

Review Article

Playing for wellbeing: A scoping review of students with disabilities and tertiary sport

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ABSTRACT

Aim: Students with disabilities at tertiary institutions do not have guaranteed opportunities for recreational sport and physical activity (RS&PA). This scoping review synthesized evidence on the contribution of RS&PA towards improving the social inclusion and wellbeing of these students to inform implementation of policy into practice.

Methods: EBSCOhost, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science and ProQuest were searched before two reviewers screened studies based on the following inclusion criteria: social inclusion and/or wellbeing; recreational sport and physical activity; students with disabilities; tertiary institutions. Studies published in English from between 1995 and 2025 were included.

Results: From 349 studies from the search, 10 were included. An additional 10 studies were included from screening the reference lists of the selected studies. Most studies were qualitative and from the Global North. Evidence supports RS&PA facilitating students with disabilities' social inclusion and wellbeing through enabling health outcomes, physical accomplishment, academic persistence, empowerment and a sense of belonging.

Conclusions: More evidence from the Global South is needed. Equitable policies that facilitate implementation of inclusive sport and physical activity practices can be achieved through engaged research about students' experiences.

Implications: Addressing the gap in research from the Global South will provide evidence to influence disability inclusion on policy and practice. Institutional leadership needs to be intentional about increasing the participation of students with disabilities in RS&PA.

Keywords: Disability; Recreation; Sport; Physical activity; Higher education institutions; Social inclusion; Wellbeing .

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education institutions, including universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools (World Bank, 2025), facilitate learning, work, and play for

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a range of students. They can provide access to infrastructure persons with disabilities need to participate in recreational sport and physical activity (RS&PA). RS&PA are extra-mural activities that students can participate in on an individual or collective level for social or intra-institutional interactions (Abdeahad & Mock, 2023). These activities are essential to student life for all tertiary students (Oakes et al., 2021). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) (2015) International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport states that full participation in society involves opportunities to engage in RS&PA.

Persons with disabilities include those with physical, mental, sensory or intellectual impairments who face environmental barriers that stifle their full and equal participation in society (United Nations, 2017). Critical Disability Theory acknowledges that disability is a social construct. It is the oppressive perceptions and actions of the social, cultural, and political structures that create systemic barriers, which curtail meaningful participation for people with impairments (Carmel et al., 2025; Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Tremain, 2005). Participation in RS&PA has been shown to benefit individuals' physical, psychological and social wellbeing, especially for persons with disabilities (Carretti et al., 2022). Wellbeing is a positive state which "encompasses quality of life, as well as the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world in accordance with a sense of meaning and purpose" (WHO, 2021, p. 10). Social inclusion is improving how disadvantaged individuals and groups participate in society by championing ability, opportunity, and dignity (World Bank, 2026). RS&PA's benefits align closely with the PERMA theory of wellbeing (Positive Psychology Centre, 2026). PERMA comprises five core elements, namely, Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (see Table 1).

Table 1: Core elements of PERMA (Ntovoli et al., 2025)

Core element	Description
Positive emotion	feelings of happiness, enjoyment, and fun
Engagement	deep involvement in and connection with an activity
Relationships	extent to which individuals are socially integrated, accepted, and respected within a community
Meaning	experiencing a sense of purpose and contributing to one's community
Accomplishment	attainment of personal goals and a sense of achievement

Problem statement

Chiwandire (2021) claims that while policies exist championing opportunities for participation in RS&PA, students without disabilities have guaranteed opportunities while students with disabilities do not. This inequity stems from support, services and accommodations for RS&PA not matching the promotion of academic support at institutions (Braga et al., 2015). Students with disabilities have shown interest in being included in sports, but their voices in research about their participation experiences at South African and American tertiary institutions are underrepresented (Abrahams, 2024; Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022). Even where there is an emphasis on student wellbeing, students with disabilities have been ignored in policies, particularly those with invisible disabilities (Stokowski & O'Donnell, 2022).

There is no cohesive picture of how RS&PA facilitates the social inclusion and wellbeing of students with disabilities at tertiary institutions. A preliminary search of Google Scholar, and JBI Evidence Synthesis was conducted and identified no past or current

systematic or scoping reviews on this topic. This scoping review synthesises evidence on the influence of RS&PA towards improving the social inclusion and wellbeing of students with disabilities at tertiary institutions, and identifying the gaps to be addressed in future studies.

Review question

How does participation in recreational sports and physical activities facilitate the social inclusion and wellbeing of students with disabilities at tertiary institutions?

METHODS

The protocol for this review was registered on the Open Science Framework on 29 January 2026. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018), and JBI scoping review methodology (Peters et al., 2024) were used for this review

Types of Sources

This scoping review considered the following sources provided they met the inclusion criteria: published primary research, secondary research in the form of scoping and systematic reviews, and grey literature in the form of unpublished dissertations. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods study designs studies were considered. All included research had to be in English and meet the participants, concept and context inclusion criteria

Participants

Studies involving undergraduate and postgraduate students with disabilities at tertiary institutions were included. Studies involving students in primary or secondary school were excluded.

Concept

Studies involving social inclusion and/or wellbeing through recreational sports and physical activity were included. Studies were excluded where the form of recreation did not involve physical activity.

Context

Studies involving tertiary institutions, including universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools, were included. Studies were excluded where the institution was not tertiary.

Search strategy

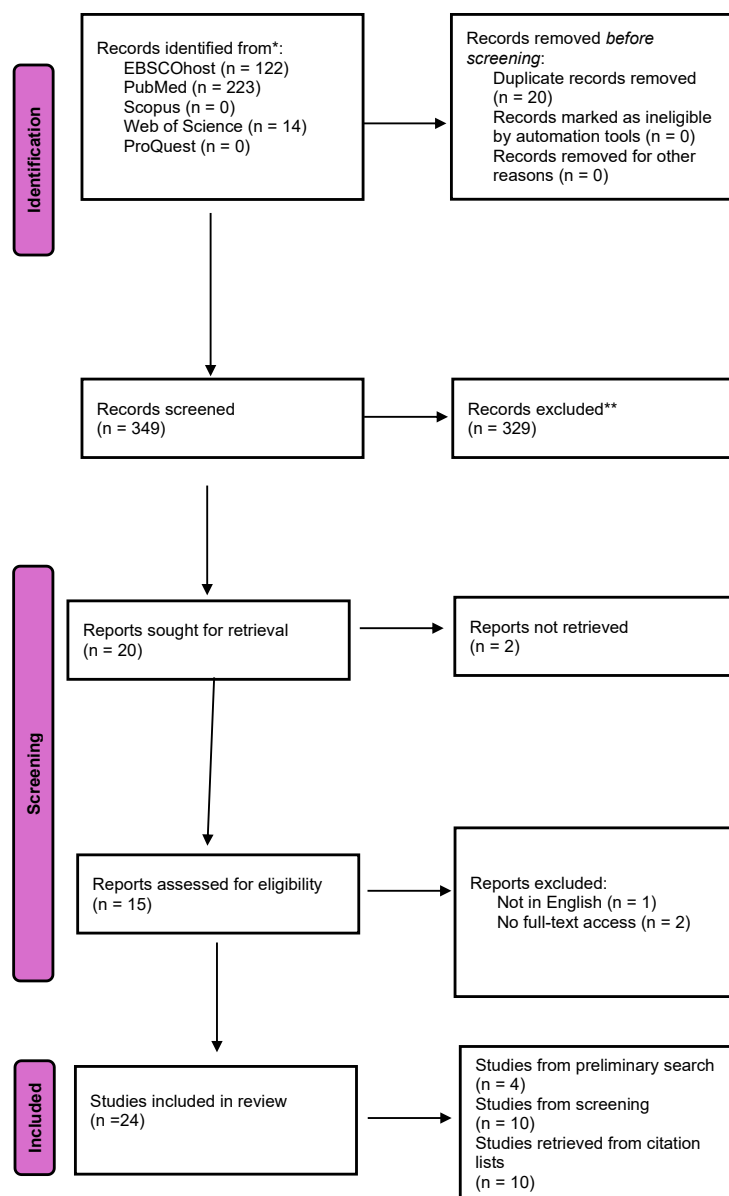
An initial limited search of EBSCOhost and Google Scholar was used to identify studies on the topic. The search terms were refined in consultation with a university librarian before the full search strategy was implemented on EBSCOhost, PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science on 18 November 2025. Subject headings and Boolean operators were used. Unpublished studies and grey literature were searched using ProQuest. Reference lists of published journal articles were also searched for additional studies. Only studies published in English were included. Publication dates were limited to 1995 to 2025 to balance having a comprehensive review, while also engaging with literature based on ideas around disability inclusion and sport from the last 30 years.

Source of Evidence selection

All identified citations were collated and uploaded into Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016), and duplicates were removed. Titles and abstracts of collected research were screened by two reviewers (Koloko and Mukasa) against the review's inclusion criteria. Potentially relevant sources that we agreed on were then retrieved for full article screening. The results of the search and screening process are presented in a Preferred Reporting

Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses extension for scoping review (PRISMA-ScR) flow diagram (Tricco et al., 2018) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram



Extraction

We used Rayyan to extract data from papers identified in the scoping review through comparisons of the data to the inclusion criteria (Ouzzani et al., 2016). The extracted data included specific details about the participants, concept, context, study methods and key findings relevant to the review question.

Data Analysis and Presentation

A total of 349 results were found through the three searches and 20 duplicates were removed. The reviewers screened the remaining 329 results by title and abstract, leaving 20 results for full-text screening. A total of 24 results were included in the final synthesis: four from the preliminary search, 10 from the full-text screening and 10 from scanning the citations of screened results. The results were analysed using both inductive and deductive approaches.

RESULTS

This section presents the study characteristics, and two themes, namely, 1. Reciprocity of personal and collective accomplishments through RS&PA, and 2. Spotlighting institutional responsibilities.

Study Characteristics

All included studies (n=24) were peer-reviewed journal articles, as no grey literature was found. Six studies were done prior to 2016. See Table 2 for details indicating the increased academic interest in sport and recreational participation of tertiary students with disabilities. Most studies were across impairments, with only eight studies focusing on a specific impairment, i.e., physical, visual, or hearing impairment (see Table 3). This result supports the human rights approach to focusing on equity of opportunities for participation rather than individual's impairment. The research designs were mostly qualitative in nature, focusing on the experiences of students. The Global North dominates this field of research, with only three papers from South Africa. Two of the South African papers focus on physical and attitudinal barriers compared to Global North studies that reflected both barriers and facilitators. This disparity highlights the inequality between the Global North and Global South in the provision of resources and opportunities for RS&PA. The role of the Global North academics in spearheading disability research could also be responsible for the dominance of the Global North literature compared to their counterparts from the Global South.

Table 2: Study Characteristics

Authors	Year	Country	No. of Participants	Study Design	Study Aim
Abrahamson, et al.	2025	USA	Three campus recreation facilities through staff interviews (n = nine)	Mixed method: Collective case study (thematic): Surveys then interviews	Evaluated the accessibility of campus recreation facilities at southeastern U.S. public universities using the AIMFREE assessment and interviews with campus recreation directors and staff.
Blinde, & Taub	1999	USA	28 male college students with physical or sensory disabilities	Qualitative: Individual interviews	Examined the empowerment capability of participation in sport and physical activity by students with disabilities
Brown, et al.	2024		39 studies involving 17,771 participants	Systematic review	Identified barriers and facilitators to university students' participation in physical activity
Dalbudak, & Yigit	2019	Türkiye	136 students (46 in university) with hearing impairments	Quantitative: Cross-sectional: Survey with analysis of variance	Determined the attitudes and opinions of hearing impaired students who are athletes and non-athletes about physical education and sports lessons, to determine if there are differences in attitudes across demographic characteristics
Dalbudak, et al.	2016	Türkiye	100 students (62 in university) with visual impairments	Quantitative: Cross-sectional: Survey with analysis of variance	Determined students with visual impairments' attitudes and views about physical education and sport

Devine	2016	USA	16 students with disabilities from five different universities	Qualitative: Grounded Theory: Individual interviews	Understanding the experiences of college students with disabilities and their leisure-time physical activity, focusing on factors that facilitate or form barriers to engagement
Devine	2013	USA	16 students with disabilities	Qualitative: Grounded Theory: Individual interviews	Explore the perceptions of college students with disabilities on their access to and engagement in leisure time physical activities on their campus
Dysterheft, et al.	2016	USA	13 undergraduate students	Mixed methods: Explanatory: Surveys then interviews	Examine the undergraduate students with disabilities' perspectives regarding physical activity in the context of their university environment
Fines, & Block	2021	USA	13 leaders followed by three foundational leaders	Qualitative: Case Study: Individual interviews	Examine programme development of collegiate adapted sports, specifically Goalball
Fultz, et al.	2024	USA	n = 358 NCAA Division-1 Universities; n = 73 Universities with adaptive sport	Document analysis	Assess the availability of adaptive sport opportunities for students at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division-1 Universities to better understand university-affiliated adaptive sport opportunity for students.
Gillies, & Pedlar	2003	Canada	Four students with disabilities transitioning from high school to university	Qualitative: Inductive analysis: Individual interviews	Examine how a small group of first-year students with disabilities integrated into a large Canadian university
Lundberg, et al.	2008	USA	126 students	Quantitative: Quasi-experimental pre-post design: Surveys	Examine the effects of a campus-wide intramural wheelchair sports programme on attitudes toward people with disabilities
Martin, & Griffiths	2016	Ireland	Four students with disabilities; five staff members	Qualitative: Focus groups	Examine factors influencing students with physical disabilities' participation in leisure activities at an Irish university
Mokwena, et al	2024	South Africa	18 African students	Scoping review	Review the barriers African tertiary students with disabilities face in sports participation

Mokwena, et al.	2025	South Africa	16 undergraduate students with disabilities; ten universities' disability units' staff; & three sport and recreation staff	Qualitative: Exploratory: Individual interviews	Explore the personal and architectural barriers to students with disabilities' sports participation at rural universities in Limpopo province.
Moola	2020	Canada	Seven students with disabilities; seven volunteers	Qualitative: Individual interviews	Explore physical activity experiences and phenomena of students with disabilities and volunteers in a physical activity programme at a Canadian university
Moritz, et al.	2022	Canada	Nine	Qualitative: Individual interviews	Investigate the experiences, access and inclusion of students with mobility-related physical disabilities at a Canadian tertiary institution
Mululuma, et al.	2025	South Africa	17	Qualitative: Individual interviews	Explore the promotion of recreational opportunities and experiences of students with disabilities at a university in Limpopo
Rich, et al.	2024	USA	Six Deaf or hard of hearing students	Qualitative: Interpretive phenomenology: Individual interviews	Explore the lived sport experiences, including benefits, challenges, and interpersonal relationships, of D/H Deaf or hard of hearing collegiate athletes
Rosselli, et al.	2023	USA	255 university students involved in a wheelchair basketball tournament	Quantitative: Cross-sectional: Survey with t-tests	Examine current attitudes of college students toward persons and athletes with disabilities, and if said attitudes are impacted by participating in or watching an adapted sporting event
Sullivan	2016	USA	Eight students (three male; five female)	Mixed method (interpretivist): two questionnaires and focus groups	Explore how participation in an exercise and recreation programme impacted the empowerment and attitudes of students with disabilities when they participated in the programme with an assigned university "buddy".
Taub, et al.	1999	USA	24 male students	Qualitative: Exploratory: Individual interviews	Explore how involvement in sport and physical activity may be a strategy to counter stigma of bodies with disabilities
Townsend, et al.	2024	USA	457 university students without disabilities from one university	Quantitative: Cross-sectional: Survey and factor analysis	Explore college students' attitudes toward persons with disabilities and examining the various factors influencing said attitudes

Yoh, et al.	1998	USA	122 students with disabilities	Quantitative: Survey	Investigate satisfaction with campus recreation facilities among college students with physical disabilities
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Table 3: Summary of study characteristics

	Total	24 (100%)
Year of publication	2016-2025	19 (79%)
	Pre-2016	5 (21%)
Disability type	All	16 (67%)
	Physical	5 (21%)
	Visual	1 (4%)
	Hearing	2 (8%)
Study design	Qualitative	12 (50%)
	Quantitative	6 (25%)
	Mixed	3 (12.5%)
	Systematic review	1 (4%)
	Scoping review	1 (4%)
Country	Document analysis	1 (4%)
	USA	15 (63%)
	Canada	3 (12.5%)
	South Africa	3 (12.5%)
	Türkiye	2 (8%)
	Ireland	1 (4%)

Theme 1: Reciprocity of personal and collective accomplishments

Both students with and without disabilities benefit individually and collectively from participation. Participation facilitates social inclusion and wellbeing by embedding physical and psychological health, academic fortitude, and belonging. Equalising participation allows students without disabilities to grow through their interactions with students with disabilities. They also gain the full campus experience and grow social capital.

Promoting physical and psychological health

Physical and psychological outcomes were highlighted in qualitative and quantitative data from 46% (n = 11) of the studies included. Only one study was from the Global South. Students with disabilities confirmed physical and psychological benefits of participating in recreational sport and physical activity, such as improved cardiovascular fitness and self-esteem (Mululuma et al., 2025; Dysterheft et al., 2016). Participation facilitates wellbeing by providing students with opportunities to relax and feel renewed (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003). Stress relief was also identified as a facilitator (Dysterheft et al., 2016).

Students with disabilities in two American studies noted feeling accomplished, independent and aware of their potential through physical activity (Dysterheft et al., 2016; Blinde & Taub, 1999). Rich and colleagues' (2024) Deaf or hard-of-hearing participants from an American university reported escaping barriers through recreational sport and physical activity, providing "an environment in which their hearing level did not act as limitation, as it would in other parts of university life" (Rich et al., 2024, p. 71). Sullivan's (2016) American participants who partnered with a university peer buddy who promoted social opportunities, community service and an exercise regime as part of a transitional programme gained empowerment over the course of the programme and felt more confident to ask for help when they needed it.

Participation also motivates continued engagement in physical activity among students (Sullivan, 2016). Taub and colleagues (1999) presented outcomes related to physical competence and enhanced body image. Similarly, participants in Moola's (2020) study in a Canadian university peer-to-peer physical activity programme facilitated enhanced body image (Moola, 2020).

Physical activity enhances wellbeing outcomes in persons with disabilities (Rich et al., 2024). Being able to engage in their preferred campus recreational activities promotes wellbeing in students (Martin & Griffiths, 2016; Gillies & Pedlar, 2003). However, despite all students being able to benefit from participation, students with disabilities are not afforded equitable participation opportunities. Inequalities in recreational opportunities hamper their health and wellbeing (Mululuma et al., 2025). This inequality, mentioned in the only Global South study featured above, shows that despite physical activity enhancing wellbeing outcomes in tertiary students and persisting after graduation, such activities are not prioritised.

Forging academic fortitude

RS&PA also have educational benefits, such as encouraging academic persistence till graduation. Educational benefits were presented in six (25%) studies included. Data from Canada, the USA and Ireland show that participation breeds academic fortitude in students with disabilities (Townsend et al., 2024; Martin & Griffiths, 2016; Moola, 2015; Gillies & Pedlar, 2003). This fortitude assists with academic perseverance and achievement - a challenge for some students with disabilities.

All students benefit from participation, but equitable access remains scarce for students with disabilities. Despite attending institutions alongside students without disabilities, they are excluded from the community because they do not have access to activities. Having limited opportunities and inaccessible facilities is detrimental to students with disabilities' psychological and academic health (Mululuma et al., 2025). This inequality also hampers students without disabilities' development as they do not have opportunities to interact with persons with disabilities.

Embedding belonging

Recreational sport's facilitation of social inclusion for students with disabilities was presented in 79% (n = 19) of the studies included. Social support networks and social interaction skills are gained from leisure participation (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003; Blinde & Taub, 1999). Joining clubs and societies aids in making friends outside of one's existing social network, getting involved in university life and feeling successful in transitioning to tertiary life (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003). Participation facilitates social inclusion by providing students with disabilities opportunities to build social capital and interact as equals with students without disabilities.

Working with like-minded peers assists the social inclusion of sports participation (Rich et al., 2024). Mokwena and colleagues (2025) commented that students with disabilities' social health is improved: "You can communicate with others and make friends. The more you network with others who are not disabled, [the more] you become free yourself" (p. 377). A sense of belonging is encouraged as participation in sport and leisure-time physical activity provides spaces for students with disabilities to connect with their peers (Mululuma et al., 2025; Rich et al., 2024; Martin & Griffiths, 2016; Devine, 2016; Blinde & Taub, 1999). Participation also helps students feel part of the university community (Martin & Griffiths, 2016; Devine, 2013).

The Goalball Club at Fines and Block's (2021) American study site provided inclusive learning opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact and connect. It positively changed the university culture as more students with disabilities were recruited. Such a result confirms the positive transformative power of participation and how

the transformation is not exclusive to the students with disabilities. There is a reciprocity of accomplishment through the interactions that support positive relationships wherein power imbalances between students with and without disabilities are countered.

For some, the social engagement is more important than the physical activity itself (Devine, 2013). Martin and Griffiths (2016) noted that establishing relationships can be one motivation students have for engaging in physical activities. Relationships can help students build social capital, which is useful for advocating for equitable inclusion. Continued interactions between students with and without disabilities can equalise power relationships between students by providing students without disabilities a better understanding of disability. Some of the activities can be accessed by all students and require minor adaptation for students with disabilities (Mululuma et al., 2025). These interactions can make all students feel welcome, accepted and free when opportunities to participate are available and taken.

Theme 2: Spotlighting institutional responsibilities

Apart from personal and collective accomplishments, social inclusion and wellbeing are facilitated by, firstly, changing discriminatory perceptions about disability related to physical activity. Secondly, the duality of self-advocacy reveals the shared responsibility of disability inclusion. These facilitators spotlight the responsibilities tertiary institutions have for students.

Changing discriminatory perceptions

The ableist gaze may be a larger barrier than the physical environment (Moola, 2020). Tertiary institutions should be providing safe and welcoming environments for their students. Data from Global South and North suggest that discriminatory perceptions about students with disabilities' participation are prevalent. Mokwena and colleagues' (2024) scoping review on the barriers experienced by tertiary students with disabilities in Africa face in recreational sport and physical activity revealed perceived dependency on others, stigma, segregation, and cultural stereotypes as hampering participation. These findings were supported by Brown and colleagues' (2024) systematic review highlighting stigma as a significant barrier to participation as students with disabilities aren't seen to fit into public perceptions of normalcy. South African research has uncovered that students without disabilities tend to have negative attitudes towards students with disabilities participating in sport (Mokwena et al., 2025). American and Canadian studies show that stereotypes pose disability as separate from physical activity (Brown et al., 2024; Moola, 2020; Devine, 2016). Facing such stereotypes can leave students feeling unaccepted and fragile, which discourages self-advocacy (Devine, 2016).

The demonstration of physical skill and physical fitness countered the stereotypes that persons with physical disabilities not being able to participate in physical activities at a Canadian university (Moola, 2020). This emphasises how participation in recreational sport and physical activity can further institutional transformation goals by providing environments where people are able to recognise the humanity in others. Removing the presumption that sport and disability are contradictory is paramount to transformation (Moola, 2020). Tertiary institutions are responsible for such inclusive development.

Turkish students with visual impairments (Dalbudak et al., 2016) and hearing impairments (Dalbudak & Yigit, 2019) were found to have positive attitudes towards physical education and sport. Students without disabilities were found to have positive attitudes towards students with disabilities while participating in or spectating a wheelchair basketball tournament on their American campus (Rosselli et al., 2023). Their positive attitudes were not affected by participating, spectating or not taking part in the tournament (Rosselli et al., 2023). Changes in negative attitudes may be possible through such integrated participation and spectating. Rosselli and colleagues (2023) suggest that more

information and contact with players with disabilities may influence a change in attitudes. Tertiary institutions need to ensure that students with disabilities are well integrated into university life so that students can participate as players and/or spectators, and feel included in campus life.

American data showed students have mostly positive attitudes, which suggests that interaction leads to better attitudes towards students with disabilities (Townsend et al., 2024). They revealed that one's past and current experiences, knowledge about disabilities, and type and frequency of contact with persons with disabilities influence current attitudes. Students without disabilities overcame high baseline levels of discomfort through participating in an American intramural wheelchair sport programme championed by students with disabilities (Lundberg et al., 2008). Frequent, high-quality interactions between students with and without disabilities are needed.

The duality of self-advocacy

Self-advocacy and awareness raising allow for RS&PA to contribute to the social inclusion and wellbeing of students with disabilities by providing students with disabilities a voice and a sense of purpose. The Goalball programme at Fines and Block's (2021) study site opened pathways for disability advocacy at that American university. Such self-advocacy by students with disabilities is presented as a way of addressing knowledge gaps around disability while also allowing the students to grow in confidence as they become better able to articulate their needs (Brown et al., 2024; Rich et al., 2024). Rich et al., (2024) also recognised that self-advocacy may be emotionally draining for students with disabilities. The development of self-advocacy through participation emphasises the need for RS&PA to be recognised as essential to the campus experience. While it places the burden of institutional and cultural change on students with disabilities rather than on the institutions and their leaders, articulation is essential for the appropriate changes to be made at institutions.

DISCUSSION

Appreciating how recreational sport and physical activity (RS&PA) facilitates social inclusion and wellbeing is central in different facets. First, it demonstrates the opportunity cost for persons with disabilities and the community at large of not availing resources and opportunities for participation in RS&PA. Second, it awakens the duty bearers to create inclusive and enabling environments for participation in RS&PA as a catalyst for disability inclusive development. Our scoping review shows that participation in RS&PA facilitates the social inclusion and wellbeing of students through reciprocity of personal and collective accomplishment and by spotlighting institutional responsibilities.

Addressing the inequalities in recreational opportunities that Mululuma et al., (2025) found hampered students' health and wellbeing is crucial as it will enhance their wellbeing outcomes beyond graduation. While more females with disabilities were included in recent studies, there is overrepresentation of white students and well-resourced institutions in the literature. Students with invisible disabilities are also not well represented. These patterns indicate that access to, and visibility within, RS&PA is shaped by intersecting axes of race, gender, type of impairment, and institutional resourcing, rather than disability alone, underscoring the need for explicitly adopting intersectionality lens in the analysis of participation outcomes on social inclusion and wellbeing.

Continued interactions between students with and without disabilities can equalise power relationships between students by providing students without disabilities a better understanding of disability. Some of the activities can be accessed by all students and require minor adaptations for students with disabilities (Mululuma et al., 2025). Students with invisible disabilities might not need equipment adaptations or even specific

programmes/clubs. Some already take part in various clubs, and their stories need to be explored for more ways of being inclusive.

Interactions between students with and without disabilities can make all students feel welcome, accepted and free, thereby growing stronger campus communities. Stronger communities could assist in further advocacy for inclusion and access because advocacy would be beneficiary-led while acknowledging that everyone benefits from inclusive development. Continued interaction facilitated by RS&PA can demolish the systemic barriers created by oppressive social, cultural and political systems that cause disability (Tremain, 2005; Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

A deductive analysis of the findings using PERMA as a theoretical lens illustrates how students with disabilities' participation in RS&PA influenced their well-being. The feeling of relaxation (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003) and stress relief (Dysterheft et al., 2016) rhyme with the element of positive emotions (Ntovoli et al., 2025). Accomplishment was experienced through gaining independence (Dysterheft et al., 2016; Blinde & Taub, 1999), empowerment (Brown et al., 2024; Rich et al., 2024; Sullivan, 2016) and academic fortitude (Townsend et al., 2024; Martin & Griffiths, 2016; Moola, 2015; Gillies & Pedlar, 2003). Accomplishment is a fundamental motivator for students with disabilities to try other opportunities beyond their participation in RS&PA even in the face of societal barriers. While white females with disabilities have been featured in studies on the empowerment potential of RS&PA participation, African females with disabilities need more attention. Patriarchy, poverty, and exclusion may be exacerbated by disability in females, which warrants further research. Students experienced engagement through participation in RS&PA (Devine, 2013). Relationships and meaning generated a sense of belonging (Mokwena et al., 2025; Rich, et al., 2024; Martin & Griffiths, 2016) and the capacity to self-advocate (Brown et al., 2024; Rich et al., 2024; Fines & Block, 2021). Contrasting experiences in well-resourced and resource-constrained institutions also highlight how disability intersects with geography and socio-economic context to structure which students can benefit from RS&PA-related belonging and social capital.

The review also finds that building social capital is a major benefit of participating in RS&PA. The power of social capital is a major livelihood asset as it fosters reciprocal benefits fundamental for poverty alleviation and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods (Mulubiran, 2021; Chambers & Conway, 1992). Students cannot build this social capital if they are isolated in campus environments. Similarly, their opportunities to build social capital are limited when they have unequal access and have to fight for all facets of a campus experience. If sustained, social networks and connections and their value could transcend campus life to impacting livelihoods through employment connections and continuous reciprocal support.

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) views disability as being created through the same ableist gaze. Participation in RS&PA highlights institutional responsibilities to address barriers to the participation of students with disabilities in campus life. Brown and colleagues (2024) agree with Moola (2020) that ableist perceptions and stigma are significant barriers to participation in RS&PA. Ableist perceptions are more disabling than the physical environment (Moola, 2020). Environmental barriers are created by institutions that nurture exclusionary perceptions of normalcy and do not appreciate impairment as part of human diversity (Davis, 2025).

Participation in RS&PA counteracts ableist perceptions and reminds tertiary institutions, as well as other relevant government institutions, of their responsibility to avail resources and provide facilities and opportunities that are disability inclusive. CDT seeks to identify actors who can change what is wrong in the societal landscape (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). The leadership of tertiary institutions are the actors who have the responsibility to provide all their students with an inclusive campus life, not just for

academic success, but to foster their well-being and set them up for career transitions to ensure socio-economic inclusion. The duality of self-advocacy reveals the imbalance of responsibility that students with disabilities carry to influence change. So far, they have been at the forefront while the institutions remain reactive. Crucially, participation in RS&PA provides a platform for self-advocacy. The confidence gained through participation in RS&PA places students with disabilities in a better position to demand their rights. Students must repeatedly demand, more so in environments where their academic needs are not met. They are stuck between their studies and being change agents, but then also have to decide which changes to fight for. Institutions prioritise academic accommodations but tend to neglect the students' wellbeing. Students with disabilities, who are poor, and otherwise outliers (in terms of race and gender) bear the heaviest self-advocacy burden, yet they are currently the least studied.

Self-advocacy becomes more difficult when there is an array of disabilities on campuses as students might feel they are competing with students with different disabilities for equity. Institutions are more reactive than proactive in their inclusive practices and often do not implement the changes students advocate for. Being reactive leaves institutions serving the loudest category of students with disabilities rather than all students.

Institutions are meant to provide all students with the full campus life experience. Therefore, the onus falls on the institutions to ensure equitable access to recreational participation for their students with disabilities. An intersectional lens enables an audit of inequities of power relations can guide transformation in RS&PA to avoid reproducing existing campus hierarchies. Research amplifying student voices could clarify needs related to their contexts to find solutions collectively with leadership. Tertiary institutions are melting pots and recreational participation provides opportunities for meaningful interactions. It is important to note that institutions from the Global South are usually constrained by limited resources unlike their better-resourced counterparts in the Global North. RS&PA needs to be prioritised as part of transformation agendas in tertiary institutions, particularly in the Global South. Our findings highlight the outcomes related to social inclusion and wellbeing that are achieved through participation in RS&PA. Inclusive development happens when facilities are accessible to all and equitable opportunities for participation exist.

Gaps in Literature

Gaps exist in the scope and context of the available research. There is limited overall research on RS&PA for students with disabilities, even in the Global North. Studies on tertiary students with disabilities in general are minimal (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003), more so studies on their leisure-time physical activity experiences and access to campus-based recreation are even scarcer (Moola, 2020; Devine, 2016). Additionally, there is a pronounced Global South gap; there is little evidence on RS&PA participation and experiences in low- and middle-income or tertiary institutions in Africa (Mokwena et al., 2024). Data is urgently needed, given that 80% of approximately 1.5 billion persons with disabilities globally live in such contexts (Mokwena et al., 2024).

The interaction between RS&PA and educational outcomes remains understudied. Similarly, more certainty is needed on why participation is low and how to address it in sustainable ways. For example, campus interventions that generate social capital between students with and without disabilities need attention, as do participation patterns of both groups in such interventions.

Methodological gaps in the literature also exist. Most studies are qualitative (see Tables 2 and 3). While these studies help provide students with disabilities a voice, varying the research techniques could aid in providing students with more facts for evidence-based advocacy and making a sound business case to the leadership. Incorporating

quantitative data through mixed methods studies could add to the breadth of findings that inform the implementation of institutional policies in a sustainable manner.

Limitations

While the scoping review ensured rigour by using multiple databases, trying to incorporate grey literature and engaging with a librarian when refining the search terms, it still had limitations. Excluding studies from before 1995 might have limited historical perspectives. The grey literature search did not yield any useable results. Three articles were excluded because they were not available in English or behind paywalls.

Implications

Institutions stand to benefit from students with disabilities participating in RS&PA because students will feel more connected to the institution, build academic fortitude, and the model of inclusivity could be replicated. Institutions are called upon to be proactive in fostering accessibility for inclusion so that the burden of advocacy is not on the students with disabilities. Such inclusive leadership allows students with disabilities to reap the benefits of participation instead of having to fight to participate and be included.

In Global South contexts, economic constraints intersect with existing institutional challenges, underscoring the need for inclusion strategies that are designed to be financially sustainable as well as disability inclusive. Policies alone are insufficient; implementation plans and accountability mechanisms are required to prevent inclusion from remaining symbolic or inconsistently applied.

Further studies into the livelihood potential and skills development of RS&PA for students with disabilities would facilitate their economic inclusion. Investigating institutional and individual investment in recreational sport and physical activity at tertiary institutions could provide opportunities for students with disabilities to transition to employment in this field.

CONCLUSION

While understudied, the scoping review has provided evidence that the participation of students with disabilities in recreational sport and physical activity facilitates social inclusion and wellbeing. Students with disabilities become part of the university community while demystifying disability for students without disabilities. Social inclusion is further facilitated by enabling students to spotlight how institutional leadership needs to develop inclusive campuses. The gap in Global South research must be addressed through more studies conducted by locally based researchers. Documenting students with disabilities' experiences should lead to more sustainable, inclusive policies. Resourcing inclusive facilities, coaching, and accessibility matters to facilitate equitable participation opportunities for students is possible with political will.

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