

**Conference Proceedings**

**Sports Cultures of Young People with Disabilities as Challenges to the Ideals of Ability**

Susan Eriksson

South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences

**Abstract**

This article provides a perspective on ableism in young people's sports hobbies and how it appears considering previous research. It focuses on the VALKKU and VAIKOS studies, which were carried out at the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences in a consortium with the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Helsinki. This article explored factors and meanings of ableism and how these construct the identities of young people with disabilities as sports enthusiasts.

*Keywords:* sports, disabilities, ableism, identity

### **Sports Cultures of Young People with Disabilities as Challenges to the Ideals of Ability**

Physical activities of young people with disabilities have been studied in Finland

from the perspective of the prevalence of such activities (Hakanen et al., 2019) and in the framework of youth culture and opportunities for physical activities (Eriksson et al., 2018; Eriksson & Saukkonen, 2022). The focus of the research has been on mapping the structures of opportunities that promote young people's physical activities and sports hobbies. Structural factors have been found to be mainly related to the resources available in sports and leisure services and disability services, in physical education in special education institutions, and at home.

The empirical contribution of the studies to the area of hobbies and sports cultures of young people with disabilities is significant, but they focus on the opportunities provided in the service system. The attitudes and social effects on the opportunities of persons with disabilities have not been examined to a sufficient extent. In addition, this field of study lacks theoretically and empirically grounded examination of the meanings that construct the identities of young people with sports hobbies.

The aim of this article is to provide a perspective on ableism in young people's sports hobbies and how it appears in the light of previous research. This examination focuses on the VALKKU and VAIKOS studies, which were carried out at the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences in a consortium with the University of Eastern Finland (VALKKU project in 2015–2018) and the University of Helsinki (VAIKOS project in 2019–2022). This article explored which factors and meanings of ableism, i.e., the dominance of ability, are attached to the empirical observations of the studies, and how the meanings of ableism construct the identities of young people with disabilities as sports enthusiasts.

### **Ableism as Hegemony and Discourses**

Ableism refers to culturally determined factors based on notions of functional ability. These factors shape the processes used to measure and classify ability. Ableism assumes ideal

bodily ability, based on which social relations are constituted (Campbell, 2009). For example, the educational system is fundamentally ableist as it classifies and measures abilities and skills, and places individuals in rankings and categories based on certain skill classifications. When standards and indicators of capability are thus created, attitudes related to human worth and dignity are also shaped, based on social and cultural power relations. In sports and exercise, ableism is unequivocally linked to the body's ideal performance. Competitive sports are a strong example of ableist practice as they are based on the measurement of physical abilities. The requirements for the body's optimal functional capacity that are built in ableist conceptions also affect the practices of young people in sports.

Ableism has been theoretically based on Bruno Latour's notions of the opposition between the natural and the unnatural, which has also been seen to constitute the relationship between the normal and the pathological. According to Latour (1993), social practices operate in two ways, since there is a constant mixing or hybridization between the natural and the unnatural, yet pure archetypes are formed in relation to them ("la purification" in French). These dual processes are also seen to work in the relationships between normal and pathology. A kind of "pure" archetypes position themselves to represent normal or natural and pathological or non-natural, and individuals are classified through these relationships for various governmental and other societal purposes (Campbell, 2009).

In particular, the classifications of illness and disability are based on the distinctions between normal and pathological. Illness or disability is conceptualized as an exception from the norm, which means that normalizing measures, such as curing an illness or rehabilitating a body classified as disabled to functioning capacity, come into question and become actual. Fiona Kumari Campbell sees two social and cultural practices as producing similar ableist relationships. These practices are (a) the idea of normality, which produces a kind of

individual "norm" or normative individual, and (b) the division between normal (human) and deviant (non-human), which produces and constructs social distinctions and power relations (Campbell, 2012).

Normalizing measures are influential in affecting the status of persons with disabilities in society, which has also been emphasized in research on physical activities and sports cultures of young people with disabilities. For example, physical rehabilitation often directly replaces sports hobbies (Eriksson & Saukkonen, 2021). Ableism produces the neoliberal assumptions that people should be productive, do useful things, and participate to add value. Thus, as a narcissistic projection, ableism includes the assumption of the individual's constant development and pursuit of perfection. The capabilities and dignity of persons with disabilities are mirrored against these assumptions of ableist normativity and the implicit standards created by them (Campbell, 2012.).

Ableist normativity refers to ableist concepts and practices that form the basis on which human life and individual needs are valued and categorized. It manifests itself as socially dominant dimensions. In sports cultures, for example, ideals based on physical ability are strong. Parasports rely equally on enhancing bodily performances and on ratings that measure it, but it is also essential to develop prosthetic and assistive device technology. Parasports also operate at the Olympic competition level, which is a field permeated by ableist capability norms. However, many people with intellectual disabilities mainly compete at the level of Special Olympics, which is an activity sponsored by private financiers. Although the criteria for success in sports are looser in Special Olympics competitions, the meanings related to enhancing the bodily performance and the competitive ethos are also present in them.

Similar dimensions were found in the results of research projects on physical

activities among young people with disabilities. Although the sports activities and hobbies of people with intellectual disabilities were largely characterized by social values, such as having fun together, the young people were not free from the impact of competition, for example, in developing within their own sport (Eriksson, 2018; Armila et al., 2017). These considerations influence young people's identities as sports enthusiasts. The sociological debate regarding identities focuses on the cultural affordances offered in social relations and practices and in the processes of appropriation of which identities are formed (Alasuutari, 2004; Hall et al., 1999). In addition, identities have been examined as situational positions that are constituted as social practice (Jokinen et al., 2016).

In the discursive dimension of social reality, many practices of definition become hegemonic or dominant when reality is made understandable (Fairclough, 1992). Ableist notions are also tied to hegemonic discursive practices, such as measures related to bodily ability. However, the need for support and assistance is recognized in the physical activities and sports of people with disabilities. This has created a requirement to approach, define, and conceptualize the physical activities of persons with disabilities through practices that take individual support into account in different ways. Sports policy and the practices of the service system actively use concepts and make use of meanings in which ableism and hegemonic assumptions about physical ability are questioned. Resistance in speeches and texts against the prevailing reality manifests itself as counter-discourses or meanings that are produced, repeated, and adopted intentionally. These in turn can become established as practices in defining the reality (Jokinen et al., 2004).

This article's empirical examination focuses on the meanings given to physical activities in the data analyses and interpretations collected in two research projects, and especially in the interviews and ethnographic observations of young people with disabilities.

Specifically, the ableist meanings related to the activities and the counter-meanings of ableism will be examined. The findings will be used to study the effects of ableism in the physical activities of young people with disabilities, consider ways to resist them, and create new paths of thinking.

### **Research Interpretations of Physical Activities Among Young People with Disabilities Under Review**

This article analyzes the qualitative data from studies on physical activities among young people with disabilities who participated in the VALKKU study. The VALKKU study was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland from the funding source for sports research in 2015–2018. Its purpose was to map the sports hobbies of young people with disabilities and to study their position in young people's sports cultures. Approximately 60–70 hours of multi-sited ethnographic data were collected from young people's sports facilities and hobby locations in different parts of Finland. Approximately 40 ethnographic and semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the young people and their sports coaches.

The VAIKOS study was implemented through the same funding instrument in 2019–2022. It aimed to map out the opportunities and participation of the young people with profound and multiple disabilities in sports hobbies. In the VAIKOS project, multi-sited ethnographic observation data was also collected in different parts of the country. In addition, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with people close to the young people, such as their family members and service system professionals, who are involved in their everyday lives.

The analytical approach of the studies was largely based on descriptions of ethnographic observation data and interview data. Relying on the surveys, it turned out that many young people with disabilities engage in physical activities if there are sufficient

opportunities in their hometown and the young person receives support from their family and the sports facility. However, the variety of sports hobbies is very often related to adapted sports and the sports cultures formed within them. Many young people with disabilities do not have access to the leisure communities of peers who do not have disabilities. Problems with belonging to these communities, mainly related to negative attitudes toward disability, discourage them from seeking out youth communities.

According to the research data, the young people with profound and multiple disabilities or those in need of extensive and continuous support are tied to the practices of the service system, such as their housing units, activity centers, and family circle. Their opportunities for physical activities are mainly related to physical rehabilitation measures, for example, activities organized by disability services during which their participation is supported. A young person with a profound intellectual disability has even fewer opportunities to engage in hobbies with young people who do not have disabilities. The research data did not include or describe these few opportunities, except for times spent with siblings.

The importance of help and support in sports hobbies is significant based on the data of both projects. Many structural problems with engaging in physical activities were linked to the lack of sufficient help and support. Problems with attitudes toward disability turned out to be another key factor limiting young people's opportunities to engage in physical activities.

As noted in Eriksson et al., 2018, young people's chances to engage in hobbies as young people are mainly stymied by the lack of social support, which is largely due to prejudice against disability and limited experience with and knowledge about disabilities.

The importance of help and support is also emphasized in the physical activities of the young people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities. Opportunities for physical

activities and other activities are created in various networks of support and social relationships. For example, in the winter sports event observed during the ethnographic fieldwork, the practice of supporting inclusion seemed to create opportunities for young people to engage in physical activities, and the initiator was often a person who supports the young person, such as a rehabilitation professional or an employee of a housing unit.

The young people included in the research mainly engaged in applied sports and traditional individual and team sports, such as cross-country skiing and snowboarding. Among adapted physical activities, the range of sports engaged by young people was wide. Adapted physical activities, previously referred to as special physical activities, refers to physical activities aimed at those with reduced functional capacity due to illness, injury, or age, for example, and whose physical activities require adaptation and professional expertise in the sports communities to organize the activities. The most important parties organizing adapted physical activities are municipal sports services, organizations and clubs, social and health care agencies, and educational institutions (LTS, n.d.). In adapted sports, the young people practiced judo and bowling. They also engaged in social circus, which is not classified as an adapted sport, but which contains many physical activities imitating those performed at a circus. However, there is a lack of sports opportunities and necessary aids around the country suitable for young people with disabilities. The places where the activities take place, such as in organized training camps, may be located far away from the young person's home. It may also be necessary to rent and pick up physical aids but not all families are prepared for the required transportation. The structures that create obstacles to hobbies are largely related to the scarcity of supply and transportation.

These issues that impact the physical activity opportunities of young people with disabilities emerged as key research results in the VALKKU and VAIKOS studies. Even if a

young person wants to exercise, there are not always opportunities to do so. The analytical chapters of the research article examine these factors in more detail from the perspective of ableism and consider its significance in the challenges and problems related to physical activities among young people. The subject of the analysis is the interpretations that most essentially described both young people's opportunities and obstacles for hobbies. In addition, the ethnographic and interview data collected in the projects will be analyzed from the point of view of the factors to which the meanings and counter-meanings of ableism are linked.

First, ableism is examined in terms of structural and social factors that have emerged in the interpretations of the research data, as they have a key impact on the opportunities for exercising. Secondly, ableism in identities related to physical activities is examined in the light of ethnographic and interview data. This is followed by an analysis of the meanings of resistance to ableism in young people's physical activities. Finally, the ableist and anti-ableist practices in young people's physical activities cultures and the nature of the physical activities they enable are scrutinized.

### **Structural Dimensions of Ableism: Sports Facilities and Practices**

In the research results of both studies, special attention is paid to the separate status of adapted forms of exercise as sports cultures. Young people with disabilities engage in hobbies in their peer groups or within the scope of special services offered to them. Thus, friendships or other forms of community are hardly formed with young people who do not have disabilities (Eriksson et al., 2018). This was particularly evident in the case of the young people with profound and multiple disabilities, whose opportunities for physical activities mostly depend on the practices of the service system, and who have particularly few encounters with young people who do not have disabilities.

For example, social circus was seen as an activity for young people with disabilities.

The young people are provided with ample support in their circus activities. The functional capacities of each person are considered, which determines what kind of activities are appropriate for them. In social circus, the level of technical requirements is lower than, for example, in youth circus. However, the activities are goal-oriented and long-term, which was evident at the time of the ethnographic observation when the young people were rehearsing for an upcoming public performance.

Spaces and places that are separate from other young people illustrate the realities of recreational opportunities for young people with disabilities. Most often, they engaged in adapted sports that have been developed specifically for those with limitations in their functional capacities. Young people with sports hobbies have access to aids and are coached using special methods. Young people were observed participating in adapted judo, which differs from regular judo mainly in terms of lower skill and level requirements, but which looked professional to a layman. Judo training was described as a social situation marked by a certain playfulness and ease, which is typical, for example, in children's guided exercise.

Adapted sports are particularly characterized by the fact that their skill requirements are defined according to limited functional capacity. Separate exercise practices are largely based on the meanings of the body's performance or lack thereof. However, this does not apply to all adapted sports, as the data also included observations of playing goalball for the visually impaired, in which both young adults with and without visual impairments participated. The sport is physically demanding, as one must reach for a moving, heavy ball on the floor, relying solely on the sense of hearing. There are bells inside the ball that produce sound and thus indicate the direction of the ball's movement on the floor. The requirements of the sport are based on the physical strength of the players. The need for technical skills in the sport is increased by the requirement that one cannot use the sense of

sight at all while playing—a black scarf is worn to cover the eyes.

Skill requirements are lower in sports that are aimed at those who often have limitations in their physical strength, such as people with intellectual disabilities. However, factors based on technical requirements, physical strength, and endurance do determine the field of sports in which the persons with disabilities can participate. This is mainly reflected in the assumption that adapted sports are the optimal area for them, and it is not very often that young people without disabilities participate in the field. These factors related to the skill and endurance requirements of sports show the ableist nature of the practices and have a significant impact on what kinds of hobbies and sports are provided to people with intellectual disabilities.

The VALKKU study also revealed that some young people without disabilities do not want to engage in hobbies in the same space and time with young people with intellectual disabilities. The separation of hobby cultures is thus also affected by discrimination, which is why young people with disabilities are placed in their own separate shifts. In the case of children and young people, discrimination can most often be caused by fears and prejudices toward disability. For these reasons, it may be most natural for the owner of a sports venue to place young people with intellectual disabilities in their own shifts so that leisure activities are possible although the venue's clientele includes all enthusiasts. Thus, the arrangements of separate venues and facilities have been justified due to negative and discriminatory attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Discrimination and isolation of people with disabilities has a very long history based on prejudices about human differences. It has been argued that the ideal of humanity created in ancient Greece, based on the ability of the athletic body, still has an impact as a deeply ingrained cultural structure (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005). The ideals of humanity are

constructed with the emphasis on able-bodiedness, creating social divisions and classifications through which the status of people with disabilities in various cultural and social practices are determined.

The ideal of a capable body is also based on generalized notions that people with profound and multiple disabilities have no ability to engage in physical activities. In the VAIKOS study, this became evident when researchers were seeking to collect data. In the first phone contacts with children's and young people's sports clubs, the researchers were questioned about the project and told it is obvious that a young person with a severe disability cannot have sports hobbies. However, as the project continued, it became apparent that physical capabilities vary greatly among people who are perceived as severely disabled. For example, even if snowboarding is not suitable as a sport for many young people with severe disabilities, the range of sports and physical activities is very wide. They are made accessible by special methods and aids, making it possible for everyone to find physically activating hobbies.

It was particularly noticeable for young people with profound intellectual disabilities that many of their opportunities for physical activities are tied to the service system, such as the institutional practices of health care, special education institutions, housing units, and activity centers. Rehabilitation services are the most central of these. For some with disabilities, these services may be the only opportunities they have for physical activities.

The practice of rehabilitation has been examined in critical disability research as a project of normalization, as it is based on notions of a deviant and defective body that needs to be repaired to make it functional (e.g., Eriksson & Saukkonen, 2021). At the same time, the practice of rehabilitation is seen to produce a paradigmatic understanding of the measures applied to people with disabilities and the physical activities available to them. It is argued

that the normativity of the practice of rehabilitation has even excluded people with disabilities from understanding leisure time as spontaneous, pleasurable activities (Aitchison, 2009).

Although considering the VAIKOS study, the physical activities of the young people with profound and multiple disabilities are very often related to the physical rehabilitation of the young person, it was also revealed in the study that the everyday practices of the service system can be diverse. For example, in special schools and educational institutions, rehabilitation is combined with play and fun whenever possible. Physical activities are diversified with many enjoyable activities so that they also function as efficient physical rehabilitation. These kinds of physical activities, which are based on imagination and the brainstorming of individual professionals, fit naturally into the everyday hustle and bustle of the service system, but is also promoted by the institutionalized system. For example, social circus activities have been included in the curriculum of special education institutions because circus activities can develop a wide range of skills and qualities, such as cognition, imagination, and physical improvement.

However, the key research results of these two projects were largely related to the structural factors permeated by ableism and the resulting problems in the opportunities for young people with disabilities to engage in physical activities. For example, rehabilitation is too often considered sufficient for the young person's needs for physical activities, and no support is offered to seek out sport hobbies. This also includes an implicit, generalizing assumption that the young person does not have the ability to engage in sports, often leading to a disabled young person having fewer hobbies compared to their non-disabled peers. Additionally, the places and practices intended for sports have been designed and built based on the ideal of a capable body. This means accessibility, inclusivity, or adequate adaptations

that would allow people with disabilities to participate in physical activities have not been considered.

Sports cultures are largely built on the ideals of physical abilities (e.g., Itkonen & Salmikangas, 2015). Structures and practices based on the body's ideal performance are also responsible for a lack of sufficient expertise or competence related to functional disabilities in sports coaching. When a sports facility or sports club does not have the necessary expertise and is unable to offer special support to people with disabilities, the young person will be unable to start a hobby.

### **Ableist Ideals and the Identity of the Athlete**

Many young sports enthusiasts with disabilities draw meaning for their athletic identities from ideals related to physical performance. Competing and succeeding in prestigious competitions, for example, are very important to many young people, and it raises their self-esteem and builds positive social identities, as shown in the following interview with a young competitive athlete (Eriksson, 2018, p. 88):

Interviewer: "Well, do you think you're good at alpine skiing?"

Jari: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Yes, I saw you came from there pretty well."

Jari: "I'm two thousand and five in Japan, I got two, two, two silvers."

Interviewer: "Aha, pretty nice."

Jari: "And then, after two thousand in America, I was fourth, and now I'm fourth, I'm disappointed."

Interviewer: "Aha, one fourth place that you're a little disappointed with?"

Jari: "Yes, and in Japan a two-silver medalist and, in America two times fourth, and then that one gold."

Interviewer: “Yes. Wow. Great, congratulations. You've been very successful in those competitions.”

The interviewer first asks the athlete's opinion on whether he is skilled in his sport, and the athlete's answer is an unequivocal "Yes." In the interviewer's immediate statement— "Yes, I saw you came from there pretty well"—it is confirmed that the athlete is skilled. Immediately after the interviewer's statement, the athlete begins a story about his international success in competitive sports, through which he further justifies his skill. His disappointment in placing fourth place also speaks to the young person's competitive spirit and the fact that medals in prestigious competitions have been very important to him.

Success in competitions is of great importance for the positive identities of young athletes (Salasuo et al., 2016). In sports that require physical strength and technical skills, many young people with disabilities do not differ in this respect from young people in general. Proficiency in one's favorite sport and the competitive spirit as an athlete affect the desire to develop further in the sport. But so does the desire to beat other athletes, as the following observation notes indicate (Eriksson, 2018, p. 90):

“Aija doesn't care much about people, she doesn't need support because she is skilled in all sports, develops a lot and is competitive, and wants to be the best. Because she is an autistic person, she doesn't care about having friends, doesn't need them but wants to be in a group, other people are extras, but she needs them to support her own performance.”

Competitiveness is a key factor in forming and further strengthening the identity of an athlete, and skill in the sport is seen as a prerequisite for success in competitions. In the VALKKU research data, success in the sport, public popularity, and the reputation of a good athlete appeared to be key motivators for many young people to engage in physical activities.

However, for many, the most important element in sports is friends and, for a few, also being part of a wider international sports culture. In certain winter sports, such as snowboarding, some are also attracted by the feeling of danger, as the sport has a high risk of physical injury. In addition to the fact that mastery of difficult technique indicates excellence in personal performance, risk is related to several factors in young people's sports cultures, the collective values of the sport culture, and the competence to act in the culture. These social dimensions may be the most important motivating factors for practicing the sport.

Nevertheless, positive identities as exercise enthusiasts are often constructed by competence related to physical skills and strength, but it is not the only factor. Fun and being part of a larger group of young people and a wider youth culture form the most inspiration for many people to engage in sports. However, social competence related to sports cultures requires meeting the norms of that culture. This involves, for example, various factors related to risk management. In these dimensions, ableist meanings and practices become visible in the sports cultures of young people.

The sports that require physical strength and mastery of technical abilities include dimensions of ableism, all often significant for the young people constructing identities as athletes. Problems at the structural level, such as the lack of opportunities for sports and exercise as well as inadequate practices for help and support, are also based on the ableist understanding of the meanings of physical sports performance inherent in the culture. It is based on the ideal of physical ability, which is normative in the deep structural level of sports cultures, and the ableist normativity that profoundly limits these young people's opportunities to operate in the field of sports.

### **Carnavalesque of the Sport Culture as a Challenger to Ableism**

Play, fun, togetherness, and joy largely reflect the sports cultures of young people

with disabilities. For many, having fun and nurturing friendships is the most important component in all hobbies. This was demonstrated, for example, in the ethnography of the VALKKU study when adapted football was introduced in a national tournament. The team, consisting of young players with intellectual disabilities, was dressed for the match with face colors and colorful uniforms, and there were family members and friends of the players cheering them on. Their supporters formed a collective on the edge of the field, sitting on the grass in small groups, listening to music, and eating snacks. Many families knew each other and groups planned future joint activities.

The players' scoring and good passes were cheered, and they rejoiced and gestured their success in ways that are typical in football matches. Brisk cheers echoed throughout the match. Family members, friends, and employees of housing units moved around the edge of the field with banners and maintained a boisterous atmosphere.

The official adapted football match was a very communal, even carnivalesque event. The carnival-like atmosphere was shown, for example, in the use of face paints, colorful clothing, and exaggerated movements and gestures when playing football. The relaxed presence of the audience and activities, separate from the context of the match, included a picnic and planning of future events, emphasizing the communal nature of the event.

In cultural studies theory, the significance of carnival has been understood as a rebellious but controlled event based on medieval Europe, in which the prevailing order of values was questioned by symbolically reversing it. At the carnival, individuals and groups of people from the lower social classes were allowed to appear in processions, for example, dressed as superiors, such as kings and popes (Bakhtin, 1981). People with disabilities were prominently featured during the carnival. Since bodies with disabilities were generally seen as defects, their presence at the carnival symbolized chaos and disorder.

According to cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, carnivalizing the prevailing social order made its norms visible and strengthened them and, therefore, the action was approved by those in power. At the carnival, the lower classes were allowed to ridicule social order and those in power, which in turn prevented the emergence of genuine rebellions (Bakhtin, 1981). The public appearance of the body perceived as disabled and the emphasis on its characteristics during this exceptional time made the prevailing power and value structures in society visible. Today, it is argued in cultural disability studies that the purpose of emphasizing physicality and exaggerating performances is to highlight disability in positive ways, and that it has an empowering impact (Kuppers, 2011).

Playing in the adapted football tournament with carnivalesque emphasis on the practices of a sport based on the idealization of technical prowess and bodily performance can be interpreted as a performance that turns rankings upside down and at the same time brings disability to the fore. The players were happy about exercise and their own bodies as they are, and they were also encouraged to go on. The carnivalization of football also made visible the prevailing sports cultural order, within which adapted sports are not valued to the same extent as, for example, typical men's football.

At the same time as the adapted football, the women played matches in the final series of the Finnish Championship on another grass field of the large sports area. During the ethnographic observations, a few young spectators of the women's matches stopped by to watch the young people with disabilities play. The adapted football appeared in this context as a freak circus, as the playing caused amusement for these young spectators. They took pictures and videos of the game with their phones and sent them to their friends, urging them to arrive there, too.

The meanings of ableist normativity arose here again to emphasize what is perceived

as a "real" sport and what does not. In this context, too, ableism attaches with meanings as a deep-rooted cultural structure relying on the ideal of an athletic and skilled body, based on which the cultural rankings of sports are created. However, the carnivalization of football by the young people themselves strongly challenges ableist normativity and produces its opposite to the conventional understanding of sports. As an anti-ableist practice, the carnival also re-articulates identities based on corporeality perceived as disabled or deviant into a positive and worthy celebration.

### **Institutional Anti-Ableism of Youth Physical Activities**

In sports cultures, similar anti-ableist meanings are present, for example, in speech about moving through play. In sports youth cultures, young people conduct voluntary exercise not under the guidance of a sports club. This can be, for example, basketball with groups of friends on the court or skateboarding on the streets. In sports cultures of young people with disabilities, the joy of physical activities stems especially from practices that allow for imagination, creativity, and spontaneity. For example, in social circus, the physical nature of the workouts seemed to have a lot to do with the fact that the young people were allowed to do the things that they felt were meaningful and that their spontaneous ideas and impulses mattered. Exercise is even more meaningful and fun if it is linked to other, more creative activities. For example, the joint brainstorming of an audience performance in circus rehearsals seemed to inspire the young people because everyone was allowed to choose a program to participate in that included at least acting.

A sports instructor at a special education institution who followed the circus training said in an interview that because the circus is based on foolishness anyway, the failure to perform tricks is a good thing rather than a bad thing. That, in turn, provides a very free framework for young people's physical activities. In these circus exercises, the young person

does not need to learn anything streamlined or technically perfect. The activities are referred to as creative exercise, which describes the physical activities typical of performing arts. For example, improvisation is of great importance for the performance (Eriksson, 2023). In the performance arts of people with disabilities, the inclusion of creative exercise in the production of art itself has been interpreted as an anti-ableist practice based on the recognition of all kinds of bodily performances as competent forms of physical activities (Kuppers, 2011).

Because spontaneous physical revelry is accepted in so many social and institutional spheres, it has also laid the foundation for anti-ableist thinking. Physical activities can be possessed by people whose physical functional capacity does not allow for participation in traditional sports. When probing possibilities for young people with profound and multiple disabilities, anti-ableist practices such as physical activities supported by assistive devices strengthen inclusion precisely because they allow for the interpretation of activities in supported physical activities as physical ability.

In institutional sports contexts, such as physical education in a special education institution, the principle of recognizing the diversity of abilities is applied pedagogically. According to a sports instructor at an educational institution, a young person's individual skills are always considered in physical education lessons. For example, if a person can raise one hand, a common exercise is developed around the movement, and thus the inclusion of young people with severe disabilities is strengthened.

Many practices of the service system must be interpreted in a way that they seek to question the hegemony of superior physical performance when defining and organizing physical activities for people with disabilities. These questioning practices are based on the principles of equality and human rights, according to which opportunities for inclusion must

be created for everyone. According to the Finland 2014 Equality Act, the principle of supporting inclusion must be followed up with services, considering person-centered approaches. Research data show that young people with disabilities can experience improved everyday life with creative methods even while acknowledging diverse individual competencies.

### **Tyranny of Ableism and its Opposition in Physical Activities of Young People with Disabilities**

This article analyzed the dimensions of ableism and the practices that impact the physical activities and sports of young people with disabilities. Through analysis, it concludes that ableism is deeply rooted in cultural structures on which the understanding of exercise is based and the ways in which physical activity is conceptualized. This is reflected in the opportunities offered to young people with disabilities to engage in hobbies and, at its most glaring, in the lack of practice, skills, and expertise for help and support. However, the analysis raises hope as it found that service support can strengthen young people's participation in physical activities in many imaginative and creative ways.

Anti-ableist meanings can be found in creative and spontaneous forms of physical activities incorporated into official, institutional definitions of physical activity benefits and public health. But ableism is also hidden in these elements as they include neoliberal meanings of self-development and the optimization of individual reproductive potential and productivity. In the debate on bio-governance, it is also argued that physical and health well-being has been harnessed as an object of social regulation by means of various administrative and controlling mechanisms (Foucault, 1975).

Forms and meanings of ableism are often implicit or hidden, and their effects and consequences cannot be examined without special theoretical tools. This article highlights a few dimensions that are related to both social structures and the lived reality of young people.

Many young people in the research data express themselves through positive identities affected by personal success, even if these are based on ableist notions of excellent physical and technical skills. In the discussion about ableism, the notion of internalized ableism was introduced, when one's own disability is ignored because one must strive toward everything that is considered normal (Campbell, 2009 ). Nevertheless, as identities are fluid and contextual and even situation-dependent, internalized ableism is only one dimension through which a young person can form their identity as an athlete or sports enthusiast. The practices in which disabilities are celebrated were also recognized in the research, and they are dimensions into which anti-ableism is interwoven. Some cultures of adapted physical activities thus present disability in a particularly positive light, promoting empowerment and a culture of disability advocacy that seeks to influence society. Ableism is challenged in these emancipatory efforts—and new youth cultures based on anti-ableist ideals are formed in them.

Within the social service system, universal principles related to human rights, such as the equal rights of children and young people to play, constitute professional ethics and can guide the expert services provided children and young people with disabilities. Through these principles, anti-ableist understanding should be part of everyday professionalism and can serve to challenge conventional value hierarchies. In services that support young people, the meanings of equality are increasingly becoming visible as actions and practices that recognize diversity emerge in terms of abilities, competences, and human dignity in general.

### References

- Aitchison, C. (2009). Exclusive discourses: Leisure studies and disability. *Leisure Studies*, 28(4), 375–386.
- Alasuutari, P. (2004). *Social theory and human reality*. Sage.
- Armila, P., Rannikko, A., & Torvinen, P. (2017). Young people with intellectual disabilities and sport as a leisure activity: Notions from the Finnish welfare society. *Leisure Studies*, 37(3), 295–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2017.1397184>
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. (M. Holquist, Ed., Trans., & C. Emerson, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Campbell, F. K. (2009). *Contours of ableism: The production of disability and abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Campbell, F. K. (2012). Stalking ableism: Using disability to expose “abled” narcissism. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes, & L. Davies (Eds.), *Disability and social theory: New developments and directions* (pp. 212–231). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eriksson, S. (2018): “Se on mulle tosi fiilisjuttu” – liikuntaharrastusten kulttuuriset ulottuvuudet” [“It's a real cool thing for me”—the cultural dimensions of physical activities]. In S. Eriksson, P. Armila, & A. Rannikko (Eds.), *Vammaiset nuoret ja liikunta* [Young people with disabilities and sports] (pp. 85–97). Publications on physical activities and public health 356. Jyväskylä: Finnish Foundation for the

Promotion of Physical Activities and Public Health (LIKES).

Eriksson, S. (2023). Impact of art and sensory experiences in the physical activities of young people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities. In S. Prideaux, M. Sheikh, & A. Formby (Eds.), *Crime, criminality and injustice: An interdisciplinary collection of revelations* (pp. 135–50). Anthem Press.

Eriksson, S., Armila, P., & Rannikko, A. (2018). Vammaiset nuoret ja liikunta [Young people with disabilities and sports]. Publications on physical activities and public health 356. Jyväskylä: Finnish Foundation for the Promotion of Physical Activities and Public Health (LIKES).

Eriksson, S., & Saukkonen, E. (2021). Rehabilitation or leisure? Physical exercise in the practice of physiotherapy with young persons with profound and multiple disabilities. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 23(1), 295–304.

<https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.795>

Eriksson, S. & Saukkonen, E. (2022). Vaikeimmin vammaisten nuorten liikunnallinen osallisuus. [Young people with profound and multiple disabilities and participation in sports]. *Finnish Youth Research Society/Finnish Youth Research Network, Publications 241*. Finnish Youth Research Society.

Fairclough, N., (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Foucault, M., (1975). *The birth of the clinic. An archaeology of medical perception*. Vintage/Random House.

Hakanen, T., Myllyniemi, S., & Salasuo, M. (2019). Takuulla liikuntaa. Kyselytutkimus toimintarajoitteisten lasten ja nuorten vapaa-ajasta ja liikunnasta. [Physical activity guaranteed. Survey of participation in physical activity and sport and the leisure time of children and young people with disabilities.] Finnish Youth Research

Society/Youth Research Network 142. Finnish Youth Research Society.

<https://www.liikuntaneuvosto.fi/wp->

[content/uploads/2019/09/Takuulla\\_liikuntaa\\_Verkkojulkaisu\\_020619.pdf](https://www.liikuntaneuvosto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Takuulla_liikuntaa_Verkkojulkaisu_020619.pdf)

Hall, S., Herkman, J., & Lehtonen, M. (1999). *Identiteetti / Stuart Hall*; transl. and eds.

*Mikko Lehtonen and Juha Herkman*. Vastapaino.

[https://helka.helsinki.fi/permalink/358UOH\\_INST/1a9ac4k/alma9913570323506253](https://helka.helsinki.fi/permalink/358UOH_INST/1a9ac4k/alma9913570323506253)

Itkonen, H., & Salmikangas, A.-K. (2015). The changing roles of public, civic and private

sectors in Finnish sports culture. *Viesoji politika ir administravimas*, 14(4), 545–

556. <https://doi.org/10.13165/VPA-15-14-4-04>

Jokinen, A., Huttunen, L., & Kulmala, A. (2004). *Puhua vastaan ja vaieta. Neuvottelu*

*kulttuurisista marginaaleista*. [To speak counter and be silenced. Negotiation of cultural margins]. Gaudeamus.

Jokinen, A., Juhila, K., & Suoninen, E. (2016). Diskurssianalyysi: Teoria, keskeiset käsitteet

ja käyttö. [Discourse analysis: Theories, basic concepts and use.] Vastapaino.

Kuppers, P. (2011). *Disability culture and community performance. Find a strange and*

*twisted shape*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*. (C. Porter, Trans.). Harvard University Press.

(Original work published 1991).

LTS: Applied physical education. (n.d.). Applied physical activities - Finnish Society of

Sport Sciences.

Salasuo, M., Piispa, M., & Huhta, H. (2016). *Exceptional life-courses – elite athletes and*

*successful artists in 2000s Finland. Finnish Youth Research Society's Publications 177, internet publications 97*. Finnish Youth Research Society.

<https://nuorisotutkimus.fi/julkaisut/nuorisotutkimusseuran-julkaisut/exceptional-life->

[courses/](#)

Sandahl, C. & Auslander, P. (2005). Introduction: Disability studies in commotion with performance studies. In C. Sandahl & P. Auslander (Eds.). *Bodies in commotion: Disability and performance* (pp. 1-11). University of Michigan Press.



**Sports Cultures of Young People with Disabilities as Challenges to the Ideals of Ability** by Susan Eriksson.

<https://rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/1400> is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#) and based on works at <https://rdsjournal.org>.