

Inclusive Coaching : Supporting Children and Youth With Intellectual Developmental Disabilities Engaging in Sport

Justin. Heenan^{1*}, Sierra. Sumner²

¹ PhD Candidate, Educational Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada

² PhD Student, Child and Youth Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada

* Corresponding author email address: jheenan@trentu.ca

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ABSTRACT

Special Olympics is an international movement committed to promoting inclusion and building community through sports and physical activity for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In Canada, the organization supports more than 40,000 athletes, offering structured athletic opportunities from early childhood through to adulthood. This critical literature review synthesizes 18 sources on coaching within Special Olympics, including peer-reviewed research around coaching Special Olympics, to examine trends, themes, and gaps in the field. Literature was reviewed from March 2025 to December 2025. It emphasizes the continuous, community-based nature of Special Olympics programming, which occurs regularly in local settings, rather than as infrequent high-profile events. The findings highlight both the benefits of athlete participation and the critical role of effective coaching, while also revealing a need for additional research focused on coaching practices, particularly among coaches who work with children and youth. Strengthening the evidence base in the Canadian context is essential to enhance coaching strategies, support athlete growth, support and guide future research opportunities and promote sustained success within the Special Olympics community.

Keywords: *Special Olympics, Coaching Education, Intellectual Developmental Disability, Inclusion in Sports*

1. Introduction

Special Olympics is a global organization and movement committed to promoting inclusion and building community through active, engaged and meaningful participation in sports and community activities

(Heenan & Sumner, 2025b). By encouraging engagement in physical activity, the organization seeks to support healthier lifestyles for individuals with intellectual disabilities across their communities (Heenan & Sumner, 2025b). In Canada, Special Olympics provides athletic opportunities for over

40,000 athletes, making it the largest sports organization serving this population (Special Olympics Canada, 2026). Programs are offered for participants ranging from age two through adulthood, creating a lifelong pathway for involvement in organized sports and the associated health benefits (Lloyd et al., 2024; Special Olympics Canada, 2026). Given the organization's aim to enhance the well-being of children, youth, adults with various intellectual disabilities, and their communities through sport and physical education, it is essential to explore the existing research on coaching within Special Olympics contexts.

This critical systematic literature review provides a foundation and direction for potential further research to support the work of academics, volunteers, and athletes engaged in Special Olympics programs. It includes a review of 18 sources focused on coaching within the organization, drawing from peer-reviewed literature to better understand the research that informs coaching practices in Special Olympics Programming with a focus on the unique needs of the Special Olympics coaching contexts.

The public often perceives Special Olympics as a large-scale, quadrennial event similar to the Olympic or Paralympic Games, which gains significant, worldwide media attention (Carter & Williams, 2012). In reality, Special Olympics programming is continuous, occurring weekly in communities around the world, offering year-round opportunities for athletes with intellectual disabilities to participate in sport and physical activity (Special Olympics Canada, 2025c). This distinction emphasizes the ongoing, community-based nature of the programs, which prioritize consistent engagement and skill development over singular, high-profile competitions. By integrating programs into local communities, athletes have regular access to training, competition, and social interaction, supporting both personal and athletic growth (Cybulski et al., 2016; Stynes et al., 2017).

This critical review is guided by inclusive practice as its primary theoretical framework, which emphasizes equitable access, meaningful participation, and the removal of systemic barriers for individuals with diverse abilities within educational and sport environments. Inclusive practice is rooted in social justice and rights-based perspectives, asserting that individuals with disabilities should be supported within mainstream and adapted contexts through responsive and flexible approaches (Ainscow et al., 2006; Slee, 2011). In the context of sport and coaching, inclusive frameworks highlight the importance of adapting instruction methods, fostering belonging and safety, and recognizing

individual strengths to promote participation and well-being among athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). This perspective aligns with qualitative inquiry approaches that seek to understand lived experiences within complex social settings, as emphasized by Creswell (2013), who advocates for research designs that prioritize participant perspectives, lived experiences and contextual understanding (Creswell, 2013). By grounding this review in inclusive practice, the analysis focuses on how research based coaching strategies, supports, and resources can promote equitable participation and enhance experiences for children and youth within Special Olympics programs.

Research Questions

- 1) What does the existing scholarly literature reveal about coaching practices, supports, and resources in sport contexts serving athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities, with particular attention to Canadian research?
- 2) What key themes, theoretical frameworks, and evidence-based practices emerge from coaching research that may inform the preparation and ongoing development of Special Olympics coaches?

2. Methods and Materials

To identify relevant literature, a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed and grey literature was conducted across multiple databases, including EBSCOhost, ERIC, PubMed Central, Taylor & Francis Online and Wiley Online Library. The search was limited to sources published within the past 15 years to ensure inclusion of current and relevant research. A combination of keywords was used to guide the search process, including 'intellectual disabilities,' 'Special Olympics,' 'coaching,' 'sport participation,' 'physical activity,' 'health outcomes,' and 'children and youth.' These terms were selected to capture literature related to both athlete experiences and coaching practices within Special Olympics and broader sport contexts.

Given the applied and emerging nature of research in this area, a systematized critical review approach was employed. This approach allowed for a structured and transparent search process while also enabling critical interpretation and synthesis of a diverse range of sources, including empirical studies, reports and organizational resources (Paul & Criado, 2020). This methodological approach was particularly appropriate for identifying gaps in coaching research and

examining implications for practice within Special Olympics programming.

2.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they addressed coaching practices, coach development, volunteer retention, or athlete engagement within Canadian sports contexts, with particular attention to Special Olympics programming. While priority was given to Canadian research, studies conducted in other contexts were included if their findings were transferable to the Canadian sport system and relevant to Special Olympics contexts. Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on adult populations without relevance to coaching or youth sport, or if they were opinion-based without empirical or practical grounding.

2.2. Screening and Selection

Titles and abstracts of retrieved articles were initially screened for relevance. Articles that met preliminary criteria were then reviewed in full to determine their inclusion in the final sample. This process was guided by the aim of identifying literature that could meaningfully inform coaching practices and athlete experiences within Special Olympics contexts. A total of [18] articles were included in the final review. Although not all included studies were conducted in Canada, a Canadian lens was applied throughout the analysis to consider how findings could

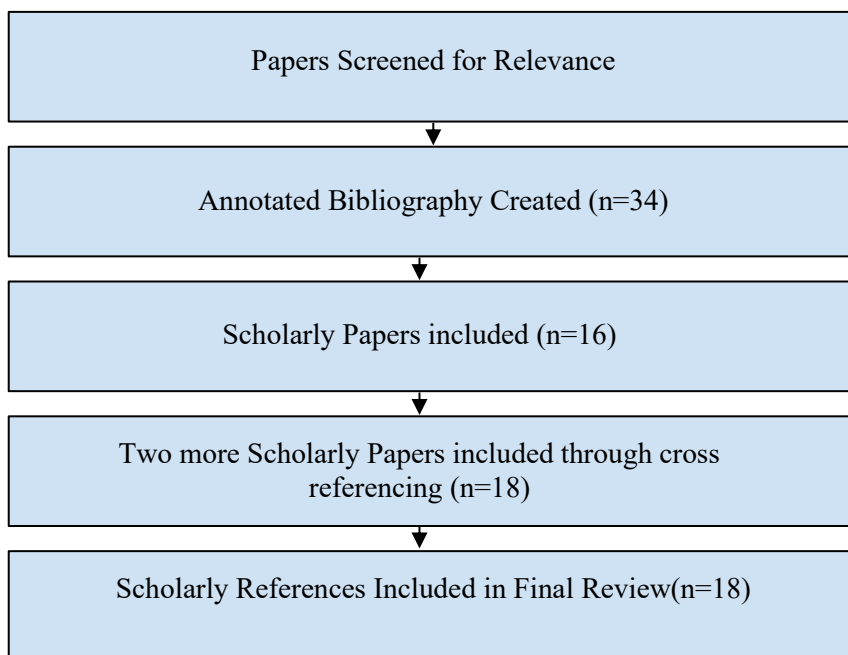
inform coaching practices within Special Olympics, particularly for coaches working with children and youth athletes when possible.

2.3. Data Extraction and Synthesis

From each included study, key information was extracted, including study design, participant characteristics, coaching interventions or practices, and reported outcomes related to athlete experience and development. The findings were then analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and gaps related to mentorship practices, volunteer retention, and athlete experience. These themes included [*Coach Training and Policy, Athlete Development Frameworks, Competition and Safety Resources, Organizational Guidance and Volunteer Support, Research Impacting the Practice of Coaching, Health, Coaching Children and Youth, Special Olympics Coaching Education, Coaches Lived Experiences*]. The synthesis of these findings was used to generate practical recommendations for enhancing coaching programs within Special Olympics programs and to identify future research priorities. Particular attention was given to developing a deeper understanding of coaching context and how this body of research can extend and support the ongoing work of the organization. The peer-reviewed, scholarly literature relevant to this study is presented in Table 1 below. Also, please see the Literature Review's Flow Chart below.

Figure 1

Literature Review Flow Chart


Table 1

Peer-reviewed articles relating to Coaching Special Olympics

Author(s)	Year	Title	Journal	Special Olympics Focus
(Alexander-Urquhart et al., 2024)	2024	Understanding the career experiences and reflections of Special Olympics Canada's National Team Program coaches	Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health	Adult Focus
(Collins & Staples, 2017)	2017	The role of physical activity in improving physical fitness in children with intellectual and developmental disabilities	Research in Developmental Disabilities	Children and Youth Focus
(Cybulski et al., 2016)	2016	Special Olympics coaches: Examining the strategies they use to encourage their athletes to develop life skills	International Journal of Coaching Science	Youth and Adult Focus
(Eliasson, 2017)	2017	The gap between formalised children's rights and children's real lives in sport	International Review for the Sociology of Sport	Children and Youth Focus
(Heenan & Sumner, 2025a)	2025	From Margins to Movement: The Role of Special Olympics Ontario in Promoting Inclusive Sport for Children with Developmental Disabilities	Movement Matters	Children and Youth Focus
(Heenan & Sumner, 2025b)	2025	Coaching in the Special Olympics: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography of Resources and the Need for Continued Research in Canada	<i>International Journal of Educational Studies</i>	General Focus
(Lloyd et al., 2024)	2024	Participation in Special Olympics reduces the rate for developing diabetes in adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities	Diabetic Medicine	Adult Focus
(Lloyd et al., 2022)	2022	Young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who participate in Special Olympics are less likely to be diagnosed with depression	Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology	Young Adult Focus
(Lohani et al., 2021)	2021	A qualitative study: effect of sport participation on general mental health of athletes with intellectual disabilities from special Olympics Bharat	The International Journal of Indian Psychology	Adult Focus
(MacDonald et al., 2016)	2016	Understanding Sources of Knowledge for Coaches of Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities	Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities	Adult Focus

(McGarty & Melville, 2018)	2018	Parental perceptions of facilitators and barriers to physical activity for children with intellectual disabilities: A mixed methods systematic review	Research in Developmental Disabilities	Children and Youth Focus
(Stynes et al., 2017)	2017	Stressors, coping strategies and effectiveness: A study of Special Olympics coaches at a major sporting event	International Sports Studies	Adult Focus
(Sumner & Heenan, 2025)	2025	At Promise, Not At Risk: A Literature Review of Special Olympics Impact on Early Childhood Health	Canadian Journal of New Scholars in Education	Children and Youth Focus
(Temple & Field, 2023a)	2023	Evaluation of the Special Olympics Canada Coaching young Athletes Training: Part B How's it Going? A Study of Active Start and FUNdamentals Program Implementation	PALAESTR	Children and Youth Focus
(Temple & Field, 2023b)	2023	Evaluation of the special olympics canada coaching young athletes training: Part A	PALAESTR	Children and Youth Focus
(Thurston et al., 2021)	2021	Practical Considerations for Coaching Athletes With Learning Disabilities and Neurodevelopmental Disorders	International Sport Coaching Journal	Adult Focus
(Turgeon et al., 2023)	2023	Coaching special Olympics: A scoping review	International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching	General Focus
(van Putten, 2025)	2025	A formative and utilization-focused evaluation of assessment efficacy in Special Olympics coach education programmes across the Asia Pacific region	Journal of Sport for Development	Adult Focus

Figure 2

Scholarly Articles by Research Focus

Scholarly Articles by Population Focus

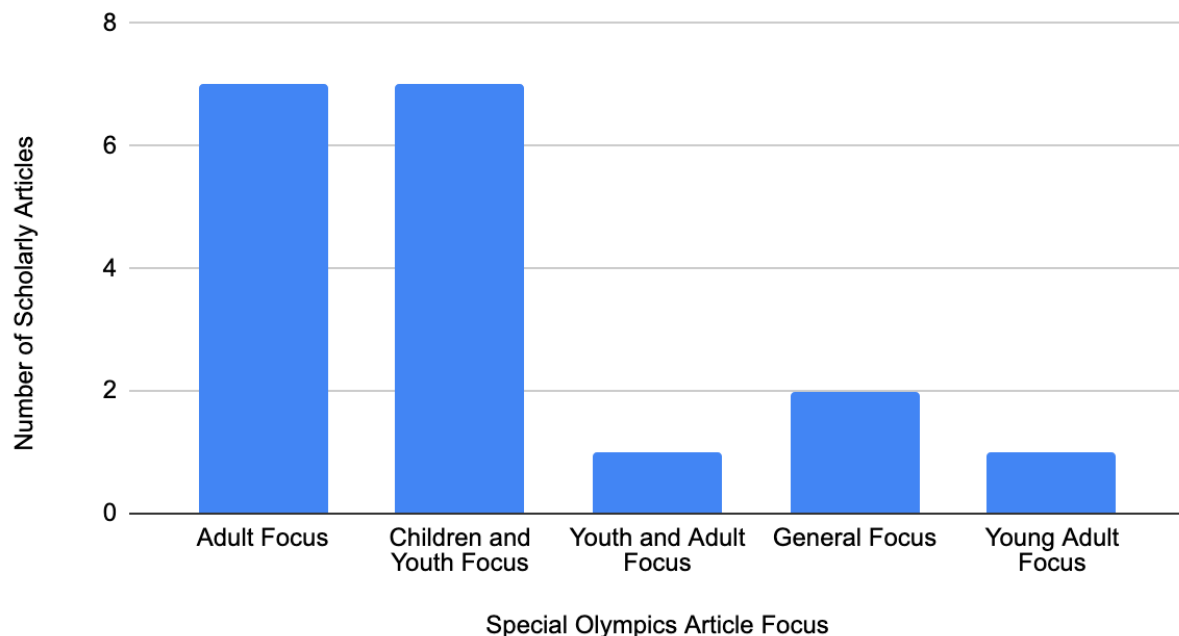
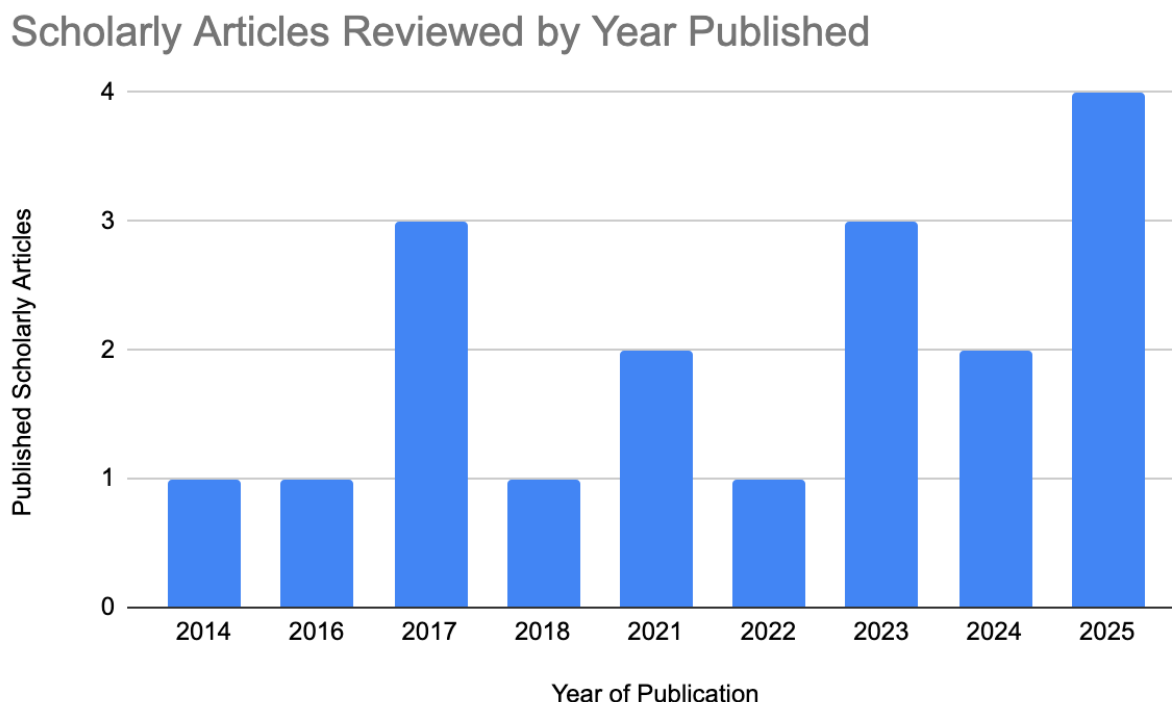


Figure 3

Scholarly Articles by Year Published



3. Findings and Results

3.1. Coach Training and Policy

Effective coaching in Special Olympics Canada is supported by national and provincial organizations that provide training, education, certification, and ongoing professional development development opportunities for volunteers (Heenan & Sumner, 2025a). The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) offers training, resources, and certification programs to ensure coaches can create inclusive and supportive sport environments for athletes of all abilities (Coaching Association of Canada, n.d.-a). CAC's online digital platform, *The Locker*, allows coaches and other volunteers to manage trainings and workshops taken, credentials, complete courses, and access some training modules, including some free resources for Special Olympics coaches (Coaching Association of Canada, n.d.-b). At the provincial level, the Coaches Association of Ontario (CAO) provides additional support and programming for coaches, including professional development, parasport-specific guidance, and safe sport resources, emphasizing continuous improvement and coach readiness across the province of Ontario ((Coaches Association of Ontario, 2020); Special Olympics Canada,

n.d.). Special Olympics Canada has been a leader in coaching training for supporting athletes with intellectual disabilities (Heenan & Sumner, 2025a). These platforms collectively offer coaches the tools, training and knowledge necessary to deliver high-quality, accessible and inclusive sports programs that promote engaging, equitable and safe activities based on the needs of each unique athlete in their programs.

3.2. Athlete Development Frameworks

Special Olympics Canada provides structured frameworks to help guide and support coaching practices and promote athlete growth and improvement across the lifespan (Davies et al., 2021; Heenan & Sumner, 2025a). The Long-Term Athlete Development: Supporting Quality Sport Experiences 2.0 framework emphasizes inclusive, sustainable programming that prioritizes physical, mental, and emotional well-being for athletes with intellectual disabilities (Davies et al., 2021). Sport-specific guides, such as *Special Olympics basketball: A guide for coaches*, offer strategies for skill progression, athlete-centered coaching, and fostering supportive team environments (Heenan, 2021). Early childhood programs, including Active Start (Special Olympics Canada, 2021) and FUNdamentals (Special

Olympics Canada, 2014b), focus on developing fundamental motor skills and confidence in young athletes, providing foundational experiences that support lifelong participation in sport. These resources collectively highlight the importance of structured, developmentally appropriate coaching at all stages of athlete growth, including our youngest athletes who may be on their first sports team of their lives (Special Olympics Canada, 2014a, 2014b). Furthermore, Active Start and FUNdamentals programming helps support athletic achievement and growth in hopes that athletes will graduate into Multi-Sport and more specific sports programs to engage athletes from a long-term perspective (Heenan & Sumner, 2025b).

3.3. *Competition and Safety Resources*

Special Olympics Canada emphasizes safe and equitable competition through a range of resources that guide coaches in creating inclusive sporting experiences (Special Olympics Canada, n.d.). The Sport Rules & Regulations webpage outlines official rules, divisioning procedures, and competition structures to ensure athletes are grouped according to skill levels (Special Olympics Canada, 2025c). Coach-to-athlete ratios provide minimum supervision standards for various sports, ensuring safety and effective coaching support during practices, training and competitions (Special Olympics Canada, 2021). Additionally, provincial resources, such as those from Special Olympics Saskatchewan (2025), offer sport-specific coaching tools, training plans, and competition guidelines to support athlete development and program organization (Special Olympics Canada, 2025a). The diversity of sports and community-based events offered year-round (Special Olympics Canada, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c) highlights the ongoing opportunities for skill-building, social engagement, and competition beyond high-profile World Games.

3.4. *Organizational Guidance and Volunteer Support*

The role of volunteers and organizational guidance is critical in facilitating effective coaching and inclusive programming. Special Olympics Canada provides detailed information on its mission, strategic priorities, and volunteer roles, emphasizing community involvement, leadership development, and the creation of supportive environments for athletes (Special Olympics Canada, 2021, 2024). Policies on athlete eligibility (Special Olympics Ontario, 2021) ensure participation is appropriately structured for individuals with intellectual disabilities, providing a clear

pathway for engagement from early childhood through adulthood. These resources collectively support coaches in delivering programs that are both safe and inclusive, while promoting mentorship, skill development, and community building.

3.5. *Research Impacting the Practice of Coaching*

Research in coaching provides evidence-based insights that directly inform how coaches develop athletes, structure programs, and foster more inclusive sporting environments within the Special Olympics spaces. By examining coaching practices through scholarly studies, researchers can identify strategies that enhance athlete engagement, skill development, and overall program effectiveness. Understanding the link between research and practice ensures that coaching decisions are grounded in proven methods rather than tradition, experiences or intuition alone.

3.5.1. *Health*

Mental health in individuals with intellectual developmental disabilities is a critical concern, given the consistently documented elevated prevalence of mental health disorders within this population (Emerson & Hatton, 2007). Lloyd et al. (2022) further investigated mental health outcomes in this particular population (Lloyd et al., 2022), finding that participation in Special Olympics was associated with a 49% lower risk of depression among young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The study highlights the combined effects of physical activity and social engagement in supporting and enhancing mental health (Lloyd et al., 2022). These results emphasize the broader psychosocial benefits of structured adaptive sports programs for participants (Lloyd et al., 2022). This is also aligned with the founding principles of Special Olympics, as Eunice Kennedy Shriver believed that individuals with intellectual disabilities could thrive physically through increased opportunities for physical activity and sport (Special Olympics, n.d.).

In their qualitative study Lohani et al. (2021) conducted research with athletes with intellectual disabilities in Special Olympics Bharat to explore the effects of sports on mental health (Lohani et al., 2021). Interviews revealed improvements in confidence, communication, teamwork, independence, leadership, and the ability to overcome various barriers faced (Lohani et al., 2021). The study reinforces the transformative potential of sports participation for social inclusion and personal growth, highlighting the

role of coaching and mentorship in supporting these outcomes (Lohani et al., 2021).

Lloyd et al. (2024) examined the impact of Special Olympics participation on diabetes risk in adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Lloyd et al., 2024). Their 20-year cohort study demonstrated a 15% reduced risk of Type 2 diabetes among participants, suggesting that ongoing physical activity and structured programming contribute to long-term health outcomes (Lloyd et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the role of Special Olympics programs as low-cost interventions to promote health and well-being in this unique and diverse population (Lloyd et al., 2024).

3.5.2. *Coaching Children and Youth*

The participation of children and youth in Special Olympics programs is a crucial component of athlete development and long-term engagement in sport (ParticipAction, 2020; Temple & Field, 2023a). Early involvement provides opportunities for young athletes to build physical skills, develop confidence, and experience social inclusion within a supportive environment (ParticipAction, 2020; Temple & Field, 2023a). Understanding the needs and experiences of these young participants and their coaches is essential for designing effective coaching strategies, fostering sustained participation, and promoting positive health and psychosocial outcomes (ParticipAction, 2020; Sumner & Heenan, 2025; Temple & Field, 2023a). This section will explore and critically examine the literature on children and youth in Special Olympics participation, highlighting the role of sport in early development and pathways to continued engagement.

In their 2017 study, Collins and Staples assessed the impact of structured physical activity programs on the fitness of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Collins & Staples, 2017). Their 10-week intervention showed significant improvements in aerobic capacity, muscular strength, and endurance, highlighting the benefits of combining fitness development with enjoyable activities that met the needs of their participants (Collins & Staples, 2017). The study emphasizes the importance of individualized instructional strategies and motivational strategies to enhance both participation and physical outcomes for a diversity of athletes (Collins & Staples, 2017).

Temple and Field (2023a; 2023b) evaluated the implementation of the Special Olympics Canada Coaching Young Athletes Training program, focusing on youth programs like Active Start and FUNdamentals. Interviews with program leaders revealed a need for additional training in working with children with autism and in promoting positive athlete behavior (Temple & Field, 2023a, 2023b). These findings suggest that repeated and diverse skill practice is necessary to enhance program effectiveness and support coaches in delivering inclusive, high-quality sports experiences (Temple & Field, 2023a, 2023b).

While much of the literature reviewed focused on adult athletes in the Special Olympics, in 2025 Sumner and Heenan reviewed empirical studies on health outcomes for children and youth participating in Special Olympics. Their findings highlighted significant health disparities and emphasized the benefits of structured programming in promoting physical activity and well-being (Sumner & Heenan, 2025). The study underscores the importance of program design and mentorship in enhancing both social and health outcomes for athletes (Sumner & Heenan, 2025).

In 2018, researchers McGarty and Melville reviewed parental perceptions of facilitators and barriers to physical activities for children with intellectual disabilities. This research study identified family influence, social motivation, access to inclusive programs, and knowledge levels as critical factors affecting participation (McGarty & Melville, 2018). These findings demonstrate the importance of coaching skills and strategies as well as community support in enabling consistent physical activity and skill development (McGarty & Melville, 2018).

Further, Eliasson (2017) explored how children's rights are experienced in sport settings, interviewing 12 athletes and six coaches in floorball and equestrian programs. The study revealed a lack of awareness among both coaches and athletes regarding the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, creating gaps in the practical implementation of policy (Eliasson, 2017). This highlights the need for education and advocacy to ensure that rights-based approaches are integrated into coaching practices (Eliasson, 2017).

3.5.3. *Special Olympics Coaching Education*

Volunteer retention can be a challenge for many organizations, Special Olympics included (Clary & Snyder, 1999). Volunteer education and training can be helpful in supporting coaches in this case (Cuskelly et al., 2006).

Culver et al. (2020) examined coaching practices for athletes with disabilities, highlighting the emerging scholarly attention to this area (Culver et al., 2020). While research has historically focused on physical disabilities, their chapter acknowledges the growing literature on intellectual disabilities, including international perspectives on coach education (Culver et al., 2020). They propose a coach development model designed to facilitate ongoing learning despite limited formal training programs, emphasizing the need for structured pathways for professional growth and development (Culver et al., 2020).

Furthermore, in their 2016 study, Cybulski et al. investigated the strategies Special Olympics coaches use to foster life skills in athletes with intellectual disabilities. Using a qualitative approach, the study identified themes including coaching philosophy, relationship building, skill development, modeling, teachable moments, volunteerism, and the unique approach of being direct and stern (Cybulski et al., 2016). These findings provide further insight into tailored coaching practices that promote both athletic and personal development in adaptive and inclusive sports contexts (Cybulski et al., 2016).

Additionally, Turgeon et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review on Special Olympics coaching, analyzing 16 studies published between 1988 and 2021. They identified significant gaps in research regarding the effectiveness of formal coach education programs and their impact on athlete outcomes (Thurston et al., 2021). The authors highlight the urgent need for further empirical investigation to guide mentorship and professional development in adaptive sports coaching (Turgeon et al., 2023). This research highlights the importance of studying coaching for these athletes with disabilities (Turgeon et al., 2023). This research suggested that there is an “urgent need” for more research in this area (Turgeon et al., 2023).

In focusing on skills that coaches must learn, MacDonald et al. (2016) investigated how Special Olympics coaches acquire such knowledge and skills. Their interviews with 45 Canadian coaches revealed that most learning occurs through hands-on experience and peer consultation, with coaches expressing a need for more structured education and mentorship (MacDonald et al., 2016). This highlights the importance of formalized professional development alongside experiential learning to strengthen coaching practices in adaptive sports (MacDonald et al., 2016).

Assessing the effectiveness of coaching training is also an important area of inquiry. A 2025 study conducted by van Putten evaluated assessment strategies in Special Olympics

coach education programs across the Asia Pacific region. Using focus groups, the study identified five principles of effective assessment, including situating evaluation within practical coaching contexts and incorporating coach input (van Putten, 2025). The findings provide guidance for improving coach learning and highlight the role of assessment in promoting athlete-centered, socially inclusive coaching practices (van Putten, 2025).

Válková (2014) analyzed the “maximum effort rule” (MER) in Special Olympics competitions, which governs athlete progression in events. The chapter highlighted instances of coaches manipulating performances to gain competitive advantage, while ultimately concluding that the MER ensures fair competition as well (Válková, 2014). This research informs coaching practices by emphasizing both policy compliance and strategies to enhance athlete experience and development (Válková, 2014). This research also provides guidance around understanding performance levels of athletes to ensure meaningful competition.

Thurston et al. (2021) provided practical recommendations for coaching athletes with learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders. Their research emphasizes adapting the environment, communication, and coaching approaches to individual needs rather than focusing on disabilities as limitations (Thurston et al., 2021). These strategies promote inclusive, athlete-centered coaching that aligns with mentorship practices in Special Olympics and other adaptive sports programs (Thurston et al., 2021).

3.5.4. *Coaches Lived Experiences*

Understanding the lived experiences of coaches in the Special Olympics is essential as lived experiences help us understand the meanings, perceptions, and personal interpretations that shape how coaches approach their practice and respond to the unique needs of their athletes (Creswell, 2013). Alexander-Urquhart et al. (2024) explored the career experiences of coaches in Special Olympics Canada’s National Team Program using narrative inquiry. Their qualitative study included 13 coaches, and highlighted various challenges such as managing travel logistics needs, addressing athlete behavioral needs, and balancing personal responsibilities alongside coaching (Alexander-Urquhart et al., 2024). The research emphasizes the importance of mentorship and coach education, providing practical insights that can inform the development of effective training

strategies for coaches of athletes with intellectual disabilities (Alexander-Urquhart et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Wareham et al. (2017) explored the lived experiences of coaches working with elite athletes with disabilities, examining preconceptions versus lived realities. Interviews revealed unique challenges not typically encountered in non-disabled sports, alongside the rewards of coaching in adaptive contexts (Wareham et al., 2017). The study emphasizes the importance of specialized training, mentorship, and support systems to ensure high-quality coaching for athletes with disabilities (Wareham et al., 2017).

Stynes et al. (2017) examined the various stressors experienced by Special Olympics coaches during major sporting events. This study identified organizational, athlete management, and personal stressors, noting that coaches often relied on limited coping strategies in this unique setting (Stynes et al., 2017). The study suggests that enhanced preparation and broader coping skill development are essential for supporting coach well-being and performance (Stynes et al., 2017).

Studying the lived experiences of Special Olympics coaches is critical for advancing both coaching practices and athlete development. By exploring coaches' personal perspectives, researchers can gain insight into the challenges, motivations, and decision-making processes that shape their day-to-day interactions with athletes. Understanding these experiences allows organizations to identify gaps in training, mentorship, and support systems, ensuring that coaches are better equipped to create inclusive, effective, and engaging sport environments. Furthermore, insights from lived experiences can inform strategies to improve volunteer retention, as understanding coaches' needs and challenges is key to sustaining long-term engagement and reducing burnout among volunteers (Clary & Snyder, 1999). This focus not only strengthens coaching capacity but also contributes to the long-term growth and sustainability of Special Olympics programs.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In reviewing the scholarly literature concentrating on coaching within the Special Olympics, it is evident that much of the research focuses on coaches' experiences, challenges, and strategies for supporting adult athletes with intellectual disabilities. Research consistently highlights the importance of mentorship, formal training, and structured coaching resources in enhancing coach effectiveness, as

illustrated by Alexander-Urquhart et al. (2024), Turgeon et al. (2023), and MacDonald et al. (2016) (Alexander-Urquhart et al., 2024; MacDonald et al., 2016; Turgeon et al., 2023). Despite this growing body of work, gaps remain in understanding the research that directly informs coaching practices within the Canadian context, particularly with regard to how we coach children and youth in the Special Olympics. Additional scholarly research should be conducted to examine the experiences and coaching practices of those supporting children and youth with disabilities. Special Olympics is a leader in supporting sport participation for individuals with intellectual disabilities and scholarly literature should reflect the importance of these programs for children and youth with disabilities as well. If we can further engage and encourage children and youth to participate in Special Olympics, long-term outcomes resulting from participation could be significantly increased.

A targeted exploration of how Special Olympics volunteers can support new volunteers specifically working with young athletes is also a potential strong next step. Such research would identify areas where coaches require further training or structured guidance, highlight successful approaches to volunteer recruitment and retention, and inform the creation of resources tailored to children and youth program needs. By focusing research attention on the unique needs of our children and youth populations, barriers to participation and impactful coaching strategies, we can more effectively support athletes and retain volunteers alike. While there have been meaningful contributions to research on children and youth participation in Special Olympics programs in Canada, further research is needed to better understand how to effectively support child and youth development and inclusion in Special Olympics contexts across jurisdictions.

Expanding research could improve volunteer retention, reduce burnout, and strengthen athlete outcomes across Canadian Special Olympics programs and beyond. By continuing to offer accessible training materials, peer networks, and ongoing professional development and further research, organizations can empower coaches to implement effective, inclusive practices that foster athlete growth and long-term program success. Researchers should be prioritizing the curation and understanding of materials that will specifically support, enhance and better include more athletes in the Special Olympics in Canada.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

Not applicable.

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