, ability to attend school, or employment is compromised (Tremblay and Loiselle, 2016). In several African regions, the occurrence of disability is sometimes interpreted through the lens of traditional or spiritual beliefs, with some communities associating it with curses, witchcraft, or supernatural punishments (Bas, 2025; Congo, 2025). In these contexts, a person with a disability may be perceived as incapable of fully participating in the economic and social life of the community, thus hindering their empowerment and integration (Abdelhakim and Bennani, 2023). In Guinea, some national statistics indicate that people living with disabilities represent a significant proportion of the population, with a substantial number having intellectual disabilities (National Institute of Statistics of Guinea, 2014).

In several Guinean cities, particularly Conakry, disability can be interpreted by some populations as the result of mystical phenomena or curses, thus contributing to forms of stigmatization and even social exclusion of those affected (Nakou et al., 2025; Tchirkov and Ambassa, 2011). Individuals with disabilities may therefore be feared, marginalized, or sometimes hidden away by those around them. This social exclusion can lead to isolation, a sedentary lifestyle, and a reduction in physical and social activity (Berthouze and Reynes, 2011; Giudicelli and Bigard, 2025). Despite a gradual shift in attitudes, the integration and empowerment of people with disabilities often remain limited by the lack of inclusive public policies and appropriate support systems (Henrard, 2016; Tchirkov and Ambassa, 2011).

The issue of the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities is increasingly integrated into the orientations of public development policies. In this regard, several African states are implementing programs aimed at strengthening access to basic social services, improving training opportunities, and promoting the participation of vulnerable populations in local development dynamics (Kaboré, 2024). Within this framework, governments and specialized organizations are embracing the promotion of inclusive policies that foster the professional integration (Djadou et al., 2025) and social participation of people with disabilities (Nakou et al., 2025).

Furthermore, in this inclusive approach, sport emerges as a privileged space for socialization, enabling the reduction of stigmatization and exclusion (de Léséleuc et al., 2012; Nau et al., 2016). Inclusive sports activities can contribute to strengthening the self-esteem, social skills, and community integration of people with intellectual disabilities (Beldame et al. 2016). From this perspective, sports activity is a relevant tool for developing human capital and strengthening social cohesion.

Although sport is now recognized as an important tool for social inclusion, sports activities for people with intellectual disabilities remain largely invisible in the public sphere. Social perceptions, often marked by prejudice, contribute to limiting their participation in sports activities (Apostolidis and Dany, 2014). Yet, sports participation is an effective instrument for social integration and civic engagement for people with disabilities (Nau et al. 2016; Richard et al. 2020). It is therefore essential to further promote inclusive sports activities in order to reduce social barriers and foster the integration of these individuals into society.

This research therefore examines the social representations that community members have of inclusive sports practices for people with intellectual disabilities. Its objectives are to identify the factors explaining the social exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. It also aims to demonstrate the importance of sport in the social integration process of this vulnerable group.

Methods:-

Framework and Type of Research:-

This is a qualitative cross-sectional study conducted in Conakry, Republic of Guinea. The target population consists of twelve parents or guardians of people with intellectual disabilities and seven sports officials or leaders. The sample of parents or guardians of people with intellectual disabilities was selected using the accidental selection technique. The sample of sports officials was selected using the purposive selection technique. They were chosen because, by virtue of their professional position, they are the ones who can provide information regarding the acceptability of people with disabilities in public spaces and, especially, within sports communities.

Data Collection techniques and tools:-

For data collection, an interview guide was used with selected target groups to explore social perceptions of the integration of people with intellectual disabilities through sports. A direct observation grid supplemented the interview data. This direct observation aimed to observe people with intellectual disabilities in action through adapted physical and sporting activities. A Techno Camon CX Air mobile phone with a built-in recorder was used to record the interviews, with the consent of the participants. Data collection took place over two months, from January 27 to March 27, 2026, with the support of interviewers trained by specialists in qualitative data management.

Data Processing:-

The interviews, after transcription based on the items in the interview guide, were processed through an analysis followed by thematic grouping to compare the responses obtained with the research hypothesis. To this end, the collected statements were transcribed faithfully and, in their entirety, to focus the interviewees' discourse around different themes defined beforehand by the researchers and recorded in the interview guide. Responses that were more or less identical were classified by area of interest. Indeed, after careful listening to the interview recordings, the units of meaning were identified in order to give content to the themes and sub-themes emerging from all the interviews, according to the objectives. For reasons of confidentiality, no information is given regarding the identity of the respondents; they are referred to by their initials.

Results:-**Explanatory factors of social exclusion of children and young people with intellectual disabilities in the City of Conakry:-**

Intellectual disability affects intellectual functioning and involves significant limitations that impact learning, communication, and daily life. The causes are varied and include several genetic and environmental factors, as well as complications occurring during pregnancy or childbirth. It is within this framework that an interviewee stated the following: "He has suffered from intellectual disability since childhood. It was due to medical errors that occurred during childbirth." (Parent of a child with intellectual disability, D.H.; Father, 45 years old; Madinan; January 2026).

Another parent confided: "He has suffered from intellectual disability since childhood. It is a problem of malformation." (Parent of a child with intellectual disability, D.H.; Mother, 36 years old; Sonfonia; February 2026). These verbatim accounts reveal that malformation is one of the main factors explaining the presence of intellectual disability in children. Statements from an interview with one of the sports leaders in the community, primarily in Cobayah, reinforce these assertions, as he declared: "People with intellectual disabilities often find themselves in this situation from childhood. It is indeed linked to genetic factors. This problem is very often due to medical errors that occurred during childbirth." (Sports leader A.M.; Athletics coach, 38 years old; Kobayah; March 2026) The interviewee's remarks highlight the extent of the damage caused by medical errors during pregnancy monitoring or childbirth. Besides genetic factors, others believe that this health problem is related to human disbelief, extending to cases of witchcraft. This is what is justified by the words of an interviewee in this excerpt: "He has suffered from his intellectual disability since childhood. It's human malice; jealousy; witchcraft. Beyond all that, it's the will of God" (Member of the S.C. community; Male, 32 years old; Kipé; June 2025).

One of the sports leaders interviewed confided in these words: "It is often said in tradition that intellectual disability is perceived as a curse. Okay... That's why a person with an intellectual disability is rejected like a cursed child" (Sports club leader; Father, 40 years old; Gbessia Port; February 2026). This interviewee's words highlight the relationship to societal submission that sometimes leads to the isolation of children with disabilities, which can be described as marginalization. This situation is observable in certain areas where the environment is further polluted by the various prejudices held by different stakeholders. The different perceptions surrounding the phenomenon further reinforce this marginalization observed by some people.

Life Trajectory of individuals with intellectual disabilities before participating in sports:-

The interviewees shared their perspectives on the stigmatization and restricted spaces they experienced during the socialization process. One parent stated the following: Before participating in sports, he felt isolated; the neighborhood children didn't approach him. It's sad. No neighbor would let their child near them, especially since he wasn't doing well in school and had difficulty expressing himself. Everyone considered him simple-minded. I was often reluctant to let him leave the house. (Parent of a child with an intellectual disability, T.M.; Father, 40 years old; Lambanyi; February 2026).

This child was assigned a negative identity, reinforcing his isolation and limiting his social interactions. The isolation he faced only confirms the reasons for exclusion observed in the life trajectories of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, among these vulnerable individuals who are victims of stigmatization, many live in environments that did not foster strong community engagement with safe spaces. This is what a sports leader stated during the interviews: Children have been entrusted to my care for a few years now. Well... before, these children practically stayed home. I have to do home visits. I work with them. It's not easy to create a climate of trust. I have to admit, I'm managing. I really need to take courses in special education, child and youth protection. I recently discovered a course in recreation studies that will strengthen my skills in inclusive leisure activities. (Sports club leader; Father, 40 years old; Sonfonia Port; March 2026). This verbatim statement reflects a life trajectory characterized by limited social participation due to external perceptions. The interviewee here emphasized the importance of ongoing training to strengthen these skills in inclusive physical and sporting activities. Acquiring these new skills will serve as a springboard for better support of people with intellectual disabilities.

Importance of sport in the social integration process of people with intellectual disabilities in the City of Conakry:-

When asked about the value of sport as a tool for the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, many of the interviewees responded. One of them revealed: "Sporting activities are essential for these people. I think they should allow them to discover themselves" (Handball Coach B.A.; Male, 35 years old; Cosa; March 2026). This statement, recorded during an interview with a handball coach residing in Kaloum, demonstrates one of the benefits of sport for these children, young people, and even adults with intellectual disabilities. Indeed, positive situations related to the management of sports leaders and specialists in the protection of vulnerable groups encourage participation in sports activities. This is what one of the parents interviewed explained when he said: ...I wasn't convinced I'd ever see my child playing and doing sports like other children his age. After a long period of hesitation, I finally sent him to training sessions. He was directed towards athletics adapted to his disability, which is fine! It allows him to be healthy, have fun, and meet other people. I remain amazed by the changes he's seen thanks to his participation in sports. (Parent of a child with an intellectual disability, A.E.; Father, 44 years old; Donka; March 2026).

This parent's comments reveal an improvement in physical well-being and an expansion of social relationships following their child's enrolment in athletics activities. The expression of surprise in their statement reflects the potential benefits of participating in sports. The crucial role of sports activities, initially marked by limiting social representations of disability, is increasingly evident in their ability to transform perceptions and beliefs and to foster socialization. Among sports leaders, a club administrator interviewed confided: "There's a child we've been following for a few years who participates in our training sessions. Don't be surprised! I assure you that the activities are highly adapted to him. He's been able to make many friends and do things no one thought he could do: cycling, for example. But we need specialists to facilitate his support." (Club Administrative Manager H.J.; Female, 34 years old; Nongo; March 2026). This speech highlighted the inclusive nature of adapted sports activities in this child's social integration process. His regular participation in training sessions facilitated the achievement of performances previously considered almost impossible. This testimony reinforces the role of sport as a space for dismantling stereotypes. However, there is a need to address the challenges related to the professionalization of coaching teams for more effective and sustainable support.

Discussion:-

Explanatory factors of the social exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities:-

The research results showed that several factors influenced the social exclusion of the individuals concerned. The social exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the city of Conakry is based on several biomedical and sociocultural factors, as well as relational difficulties that structure their life trajectories since childhood. The various statements obtained from the respondents revealed a plurality of explanations for intellectual disability. Some respondents believed that their intellectual disability arose from genetic factors or medical errors. Others adopted sociocultural perspectives, attributing this unwanted situation to witchcraft, curses, or divine will. Consequently, research has revealed that social attitudes, heavily influenced by a lack of information about intellectual disability, give rise to exclusionary practices embedded within an ecosystem of social representations that attempt to legitimize this exclusion (Akiki, 2024; Apostolidis & Dany, 2014).

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the learning and communication difficulties faced by these individuals contribute to the reinforcement of negative identities marked by devaluing attitudes towards them (Djadou et al., 2025). Their participation in social spaces is limited: schools and their immediate environment. The family home

functions as their only refuge (Boukala and Lévy, 2025), even if slight stigmatization may be observed. The authors went further, confirming the results obtained (Chatroussat, 2011; Nakou et al., 2025). Social representations of these intellectually disabled individuals—or those with mental retardation considered incapable or abnormal—fuel social relations influenced by marginalization practices (Chatroussat, 2011), thus reducing opportunities for social integration (Nakou et al., 2025). However, studies conducted in Europe have revealed that, of the 80 million people with disabilities in Europe in 2014, including 9.6 million in France between the ages of 15 and 64, inclusion strategies differ significantly from one country to another, without responses commensurate with their technical and financial resources (Ravaud et al., 2002). A mutual effort is therefore desired, with an effort of integration on the part of people with disabilities and an effort by the state of adaptation of society (Plaisance et al. 2007).

Increased efforts are being made to break down the various socio-cultural barriers associated with this issue. State institutions such as the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children, and Vulnerable Persons, in collaboration with relevant organizations, are working to place the protection of children and vulnerable populations at the heart of public policy. Even as stigmatization and acts of imposed individual isolation persist, inclusive initiatives act as a buffer, breaking down barriers of social labeling to provide a safe space for people with intellectual disabilities and all other vulnerable individuals (Chevallier-Rodrigues et al., 2016; Koubi, 2017; Pariseau-Legault and Holmes, 2017).

The role of sport in the social integration of people with disabilities:-

The results of the survey of various target groups revealed that sports activities play a crucial role in the social integration of people with intellectual disabilities in the city of Conakry. Indeed, sports have emerged as a safe space for socialization for vulnerable individuals. In addressing the research question, based on statements from both parents and the sports leaders interviewed, participation in sports activities allows vulnerable individuals to strengthen their skills and self-esteem. These interested and motivated individuals actively participate in these inclusive and well-adapted activities. Adapted sport can thus be another way for each member of society to understand the social world (Gaillard, 2007). Playing sports facilitates communication with those around them, and at the same time, it requires autonomy and pushing them out of their comfort zone (Noël, 2012). It is in this process that they discover themselves and rediscover their hidden potential. However, when sport is practiced in a less inclusive environment, it can lead to overcompensation and, in the long term, to abandoning the activity altogether (Marcellini, 2005).

The respondents highlighted the socializing framework of sport, which fosters inclusive interactions to strengthen relationships. This framework includes people with intellectual disabilities, peers, the community, leaders, and sports officials. Participating in sport promotes the social integration of people with disabilities, who are often stigmatized and marginalized (Tant, 2014). Research in 2016 revealed that participating in sport can give people with intellectual disabilities, or any other disability, a renewed sense of control over their bodies and increased productivity (Ripoll, 2016). While a person with a disability may experience profound distress at the very idea of being alive, they must simultaneously reclaim their right to live and come to terms with their new body (Ancet and Nuss, 2012).

The analysis of the various statements gathered during fieldwork positions participation in sports activities as a way to break the isolation of these vulnerable individuals by facilitating their access to spaces for rebuilding and enhancing their social identity. Specialized centers now offer sports programs to foster the development of competitive and high-level opportunities, such as the Paralympic Games, which are growing in importance and changing social perceptions of disability by overturning stigmas (Marcellini and Villoing, 2014). However, people with disabilities remain marginalized and absent from the history of sport, as well as from the history of disability itself (Stiker, 2013). Furthermore, when stereotypes are challenged through participation in adapted sports activities, negative social representations of people with intellectual disabilities or developmental delays become obsolete. The literature indicates that interest in sports also varies according to the cultural, identity-based, and historical construction of disability (Marcellini and Villoing, 2014). Those interviewed emphasized the challenge of training coaches in inclusive sports and the management of adapted and inclusive sports activities. The shortage of educators or specialized skills in inclusive education and recreation, as well as the lack of professionalization among stakeholders, limits the numerous interventions implemented by the Guinean government, non-governmental organizations, associations, and even individuals.

The government, various relevant bodies, and federations are working to reduce the separation between able-bodied and disabled people. In his 2024 work, Cheickh demonstrated that the role of the State, sports organizations, local

authorities, and private partners is essential to providing citizens, including people with disabilities, with appropriate frameworks that allow them to engage in the physical activity of their choice, according to their ability level. Consequently, the various stakeholders are encouraged to align themselves with the national priorities of the Simandou 2040 Program, particularly through one of its strategic pillars: the health and well-being of the population. Sport, through its various activities, proves to be a strategic tool for social inclusion, capable of dismantling the stigma associated with intellectual disability and transforming the life trajectories of those affected.

Conclusion:-

This research aimed to identify the factors explaining the social exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. It also sought to demonstrate the importance of sport in the social integration process of this vulnerable group. This research revealed a restriction of access to safe spaces for socialization for people with intellectual disabilities. Their life trajectory is characterized by situations of isolation or withdrawal from community spaces. Their social participation is limited by external perceptions. Furthermore, to address this problem, sport appears as a response to these uncomfortable situations, thus contributing to the social integration of people with intellectual disabilities. The results showed that participation in sports activities strengthens their capacity to transform perceptions and beliefs and fosters socialization. The results confirm the research hypothesis, which states that participation in sports activities promotes social integration, access to inclusive spaces for socialization, and the reconstruction of sociocultural frameworks. It is imperative to strengthen communication strategies through interpersonal communication, social mobilization, and advocacy. These strategies, designed to promote individual and collective adoption of adapted and inclusive sport for people with intellectual disabilities, should further strengthen this tool, a powerful indicator of social inclusion, capable of dismantling stigma and transforming the life trajectories of those involved.

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Declaration of conflict of interest:-

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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