

Promotion of accessibility in sports facilities

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Abstract. This paper is a conclusion of accessibility work of the Finnish Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities, funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and executed in co-operation with disability organizations during 2009–2013. The purposes of the projects were to evaluate accessibility of sports facilities, collect sports specific accessibility information and develop existing accessibility information as well as accessibility audit methods in sports facilities. Based on findings of various projects national accessibility legislation does not adequately recognize accessibility needs of people with sensory impairments and of various disability-specific sports. Problems of access are usually interpreted as problems of wheelchair users only. Inaccessible sports facilities are a barrier not only to sports participation, but also to employment of people with disabilities. Accessibility must be observed comprehensively as an integral concept related to moving, seeing, hearing, and understanding. There is a need for co-operation between the disability sport actors, disability advocates, accessibility specialists, architects, designers, builders and developers. Disability sports related accessibility research is needed to provide both reliable and solid data for future planning and development.

Keywords. Accessibility, sports facilities, accessibility audits, evaluation, sports planning, disability sports, adapted physical activity.

Introduction

Both the social model of disability and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasize accessible environment. This also includes access to sporting venues. The accessibility should be provided to all people, regardless of the type of the impairment or abilities of the person.

The accessibility work initiated by the Finnish Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities in 2009 aimed to improve accessibility in Finnish sports facilities. The work consisted of three evaluation projects financed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. Finally a new guide book was published in 2013. The summary of surveys and research during 2009–2013 is in Table 1.

The evaluation criterion with key statements was created in a meeting with representatives from different disability organizations and disability sport federations. An adaptation of multiple constituency evaluation was used to create a theoretical frame for future evaluations.

The criterion (theoretical frame) consists of four accessibility categories: (1) accessibility of moving (mobility impairments), (2) accessibility of seeing (visual impairments), (3) accessibility of hearing (hearing impairments) and (4) comprehensibility (easy understanding) of the environment (intellectual disabilities, visual impairments, elderly, small children). These aspects intersect with the viewpoints of an athlete/participant, coach/leader/professional and spectator. Figure 1.

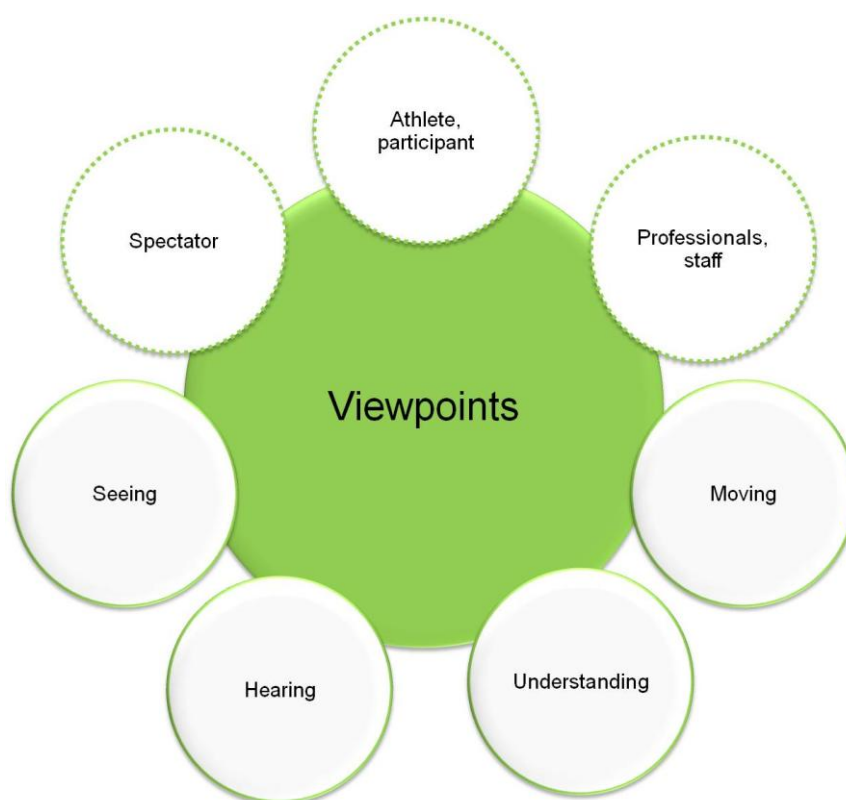


Figure 1. Accessibility viewpoints: moving, seeing, hearing and understanding. These intersect with the viewpoints of an athlete/participant, coach/leader/professional and spectator.

1. Basic flaws revealed by book analysis

The evaluation criterion was used for the first time in analyzing the accessibility content of 27 sports construction guidebooks published by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

Results of the book analysis revealed that most of the books focus on construction guidelines and instruction in sports-specific facilities, such as bowling alleys or swimming halls. In addition most of the books referred only to national legislation and did not consider accessibility in sports-specific environments. The needs of professionals with a disability, such as physical education instructors and coaches in those premises were often neglected. In many cases, the disability sports -related

terminology was confusing and old-fashioned. Barriers to accessibility were usually seen as a problem for athletes using a wheelchair. Additionally, the accessibility issues of those with sensory impairments (vision/hearing) were not addressed or information was limited. [8]

2. User experiences of accessibility

After the book analysis an internet survey supplied by a phone questionnaire for planners and administrators were conducted in order to gain deeper knowledge of the barriers to participation and the types of sport facilities that are the least accessible.

The internet survey was carried out to study user experiences. Altogether 341 people answered the bilingual (Finnish/Swedish) internet survey, most of them answered in Finnish (251). The majority (56 %) of respondents were female and biggest group was between 41–50 years of age (30 %). Of the respondents 48 % stated that their town of residence has over 50,000 inhabitants and 31 % reported to exercise 3 times a week. The type of disability of the respondents was not included in the survey.

The most used indoor sports facilities are swimming halls and spas (33 %), and gyms (29 %) and sports halls (including school gym halls) (28 %). The most used outdoor sports facilities are pedestrian and bicycle trails (57 %), recreation and camping areas, as well as beach areas. The most often reported barriers within sports facilities were found to be at the entrance, toilets, dressing rooms and showers. The most frequently mentioned barrier was the poor quality of indoor air. The biggest group of the respondents (35 %) would rather exercise in a mainstream fitness group with able-bodied persons and not in a separate group for traditional adapted physical activity.

Planners and administrators considered the format of a printed guidebook as the most important source for the accessibility information. [6]

An additional survey of six professionals (sports coaches or physical activity instructors) with a disability was conducted [1]. One of the biggest problems is that professionals with a disability cannot access all places and locations at the sports facilities, such as storage rooms.

3. Conclusion of 2009-2010 projects

Evaluation projects which took place in 2009–2010 showed that there is a need for further accessibility work in the sports context. There is a large variation in how people feel about the obstacles. Inaccessibility creates a barrier to employment and voluntary work. Actively exercising people are more used to overcoming obstacles whereas for beginners the same obstacles can prevent participation. Thus the information available received about the accessibility of the facility in advance is important for persons with a disability. [6]

The results highlighted the fact that all facilities should be accessible, not just the ones traditionally targeted for special groups or adapted physical activity. Restrictions in access are explained by old buildings not originally designed for recreational use. Barriers also reflect the ignorance of designers and builders. Emerge of new disability sports (such as wheelchair curling) creates challenges for the implementation of the facilities. Even the basic accessibility requirements are not yet known by all designers.

Based on the results the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture granted money to update an accessibility guidebook for sports planners and architects.

4. Updating accessibility guidelines and materials

Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities (FPD) had developed (2007–2009) an objective accessibility audit method in co-operation with several disability organizations and accessibility specialists [2]. The focus was on public buildings and the method didn't consider sport-specific accessibility issues. The sports specific accessibility guidelines for auditors [4] were collected with help of athletes, coaches and experts [5; 9] to complement the general audit method.

A guidebook (Accessible indoor sports facilities) was published in August 2013. The focus of the book is on accessibility of basic sports facilities supplemented with disability sports information [7].

The new materials were tested in accessibility audits of Finnish training centres. First the accessibility know-how of principals and need for further accessibility consultation in training centres of sports were assessed [3] and finally the accessibility audits of 14 training centres of sports were carried out in 2013. The report will be published in March 2014.

Table 1. Accessibility work executed by the Finnish Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities (FSAPD) 2009-2013.

Year & purpose	Data & methods	Report	Author
2009, the quality and quantity of the accessibility information in guidebooks	Evaluation of 27 sports facilities guidebooks for planners & architects. Multiple constituency evaluation & content analysis.	Finnish, 21 pages	Kilpelä Niina, The Threshold Association
2010, physical barriers experienced by the users in sports facilities	Internet survey, 341 answers.	Finnish, 43 pages English & Swedish abstract	Kilpelä Niina, The Threshold Association
2010, physical barriers faced by disabled sport instructors	Further questionnaire for 6 sports instructors chosen from the internet survey.	Finnish, 47 pages English abstract	Patrikka Anu, Lahti University of Applied Sciences
2011, accessibility guidelines in various indoor disability sports	Gathering data from 21 indoor disability sports with help of athletes, coaches and experts. Various methods.	Finnish, 68 pages English abstract	Kotinurmi Ritva & Kouvonon Liisa, Lahti University of Applied Sciences
2012, the need for accessibility audits & the evaluation of the current status of the accessibility know-how	Interviews for managers in 14 training centres (sports academies) & content analysis of web pages (accessibility).	Finnish, 35 pages English & Swedish abstract	Saari Aija, FSAPD
2013, optimal floor materials for disability sports	Questionnaire for goal ball and wheelchair rugby coaches, supplemented by information from showdown, boccia and electric wheelchair hockey.	Finnish, 4 pages	Parviainen Jukka & Saari Aija, FSAPD
2013, sports-specific accessibility guidelines for disability sport	Sports-specific checklists for accessibility evaluation.	Finnish, 11 pages	Saari Aija, Parviainen Jukka & Kilpelä Niina
2013, sports-specific guidebook on accessibility	Summary. A guidebook.	Finnish, 94 pages	Kilpelä Niina & FSAPD

5. Conclusion

Due to the increasing inclusivity, there is a growing need for all sports premises to be accessible, not only the ones that have traditionally been used by people with disabilities. The promotion of accessibility is most successful when it is observed comprehensively as an integral concept related to moving, seeing, hearing, and understanding and executed in co-operation between various actors, advocates and specialists, both in disability and sports field, as well as architects, designers, builders and developers. There is a need for continuous updating of planning guidelines and sports specific accessibility information, as well as research which acknowledges disability sports guidelines and legislation. Builders and developers could benefit of proper accessibility audits conducted by trained accessibility auditors who have experience in disability sport. Shortly, the promotion of accessibility is most efficient when it is evidence-based.

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