ORIGINAL RESEARCH

"The Blind can also Play Football": Factors Influencing Blind Football Participation among Zimbabwean High-School Students with Visual Impairments

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ABSTRACT
Despite the exponential growth of blind football worldwide, research examining factors impacting participation in the Paralympic sport has been understudied. This exploratory study adopts the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model to identify the contextual factors which impact a group of Zimbabwean high-school students with visual impairments to participate in blind football. Semi-structured interviews were completed with twelve high-school students from eight out of ten provinces in Zimbabwe. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to categorise the barriers and facilitators to participate in blind football. The analysis revealed the following five themes: 1) access; 2) socio-cultural context; 3) physical health and wellbeing/injury; 4) social relationships; and 5) intrapersonal and beliefs/attitudes. Students experienced participation in blind football as physically beneficial and personally transformative in (re-)constructing their identity. Barriers included fear of injury, lack of specialized blind football pitches, and awareness of blind football. To derive the benefits of blind football, students overcame the aforementioned barriers, many of which were reduced through ongoing participation and positive experiences. As a Paralympic sport amassing popularity amongst visually impaired children and adults, blind football appears to be an effective game to improve the physical health and social wellbeing of this population.

Keywords: Adapted Sport, Blind Football, Participation, Visual Impairment, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

The estimated number of people who are blind in Zimbabwe reached 1.30 million in 2014, equating to ten percent of the total population (Machingura, 2014). Research demonstrates that people with visual impairments (including school-age children) in Zimbabwe are significantly less likely to participate in sport than their sighted counterparts (Dakwa, 2009; Rugoho, 2019). Participation in sport has been reported to have positive effects on physical health, preventing various chronic illnesses relating to cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and diabetes (Warburton et al., 2007; Eime et al., 2013). For people with visual impairments, the physical health benefits of sport are vital, since energy requirements for daily living activities increase with the level of visual impairment due to reduced efficiency of movement patterns (Kobberling et al., 1989). It is imperative, therefore, for stakeholders to strategically develop and offer a range of adapted sports for people with visual impairments to partake in. One such adapted sport for people with visual impairments is blind football.

Although the benefits of blind football are well documented (De Souza, 2002; Ribeiro and Mayr, 2005; Richardson, 2020), research on the factors influencing participation in blind football is scarce. Reported barriers include absence of specialized equipment, extortionate costs of constructing football pitches with rebound boards, long distance trips for competitions; facilitators include family and peer support in

addition to opportunities to compete at international level (Macbeth, 2009; Gombás, 2013; Popenko and Makhov, 2018). The aforementioned studies, however, were conducted in Western countries, and consequently, little is known about the factors influencing blind football participation for people with visual impairments within African countries. The Western concept of disability seeks to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities, while many African societies are primarily interested in explaining why people with disabilities have become as they are (Muderedzi and Ingstad, 2011). This is reflected through the use of sport within several Western countries as a tool for people with disabilities to be socially integrated into school and daily life as well as create positive interactions with people without disabilities (Armella et al., 2013; Carter et al., 2014). The implementation of this notion in Africa, however, remains hindered by ableism, resource inequality, and dependency on international sport aid (Mojtahedi and Katsui, 2018; Brittain, 2019). Thus, there could be underlying factors influencing blind football participation across the African continent which previous studies in Western countries have not reported. Further, and too often, these and similar studies are not grounded in a theoretical framework, leading to a lack of coherent results which elucidate on the contextual factors affecting participation in blind football. Through adopting the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) as a theoretical framework, this paper enumerates the contextual factors that serve as barriers and/or facilitators for Zimbabwean high-school students with visual impairments to participate in blind football.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blind Football: An Adapted Sport for People with Visual Impairments

Adapted sport refers to modifying or creating a sport which uses specialized rules, space, and equipment to meet the needs of varying ability levels of people with disabilities to allow as much independent participation as possible (Lundberg et al., 2011). Adapted sport can be conducted in an integrated setting with people without disabilities or in segregated environments that include individuals with specific impairments (Franciosi and Gallotta, 2011). There are numerous sporting activities that are catered for individuals with visual impairments. Examples include athletics, chess, football, goalball, judo, ninepin bowling, powerlifting, shooting, showdown, swimming, and torball (IBSA, 2020a); some of which are included in the Paralympic Games.

Football, however, is the most popular sport for people with visual impairments worldwide (Gamonales, 2017). There are two formats of football specifically for people with visual impairments: blind football, for players who are totally blind (B1 category); and partially sighted futsal, for players who are partially sighted (B2/B3 category). Blind football—or Football 5-a-side—is an adapted version of conventional futsal for people with visual impairments. It has been governed by the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) since 1996 and has featured in the Paralympic Games competition schedule following its debut in Athens 2004 (IBSA, 2020b). The sport adopts the Federation International Football Association (FIFA) futsal rules, with specific adaptations to ensure maximum participation of people with visual impairments (Magno et al., 2013). For orientation purposes, the ball is sonorous, containing six (metal or steel) spherical ball-bearings which emit a maracas-esque sound for players to audibly locate the ball. For a dynamic game, blind football is played on an artificial turf pitch of 40×20 metres, with the two touch lines covered with 1-1.2 metres rebound boards.

According to the IBSA (2017) rulebook, players must say “voy” (meaning “I go” in Spanish) when seeking, tackling, or searching for the ball. Unlike other team sports for the visually impaired, the composition of teams in blind football demonstrates that the sport is an integrated game. The game is played for 40 minutes between two teams, each with four B1 outfield players and one sighted (or partially sighted) goalkeeper. Further, outfield players’ orientation is dependent on extensive communication with the following three sighted guides: goalkeeper, head coach, and guide. As some players may have minimal

residual sight which can give an unfair advantage over other players, all outfield players are required to wear eyepatches and blindfolds to create a level playing field.

Blind football in Zimbabwe is developed and promoted by the Zimbabwe National Paralympic Committee (ZNPC), with its headquarters in the capital city of Harare. The ZNPC—in collaboration with the author—established a national blind football project in 2018 to introduce the sport through a one-day coaching clinic for specialist teachers and students with visual impairments (IBSA, 2018). Blind football was recently implemented across all ten of Zimbabwe's provinces in multifarious educational institutions (mainstream schools, special schools for the blind, vocational training centres, and universities) with enrolled blind and partially sighted students (IBSA, 2020c). As affiliate members of IBSA (2020d), the ZNPC have received donations of blind footballs and eyeshades from the IBSA Blind Football Subcommittee to distribute to educational institutions during coaching clinics. In February 2019, one female athlete and female coach represented Zimbabwe at the IBSA Blind Football Women's World Training Camp and Games in Japan (IBSA, 2019a). Thereafter, the ZNPC held their first ever national coaching clinic in Luveve, Bulawayo, for coaches and players from all corners of the country (IBSA, 2019b). As in several other countries, however, blind football in Zimbabwe is still in its infancy and faces several challenges in growing the sport. De Haan and co-workers (2014) recommended acquiring greater attention from existing participants and supporters to grow and develop the sport of blind football. As such, there is an evident need in Zimbabwe to identify the factors influencing participation in blind football, wherein students' participation can be sustained during their school years and beyond.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health

The ICF is a classification of health domains and health-related domains (World Health Organization, 2001), which are perceived from the perspective of the body, the individual, and society in two components: (1) Body functions and structures; and (2) Activity and Participation (see Figure 1). With activity and participation possessing a bidirectional relationship, activity is defined as the execution of a task or action by an individual, while participation is involvement in a life situation. This study focuses on the participation component of the model. Within participation, the ICF model categorizes contextual factors as both environmental factors (societal attitudes or services) and personal factors (age or self-efficacy), which could be perceived as barriers or facilitators. Several authors in adapted sport have used the ICF as a respected model to conceptualize the underlying factors that promote or hinder participation in sport for people with disabilities (Wilhite and Shank, 2009; Di Palma et al., 2018). As this present study seeks to sustain blind football participation for high-school students with visual impairments, the ICF model would be appropriate to categorize the barriers and facilitators in a detailed and nuanced analysis.

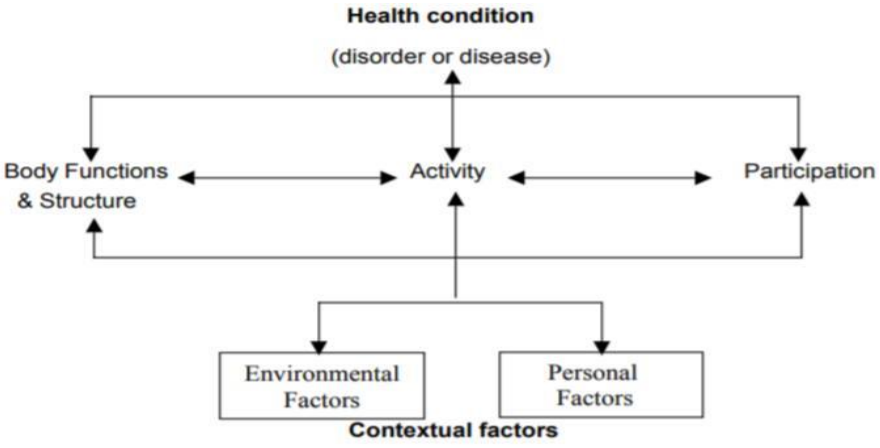

Figure 1. Diagram of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 9)

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study is guided by one overarching research question, specifically: What are the contextual factors that influence blind football participation amongst high-school students with visual impairments in Zimbabwe?

METHODS

This study utilized an exploratory case study design as a qualitative research method (Kiramba and Oloo, 2020). An exploratory case study design is beneficial and often used to investigate distinct phenomena in a research field bereft of detailed preliminary research (Mills et al., 2010). Therefore, with the dearth of literature on the contextual factors influencing blind football participation in Zimbabwe, an exploratory case study would best fit in procuring this information and serve as a firm foundation for future studies. Forming the basis of an ongoing study focused on increasing sustained participation in blind football in Zimbabwe, data were garnered through semi-structured interviews with Zimbabwean high-school students with visual impairments. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the adaptation of the interview guide in situ to mirror the students' multifarious experiences of barriers and facilitators to participation in blind football. Open-ended questions were based on the ICF model to prompt students to reflect on the contextual factors within their lived experiences that served as barriers and facilitators to participate in blind football. With the author's influential position as co-founder and coach developer of the national blind football project, purposive sampling was used to recruit students who met the established criteria (Sparkes and Smith, 2018). The criteria included a mixture of male and female students with visual impairments studying at high school level in a mainstream school or special school for the blind and have regularly participated in blind football for more than six months.

Data Collection

A total of twelve students were purposefully sampled, who consented to being interviewed following the author's approach and invitation to participate in the study. Of the twelve participants, seven were female and five were male. Seven high-school students were enrolled in special schools for the blind and five high-school students attended various mainstream schools. The ages of the cohort ranged from 15 to 23 years of age. Each student was provided with a pseudonym to protect their identity. Students had a range of acquired and congenital visual impairments. In addition to blind football, the students also participated and competed in different sporting activities, namely: judo (n=2), goalball (n=9), and athletics (n=10). Out of Zimbabwe's ten provinces, students came from the following eight provinces: Mashonaland West (n=3), Harare (n=2), Mashonaland East (n=2), Manicaland (n=1), Masvingo (n=1), Mashonaland Central (n=1), Matabeleland North (n=1), Midlands (n=1), Mashonaland Central (n=0), and Matabeleland South (n=0). Each student was interviewed once for between 25 and 56 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and thereafter transcribed verbatim and were conducted onsite at the students' school in a private and confidential space.

Data Analysis

The dataset was analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2014), which was deemed suitable in its flexibility to analyze data across myriad theoretical and epistemological approaches. With no attachment to any theoretical framework, thematic analysis has the potential to provide a rich, detailed and nuanced account of a collected dataset. The analysis of the data is situated within a 'contextualist' framework. Positioned between essentialism and constructionism, a contextualist framework explicitly analyzes: "the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of 'reality'" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The author followed the six-phase process proposed by Clarke and Braun (2014). After the interviews were transcribed, they were checked for accuracy before familiarizing with the

data by reading and re-reading, noting interesting features. This led to generating initial codes through carefully coding of the entire dataset in a systematic manner. The codes were thereafter organized into potential themes, which were identified at a semantic level. The author focused on the words of the students, remaining close to the data, to garner a thick description of their experience before interpreting what was being said, to identify significance, broader meanings, and implications of the students' words. After potential themes were identified, the themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately correlate with the coded data (extracts from each interview) and the entire dataset. Themes were then reviewed, defined, and named. The analysis is offered below.

RESULTS

The twelve interviewed students reported several contextual factors which they perceived to influence their participation in blind football. These factors are categorized into five themes, encompassing eight additional subthemes: 1) access (three subthemes); 2) socio-cultural context (two subthemes); 3) physical health and wellbeing/safety; 4) social relationships; and 5) intrapersonal and beliefs/attitudes (three subthemes). In the following section, each theme is presented and analyzed with congruent literature. Facilitators and/or barriers were identified within each theme.

Access

Awareness of Blind Football: Interviewed students acquired knowledge of blind football after their schools' agreement to host a blind football coaching clinic delivered by the ZNPC. However, they were not cognizant that blind people could play football before the training camp. Family members, peers, and teachers were also not aware of the adaptions of football for individuals with visual impairments. First-hand experience in the training camp, however, provided an enjoyable experience and ample information regarding the sport:

> When I was introduced to blind football, I enjoyed it very much. Gone are the days when I assumed that there is no one who is blind that can play football. I did not know anybody who was blind and played football; I just knew Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. (Maita)

Specialized Equipment: As would be expected, audible balls were identified as a strong facilitator to initiating and maintaining blind football participation. Discussions revealed that availability of audible balls at school and at home sustained participation throughout the calendar year (including school holidays):

> I used to play (sighted) girls' soccer, but I used to miss the ball because it had no sound. I am very happy to have the balls that are audible because I can hear the ball whilst playing. (Zendaya)

> When I arrived at home, every morning I took my friend to the stadium. Before I started to play, I would exercise and dribble the ball with my friend directing me. I was motivated because I had the ball. (Banga)

Specialized Football Pitches: Whilst interviewed students had access to sport pitches at their school, none were specialized with artificial turf or rebound boards required for blind football. Moreover, priority and availability for sport pitches varied between male students and female students in a particular school, proving to be a profound barrier for the latter group to regularly participate:

> We have fewer advantages compared to the boys. The boys are allowed to practice by themselves after dinner. Whereas we are restricted from the grounds after supper, so we practice less. Some fear that the girls will come with their own intentions, which is not about playing football. Maybe visiting the guys, hiding under the name of practice. I am still motivated to play. It is the only sport for the blind that I know. We are only allowed to practice when teachers give us time, which is usually after lunch, especially for sporting competitions. (Vimbo)

Some students revealed that the quality of sport pitches at their school served as a barrier to sustaining participation. Two students bemoaned poor conditions of the football pitch at their school, which led to the puncturing of the audible balls. Regular participation in this school underwent a long hiatus:

> The main challenges are the thorns in the ground and the school staff took long to fix the ground. The ground damaged all our balls so we ended up having nothing to play with. (Chenziri)

> Before the balls were punctured, we trained daily. But when they were punctured, we only trained twice a week on Friday and Saturday. When we called teammates, some would say no because they wanted to play with inflated balls. (Banga)

These students overcame this barrier by using their own personal audible balls once the balls belonging to the school were depleted.

Socio-Cultural Context

Quality of Trained Teachers: Teachers were consistently mentioned as an important figure in mediating students' participation in blind football. Their soft skills whilst coaching blind football were especially commended:

> The coaches train us very well. They understand that teaching blind football needs someone who is very hearted and does not give up very easily. They take their time so they see that I've gone through the process and have learnt the skill. (Danai)

> My teachers considered my visual impairment. During the difficulties, the coaches would encourage me to keep practicing and I would improve. When they are instructing us, if we cannot catch up, they are patient until we get better. They know how to coach us. (Rufaro)

Family Support: Emotional and financial support from family members was widely identified as a contributing factor to sustaining blind football participation, especially for training camps held outside of school:

> When I was selected to go to Japan, my parents and other relatives encouraged me to go there as I was selected. They gave me money to spend in Japan. (Miriro)

> My parents have never seen any blind person doing sport; they never pressured me into participating in sport. But they have changed as they gave me bus fare to come to Luveve. These days they encourage me more as they saw the audible ball I came home with. (Chenziri)

Physical Health and Well-being/Injury

Students listed several benefits related to the physical domains of blind football participation, including balance, orientation, stamina, and strength. Many students agreed that their regular participation in blind football was a contributing factor to their improved fitness:

> Blind football is improving my balance. Before I could not stand on one leg, but now I can. I have also benefitted a lot physically and health wise. (Banga)

> I used to fear walking, even on a plain ground. But now I am able to walk without any fear. I like it because it strengthens my legs. It has also taught me how to run well. (Tanaka)

Nonetheless, barriers emerged from the threat of head collisions. Time, repeated practice and trained expertise were required for students to master safe participation. Although collisions commonly occurred from the outset of participation, this gradually decreased by mastering when to say "voy" in defensive situations:

> At first, we used to have head on collisions with others. But the problem was solved by the word voy. We had falls at first, but I kept on playing because it was interesting (Maita)

> When I was introduced to football, I thought it would be so difficult, but as time went on, I found it so easy. Bumping into each other was the first thing I found difficult. (Rufaro)

Social Relationships

Social relationships with staff and fellow classmates were bolstered through blind football and thus promoted participation, infusing a sense of cohesion:

> Socially it is creating wonders as we are one team together. It is creating oneness. (Banga)

Interviewed students who attended the national coaching clinic in Luveve relived cordial experiences of meeting other blind students and athletes from different provinces in Zimbabwe, increasing their friends and social skills:

> I enjoyed it as it boosted my communication skills. Before I was anti-social, but after Luveve I became social with everyone and all new people I meet. The people who we were camping with started greeting me. I saw that my schoolmate was now connecting with other people so I just followed suit. Now I can have chats and connect with new people. (Vimbo)

After returning from the national coaching clinic, several students helped their classmates and younger students master the technical skills of blind football to yield the benefits from participation:

> Those from Form 1 who finished primary school came to join our team this term. I taught them some of the tactics I learnt in Bulawayo, like shooting, dribbling, and corners. I want blind football to go on. I have to support them so that by the time I leave this place the team will be flourishing. I don't want it to die. (Maita)

Students with visual impairments in mainstream school formulated social relationships with sighted students as the need for sighted goalkeepers and assistant trainers grew over time:

> I felt so happy when they joined us. Without their support some things would not be a success, like dribbling the ball. When we miss it, they tell us where the ball is. By giving us directions, they are helping us. (Tanaka)

Through participation in blind football, interviewed students were able to reshape perceptions of disability through the various opportunities to integrate with people without visual impairments in schools and their homestead:

> I had that [audible] ball when I came from Bulawayo and I took it home. My mother was interested to see how I was playing, so I had to teach her first. Then from there she called others: 'come and see that my blind child can play football'. They were saying 'she is blind. How can she do that?'. She said come and see. I started coaching them some skills. I blindfolded them in order for them to play. As they were playing, they realized that it was difficult. They appreciated that the skills are very important and that I am good. They said I must continue playing blind football because as time goes on, I will look after them. (Rufaro)

Intrapersonal and Beliefs/Attitudes

Transcendence of Disability Identity: Students describe their participation in blind football as personally transformative. They expressed that through participating in blind football, they were able to refute misconceptions and challenge dominant ideas about being visually impaired that are held by others, and, even themselves:

> Sports are not only for those who are sighted. Sport is for all whether you are visually impaired or not. Those who are sighted can kick the ball and us who are disabled we can also kick the ball. (Danai)

The value that students attach to feeling parity with their sighted counterparts through blind football was aptly captured by one student who attended the coaching clinic in Luveve:

> I liked that we were also being looked at like others. The blind can also play football. Some people left their jobs and their homes, paying money to come and complete the training. There were also children from the community coming to watch us play blind football. That is what made me feel like the others who are able bodied. (Chenziri)

Participation in blind football also (re-)framed and broadened students' sporting identity, particularly for those who participated in conventional football prior to acquiring their visual impairment:

> I only played [football] when I could see when I was younger, but when my sight went, I did not play. I love football. It is like I am born with the ball. I feel blind football is going to take me far away, even being international. (Chenziri)

Abilities and Self-efficacy: Challenges in mastering the technical demands of blind football was perceived as a common barrier, often amongst female students. However, discussions revealed that regular participation often diminished these challenges. Increasing cognitive, perpetual, and motor skills increased students' self-efficacy and promoted future participation:

> At first, it was very difficult for me because it was my first time. Dribbling the ball was very difficult, as was knowing the direction in the ground. Sometimes I lost instructions from the guide. I have now overcome those challenges by regular training. (Miriro)

> At first, I hated blind football. It was difficult for me to play. I didn't know where I am supposed to shoot or who is my opponent. My teacher started to explain to me and the game became so amazing. I trained with other players or alone. I used to dribble because the problem with me is dribbling. (Danai)

Mastering the skills also engendered aspiration and optimism of a career in blind football:

> I said we must have our own team and go outside Zimbabwe, which is when I got interested in playing with others. Who knows? You might be a Zimbabwean national player for blind soccer! (Zendaya)

> I want to partake in this game so I could earn a living and play in other countries. (Anodiwa)

Sport History: Interviewed students had participated in blind football for a period of 0.6 to 2 years. Some students also competed in judo, athletics, and goalball for 1 to 12 years, and were able to transfer sensory efficiency skills and motor skills to blind football:

> The listening skills I acquired from goalball are also transferrable to blind football. The ball we have now, you have to listen to it, so that we do not bump into each other. (Chenziri)

> I started Goalball when I was 13 in primary school. The sport requires good listening skills, which is quite similar to blind soccer. Both sporting activities taught me to be alert everywhere I am. If you are not alert you get injured so easily. (Zendaya)

Some students recounted experiences of exclusion in non-inclusive settings; while others identified a transition in their feelings about sport, preferring the integrated settings of sighted peers in blind football:

> When I played with the sighted, whenever they wanted to make a substitution, I was always the first one because they said I have no sight and keep missing the ball. This happened outside of school in my home area. When I was repeatedly substituted, I kept thinking, when are we going to have our own kind of football? (Shohiwa)

> Because of the introduction of blind football here I can also play football together with those who are sighted. Because of that I am now interested in playing. When I saw girls, who were sighted playing girls soccer, I wished that I could play. Now there is blind football, the chance is there for me to play football together with those who are sighted. (Rufaro)

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study is the first to reveal the contextual factors influencing blind football participation in accordance to the ICF model. By giving a voice to twelve high-school students with visual impairments living in Zimbabwe, several barriers and facilitators to blind football were identified in this study. The

narratives highlighted improvements in students' physical health in addition to transformation in self-perceptions and perceptions held by others. As such, they (re-)claimed sporting identities strongly attached to football. Social relationships and mentoring (teacher-student and student-student) enriched, motivated, and promoted participation.

Students reported inadequate specialized football pitches and lack of access to sport facilities as an environmental barrier, reflecting literature on sport participation for people with disabilities and people without disabilities in both Western countries and African countries (Crawford and Stodolska, 2008; Osvath et al., 2007; Anaza and McDowell, 2013; Conchar et al., 2016; Elumaro et al., 2016). Lack of awareness of blind football was also mentioned as a barrier (Makhov, 2019). The fear of injury was perceived as a common barrier, which a prospective cohort study legitimatizes by confirming blind football as the sport with the highest injury rate at the London 2012 Paralympic Games (Willick et al., 2013). Head collisions frequently occurred during the early stages of participation, but the prevalence reduced with regular participation. Interestingly, head collisions and other injuries were not a significant deterrent, given that the students are active in several sports. In essence, fear of injury may have been a barrier at one point, but the students appeared to have conquered this fear and no longer perceive it as an insurmountable barrier to regular participation in blind football. This finding is an important distinction to barriers reported for people with visual impairments in general.

Facilitators were often environmental, personal, social, or attitudinal. Transformation of beliefs about oneself—including identity and self-efficacy—played a critical role in participation, as reported in previous studies on adapted sport (Bantjes et al., 2019; Diaz et al., 2019). Access to audible balls at school and owning a personal ball was also an important factor, particularly in maintaining participation outside of school. Others have also found audible balls an important factor to initiating and sustaining participation in various sports for people with visual impairments (Winnick and Porretta, 2016). It is a noteworthy point, albeit, that audible balls have been a significant barrier to sport participation for people with visual impairments, due to high costs and/or unavailability of specialized equipment, particularly and more often in African countries than in Western countries (Novak, 2014; Charles and Chinaza, 2018; Nzeyimana and Rakwal, 2018). The more specialized the equipment, the more targeted the audience, the smaller the supply, and the higher the cost (Zettler, 2009). An audible football, for example, costs between $35 to $50 (Handi Life Sport, 2020). Donations of audible balls from the IBSA Blind Football Subcommittee to the ZNPC, thus, were critical in overcoming this barrier. While availability of audible balls can reduce a profound barrier and make participation tangible, access alone does not motivate and enrich participation. As reflected in the students' experiences, people with visual impairments need more time, additional support, and more repetition to learn and master technical skills (Lieberman et al., 2002). Thus, access must also be situated within a socio-cultural context which includes a patient and nurturing approach from teachers and coaches (Rowe, 2015; Richardson and Fletcher, 2020).

Family support was also identified as a critical component to stimulate participation in national and international training camps. This finding corroborates those of Jaarsma, Geertzen, de Jong, Dijkstra, and Dekker (2014a) who also identified family support as an important facilitator of sports participation for Dutch Paralympic athletes. Moreover, social relationships and fun were the main personal facilitators that mediated students' participation both inside and outside of school, as reflected in previous studies (Malone et al., 2012; Jaarsma et al., 2014b). History with sport was also a personal facilitator to motivate participation and desire to surmount perceived barriers (Lape et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study has unearthed multifarious factors influencing blind football participation, which hitherto have been scarce in adapted sport literature. The results from this study indicate that blind football

provided physical, social, and attitudinal benefits for the high-school students. Access coupled with a conducive socio-cultural context (quality of teachers and family support) were the main personal facilitators to sustain participation and offset barriers such as fear of injury.

Most qualitative research studies on participation in adapted sports literature have been overwhelmingly male dominated (Lastuka and Cottingham, 2016; Ryan et al., 2018). Seven of the twelve students in this study were female, adding to the limited literature on the sporting experiences of females with disabilities (see Anderson et al., 2008; Haegele et al., 2018). Although this exploratory study has provided important insight for researchers to investigate future studies on factors influencing blind football participation across the African continent, the findings should be viewed as hypothesis-generating, in light of some limitations inherent to the study. All the study participants were active in blind football and competed in other sports; thus, they had already achieved a degree of success and mastery in sport, benefiting extremely from sports participation. It would be therefore important for future research in this area to include the voices of students and adults who had been marginalized from participation in blind football or inactive in sport generally. Also, the study only presents the perspective from one of the stakeholders' group (students), therefore, it is important to consider the opinions of others, such as coaches and parents, as mixed-methods studies have reportedly added value to conceptualising factors influencing participation (Jaarsma et al., 2014c).

Despite these limitations, this study serves as the exploratory starting point for a conceptualised model of the barriers and facilitators to blind football participation in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, with the scant research in this area, this study offers national governing bodies, schools, and organisations focused on sport for people with visual impairments with rich information on reducing the barriers and increasing facilitators to initiate and maintain participation in blind football.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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