Sociological impacts of Special Olympics on individual growth

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Abstract: Questionnaire survey, literature review and other methods were adopted to investigate some individuals in Guilin City, to conduct an in-depth analysis of the impacts of Special Olympics on the growth of volunteers, athletes' parents, athletes and other citizens. The results show that Special Olympics exerts positive effects on individual growth. For volunteers, athletes' parents and other citizens, such effects are mainly reflected in the changes of traditional perceptions, the acquisition of relevant knowledge, strengthened sense of responsibility and improved service awareness. For Special Olympics athletes, improvements are observed in health status, self-control ability, psychological cognition, social adaptability and social awareness.

Keywords: Special Olympics, individual growth, sociological impacts

1. Introduction

Special Olympics, referred to as the Special Olympics Movement, is a sport specifically designed for people with intellectual disabilities. Meanwhile, it is a sport jointly participated by people with intellectual disabilities and non-disabled people. Throughout participation, it provides equal opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to demonstrate their skills and talents, deepen social understanding of their capabilities and needs, enable them to be accepted and recognized by society, and gain due respect. The individuals affected by Special Olympics in terms of personal growth fall into four groups: volunteers, people with intellectual disabilities, parents of people with intellectual disabilities, and ordinary citizens. Guilin is the designated city in Guangxi for promoting the national model community program of Special Olympics activities. Founded on December 30, 2004, Guilin Special Olympics is the first Special Olympics organization established in Guangxi. Guilin School for Intellectual Disabilities won the honorary title of "National Advanced Unit of Special Olympics" awarded by the China Disabled Persons' Federation and the General Administration of Sport of China twice in 2008 and 2010. Moreover, Guilin's Special Olympics athletes have achieved outstanding results many times in provincial, national and the Shanghai World Special Olympics. All these facts demonstrate that research on Special Olympics in Guilin is meaningful and can serve as a case study.

2. Research methods

2.1. Literature review method

According to the requirements of the research topic, relevant literature from sociology, psychology, pedagogy, behavioral science and other disciplines was collected, and a large number of documents concerning Special Olympics were reviewed, which provides important theoretical and empirical foundations for this study.

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2.2. Research methods

A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed to parents, 98 were recovered with a recovery rate of 98%. Among them, 94 were valid questionnaires, yielding an effective recovery rate of 95.9%, which is statistically significant. For volunteers, 200 questionnaires were distributed and 189 recovered, with a recovery rate of 94.5%. There were 182 valid questionnaires, and the effective recovery rate was 96.3%, which is statistically significant.

2.3. Interview method

An interview outline was compiled in accordance with the objectives and tasks of this study. A total of 600 citizens in Guilin were interviewed on the social effects of Special Olympics, and detailed records of the interview results were kept.

3. Results and analysis

3.1. Impacts of Special Olympics in Guilin on volunteers

Volunteer service is a product of human civilization at a certain stage of development and serves as one of the important carriers for promoting the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation in the new era. Volunteers are not only givers but also beneficiaries. Volunteer activities constitute a process of self-socialization for volunteers while serving others. The data in Table 1 show that 68.1% of volunteers gained greater self-confidence after participating in Special Olympics; nearly 80% became more responsible, open-minded and optimistic; approximately 50% of volunteers, while serving others, not only improved their interpersonal skills but also learned the spirit of constant self-transcendence and perseverance from Special Olympics athletes. These data indicate that most volunteers in Guilin experienced changes to varying degrees after taking part in Special Olympics, which promoted their all-round development.

Table 1 Survey on changes of volunteers (n=182)

Changes	Number	Proportion /%
Enhanced self-confidence	124	68.1
Stronger sense of responsibility	143	78.6
More outgoing and optimistic	133	73.1
Improved social skills	101	55.5
Brave striving and constant self-improvement	84	46.2
Others	7	3.8

3.2. Impacts of Special Olympics in guilin on parents

It can be seen from Table 2 that 78.7% of the parents of Special Olympics athletes took the initiative to learn about Special Olympics, while 21.3% did not. These data indicate that parents of Special Olympics athletes in Guilin possess a relatively strong awareness of active learning. As shown in Table 3, 26.6% of them have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Special Olympics; 28.7% only have a vague and general understanding; and 41.5% have little knowledge about it. The results reveal that approximately half of these parents have a basic grasp of Special Olympics, whereas a considerable proportion still lack relevant understanding. A comparison of the data from the two tables shows that although many parents in Guilin actively learn Special Olympics knowledge, most of them only have a superficial understanding without systematic and comprehensive study. Only a small number of parents are well-informed, and some even remain uninformed about Special Olympics.

Table 2 Survey on parents' learning of Special Olympics knowledge (n=94)

Active learning	Number	Proportion /%
Learning of relevant knowledge	10	10.6

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Read part of it	64	68.1
Did not read at all	20	21.3

Table 3 Survey on parents' awareness level of Special Olympics (n=94)

Level of awareness	Number	Proportion /%
Very well-informed	14	14.9
Relatively well-informed	11	11.7
Basically informed	27	28.7
Little knowledge	39	41.5
Totally uninformed	3	3.2

3.3. Growth and impacts of Special Olympics athletes in Guilin

3.3.1. Physical fitness and health status of Special Olympics athletes

It can be seen from Table 4 that 4 Special Olympics athletes, accounting for 4.3%, achieved remarkably improved physical fitness; 31 athletes (33%) had relatively obvious improvements; 42 athletes (44.7%) saw moderate improvements; and 15 athletes (16%) showed little change in physical fitness. The data demonstrate that most Special Olympics athletes in Guilin experienced physical fitness improvements of varying degrees after participating in Special Olympics. As illustrated in Figure 1, 13.8% of athletes obtained highly remarkable improvements in health status; 31.9% had relatively obvious health gains; 38.3% had moderate improvements; and 14.9% showed no obvious changes in health. Most Guilin Special Olympics athletes witnessed substantial improvements in physical health after taking part in Special Olympics. The enhancement of physical fitness and health status can improve the quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities and reduce the burden on their parents. Given individual differences in physical conditions and physiological dysfunctions, the degree of health improvement varies among athletes after physical exercise. Targeted training should therefore be implemented.

Table 4 Survey on the improvement of physical fitness of Special Olympics athletes (n=94)

Physical fitness	Number	Proportion /%
Very remarkable	4	4.3
Relatively remarkable	31	33
Moderate	42	44.7
Little change	15	16
No obvious change	2	2.1

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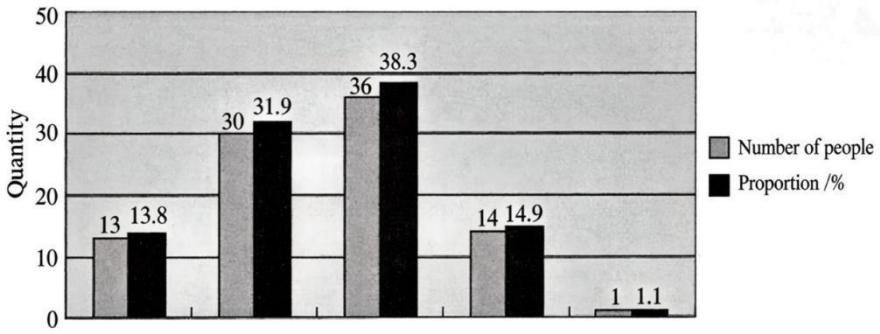


Figure 1 Distribution of health status improvement of Special Olympics athletes

3.3.2. Self-control ability of Special Olympics athletes

As shown in Figure 2, 7 individuals with intellectual disabilities, accounting for 7% of the total sample, achieved a highly remarkable improvement in self-control after participating in Special Olympics; 24 Special Olympics athletes (26%) had relatively obvious improvements; 48 athletes (51%) saw moderate improvements; 13 athletes (14%) had little change; and only 2 athletes (2%) showed no change, a proportion negligible for analysis. It can be concluded from Figure 2 that most Special Olympics athletes in Guilin gained certain improvements in self-control after taking part in the events. Due to individual differences in emotion, social environment and parental education, the degree of improvement in self-control varies among athletes. Some improvements may fail to meet parental expectations. Nevertheless, it is certain that participation in Special Olympics greatly helps people with intellectual disabilities strengthen their self-control.

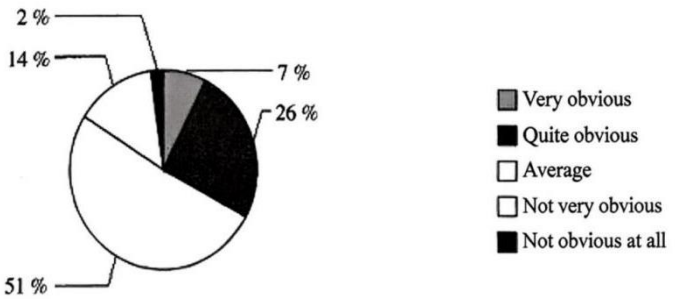


Figure 2 Distribution of self-control improvement of Special Olympics athletes

3.3.3. Psychological cognitive level of Special Olympics athletes

It can be seen from Figure 3 that 8 Special Olympics athletes, accounting for 8.5%, showed highly remarkable improvements in psychological cognitive level after participating in Special Olympics; 29 individuals with intellectual disabilities (30.9%) had relatively obvious improvements; 39 athletes (41.5%) achieved moderate improvements; while 19 athletes in total, accounting for 19.1%, had little or no obvious changes in psychological cognition. According to the overall distribution in Figure 3, most Special Olympics athletes in Guilin obtained a certain degree of improvement in psychological cognitive level, indicating that participation in Special Olympics is of great significance for people with intellectual disabilities. The group with moderate improvement was the largest in number and proportion. A possible explanation is that the extent of their cognitive improvement failed to meet parental expectations, or their own functional impairments were relatively severe.

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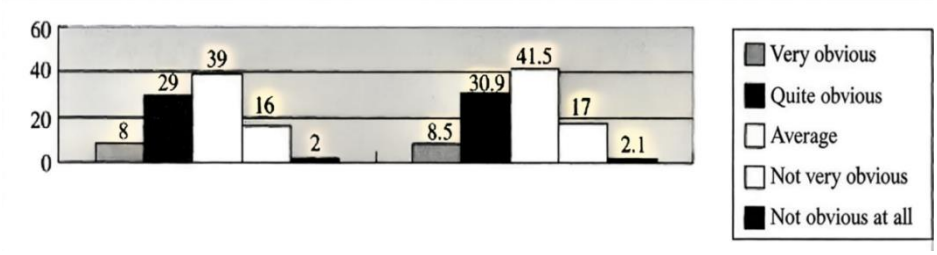


Figure 3 Distribution of psychological cognitive level improvement of Special Olympics athletes

3.3.4. Social adaptability of Special Olympics athletes

Figure 4 shows that among the 94 surveyed Special Olympics athletes, only 6 (6.4% of the total sample) had little improvement in social adaptability, and this small proportion can be neglected. Among the respondents, 13 and 28 athletes achieved highly remarkable and relatively obvious improvements in social adaptability respectively, accounting for 43.6% of the total sample. This data indicates that nearly half of Guilin's Special Olympics athletes gained marked improvements in social adaptability after participating in Special Olympics, which proves that taking part in Special Olympics brings substantial benefits to people with intellectual disabilities.



Figure 4 Distribution of social adaptability improvement of Special Olympics athletes

3.3.5. Social awareness of Special Olympics athletes

Physical exercise plays a vital role in developing individuals' social communication skills. As shown in Figure 5, athletes with moderate improvement in social awareness account for the largest proportion, with 36 athletes (38%). A total of 42 athletes (45%) achieved obvious improvements in social awareness, among whom 28 athletes (30%) had relatively obvious improvements and 14 athletes (15%) had highly remarkable improvements. These data reveal that the social awareness of Special Olympics athletes in Guilin has been significantly enhanced after a series of training and competitions. A small number of athletes showed little change in social awareness, which may result from specific types of disabilities or extremely low ability levels.

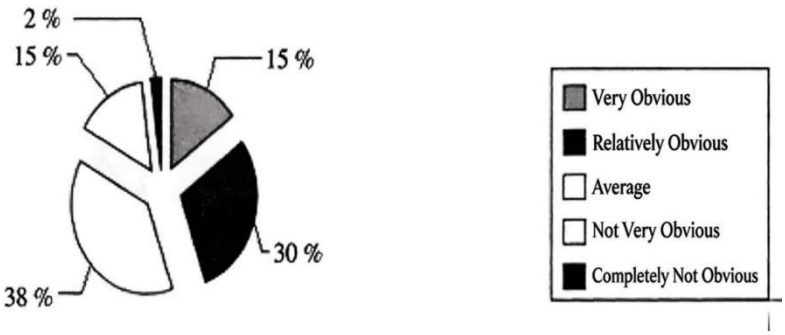


Figure 5 Distribution of social awareness improvement of Special Olympics athletes

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3.4. Impacts of Special Olympics on other citizens in Guilin

The collation of interview data shows that 82% of citizens in Guilin regard Special Olympics as a public welfare undertaking. They believe it can promote the physical and mental health of people with intellectual disabilities, help them expand their social circles, step out of isolated living environments, feel the warmth and cohesion of the big social family, improve their quality of life, integrate into society and realize self-worth. This indicates that citizens in Guilin have developed the awareness to care for and assist persons with disabilities and can offer tolerance and support to people with intellectual disabilities. Such awareness of helping the disabled among Guilin citizens not only facilitates the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities but also promotes citizens' all-round development, contributing to the construction of a harmonious socialist society.

Nevertheless, the intensity and coverage of public publicity concerning people with intellectual disabilities need to be further enhanced. Another 18% of Guilin citizens hold the view that Special Olympics has nothing to do with their daily lives and they bear no responsibility to offer help, showing an indifferent attitude. It reflects that a small portion of the public lacks sufficient understanding of people with intellectual disabilities and pays little attention to this vulnerable group.

4. Conclusion

For volunteers, athletes' parents and other citizens, the main impacts of Special Olympics are reflected in several aspects including the transformation of traditional perceptions, acquisition of relevant knowledge, strengthened sense of responsibility and improved service awareness.

Special Olympics athletes have achieved improvements in health status, self-control ability, psychological cognitive level, social adaptability and social awareness.

18% of citizens hold indifferent and biased attitudes toward Special Olympics. Subtle and extensive publicity should be carried out to foster mutual respect and equal treatment through perspective-taking.

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