

Evaluation of SKILLZ for Life in South Africa: A Sport-Based Health and Life Skills Programme for Adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities

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BACKGROUND

More than 7.1 million South Africans are living with HIV, and HIV prevalence amongst the general population is approximately 19%¹. People with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) are especially vulnerable to HIV infection², experience a higher risk of violence³, and are subjected to numerous types of discrimination⁴. They often have limited access to information, education and health services, and are largely excluded from HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes.

Special Olympics South Africa (SOSA) and Grassroot Soccer (GRS) designed and implemented a sport-based health and life skills programme, supported by the South African National Lottery Commission, to address priority needs of this population in South Africa. SKILLZ for Life (SfL) aims to build the **Assets** of youth ages 8-30 with intellectual disabilities, providing them with HIV, SRHR and life skills information and the confidence to use it, whilst also increasing **Access** to and utilisation of health services. SfL also aims to increase **Adherence** of young people to medical treatment, therapy and uptake of services, as well as to increase social inclusion of youth with ID.

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

After piloting and implementing SfL in Namibia and then Nigeria, GRS adapted the curriculum through a collaborative process with SOSA for the South African context. A visual resource guide was also produced to aid participant understanding of programme concepts. Facilitators were recruited through connections with local Learners with Special Education Needs (LSEN) schools and NGOs, and trained as SKILLZ Coaches. GRS programmes emphasise the role of Coaches as positive adult role models and build their capacity to facilitate engaging sport-based health programmes with youth. SKILLZ for Life was implemented through five-day Holiday Camps, including 'Athletes' with ID and peer 'Partners' without disabilities. Participants were given the opportunity to test for HIV at the camps, with parental consent required for those under age 18.



Figures 1 & 2: SKILLZ for Life activities

METHODS

A mixed methods evaluation was conducted in the four provinces where the programme was implemented: North West, Free State, Northern Cape and Mpumalanga. The evaluation was conducted from March to August 2018, using a participatory and utilisation-focused approach. Evaluation methods included review of GRS and SOSA programme documents, interviews with Master Coaches (n=9) and sub-provincial Department of Health Representatives (n=2), focus group discussions with Coaches, parents and SOSA volunteers (n=29), and observations of Holiday Camps (n=2).

Evaluators also conducted qualitative activities with Athletes (21 total participants, ages 12-30) using the collage life-eliciting technique, a validated method that has participants construct collages to capture non-linguistic information. Routine programme monitoring data also contributed to the evaluation. Qualitative data was analysed using an iterative thematic approach, locating common themes across different data sources.

REFERENCES

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RESULTS/LESSONS LEARNT

Province	Athletes	Peer Partners	Number tested for HIV
Northwest	242	355	126
Freestate	307	333	184
Mpumalanga	242	318	178
Northern Cape	286	288	55
TOTAL	1,077	1,294	543

Table 1: Participants in SKILLZ for Life

Key learnings from the evaluation include:

- SKILLZ for Life increased Athlete and Peer Partner knowledge of HIV/AIDS, SRH, and healthy living – collages made by Athletes indicated knowledge of condom use and healthy eating
- The programme created safe spaces for athletes to discuss abuse and other problems they face in their daily lives
- SfL created connections between Coaches and Athletes, fostering bonds that encouraged Athletes to seek support in cases of abuse
- Partners reported increased understanding of intellectual disability and friendships with Athletes
- Partnerships with LSEN schools, local NGOs, and provincial-level Department of Health staff are critical for recruitment of participants and Coaches, and providing HIV testing for participants
- SKILLZ for Life reached participants in rural communities where other programming for youth with ID was very limited, providing social inclusion benefits for Athletes

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

SKILLZ for Life is a unique health and life skills programme for young people with ID. Evaluation findings indicate that the programme has benefits for Athletes with ID, as well as for Partners without disabilities. The sport-based curriculum provides an effective method of engaging a group of adolescents who are often excluded from other health interventions.

Results from this evaluation indicate the importance of partnerships with local LSEN schools, Department of Health, and other NGOs operating in the communities. Specific criteria for Coach and Master Coach recruitment should be clarified in advance of programme activities. Future programmes should include more efforts to engage participants with ID who are outside the school system.

GRS and SOSA should also explore methods of providing ongoing support and activities for Athletes with ID, in addition to short-term Holiday Camps, and explore mechanisms for sustainability, such as further integration into LSEN schools.

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