Inclusive Leisure during COVID-19 Pandemic

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La pandemia de COVID-19 ha provocado una reducción de las actividades de ocio que implican contacto humano. El aislamiento social se ha incrementado, especialmente entre las personas vulnerables con una red de apoyo frágil, como es el caso de los jóvenes que han abandonado el cuidado. El objetivo de la presente investigación fue identificar propuestas e intervenciones socioeducativas implementadas durante la pandemia relacionadas con el ocio como forma de promover la inclusión social de estos jóvenes. Para ello, se realizó un estudio cualitativo en el que se realizaron veinte entrevistas semiestructuradas a jóvenes que habían abandonado el sistema de atención, además de quince entrevistas a profesionales que trabajan con este colectivo en la realización de intervenciones socioeducativas. El análisis del discurso reveló que el aislamiento por la crisis de salud tuvo mayores repercusiones en entornos normalizados en los que la actividad de ocio se redujo con este creciente riesgo de inclusión social entre estos jóvenes. Las propuestas y experiencias que surgen de este entorno evidencian que las intervenciones socioeducativas dirigidas al ocio facilitan la inclusión social. En este sentido, se sugieren futuras líneas de investigación para optimizar los resultados de las intervenciones socioeducativas dentro de este grupo.

1. Introducción

Over recent decades the importance of leisure has been argued as a fundamental pillar of human development [1][2][3][4] as it is an essential element of social inclusion and development [5][6]. Leisure contributes positively to physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects at an individual level as well as in a social sense [7][8]. This aspect takes on special relevance during infancy and childhood when full and satisfying experiences of free time contribute to the development of identity, autonomy, sense of achievement and social commitment due to this being an appropriate vital stage for discovering new interests and affirming personal values and social ideals [9].

In this sense, we consider that engagement in meaningful leisure must be accompanied by positive values which lead to benefits for individuals, groups and communities [10]. For leisure to be meaningful it must entail a symbolic load that is related with benefits following its engagement. This could be in terms of added value for the individual or even in an economic sense. We therefore consider leisure to be beneficial for any young person, whether in a position of vulnerability or not, because it represents values such as responsibility, solidarity, teamwork, dynamics of cooperation (although it also involves dynamics of competitiveness), fun, recreation, satisfaction and flow of emotions [11]. Of the activities engaged in by young people in their free time, sport practice takes first place [12][13] due to its recognised benefits for health [14], academic performance [15] and the social setting [16]. Participation in cultural activities, engagement in hobbies and spending time with one's family, partner and friends are indicated as being of utmost importance when it comes to the availability of free time [17].

These leisure alternatives, all of which imply human contact, have been reduced since March 2020 when the World Health Organization declared a state of pandemic due to an international increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. This phenomenon has led to an increase in social isolation [18] which is starting to have an impact on the mental health of young people [19]. According to various experts, these psychological issues will increase worldwide in response to the pandemic [20][21]. Some experts have even argued that the psychological impact will be as significant as the impact on physical health caused by COVID-19, particularly within vulnerable populations [22][23] such as care leavers. In order to address this, it is important to promote inclusive leisure as a resource in socio-educational interventions for socially disadvantaged young people in adverse contexts. This leisure should support them in their progress as individuals given that leisure should be understood as a subjective indicator of human development as the perception of positive leisure experiences favours the growth of young people with regards to psychological, emotional, creative and cognitive aspects [24].

These young people who lack or count on only fragile family support [25] account for a high proportion of cases in European data on social exclusion due to the greater challenges they face when it comes to accessing basic resources [26][27]. The inequalities in which they are mired stymie the emergence of positive development outcomes [28] due to life trajectories that are subject to risk factors [29], such as failure and school dropout, unstructured family settings and the harmful influence of peer groups who act as triggers of exclusion, discrimination and stigma [30]. The fact that leisure in young people is related with their experience in the way that it offers different opportunities to improve socialisation processes [12] invites further reflection on the time spent on leisure by socially disadvantaged young people.

2. Current Insights

During the coding of information nodes from participant discourse, a wide variety of relationships were established between sub-codes associated with *challenges to engaging in leisure activities* and sporting activity. An exception was found with regards to the sub-code *other challenges*, which was strongly related with *being with partners and friends*. For this reason, it seems that that some testimonies regarding the peer groups of these young people were linked with a risk factor that makes engagement in "meaningful leisure" more difficult [10][31]. The remaining sub-codes were directly related with engagement of these young people in their preferred activities during their free time. Despite the fact that economic challenges were more frequently mentioned within the group of quotes pertaining to the code *challenges to engagement in leisure activities* (N = 14, 45.1%), those associated with the pandemic, which was the second main topic within this code (N = 10, 32.3%), held a strong link with the *sport and physical activity* sub-code. Indeed, a direct link was found in seven testimonies (22.3% of the code), with all of these coming from young people. This finding is of particular importance as it demonstrates that a stronger association is found between the leisure activities engaged in by these young people and the challenges to their enjoyment when their account pertains to the pandemic and their main activity.

If we consider, on the one hand, the absence of a link between the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the *being with partner and friends* sub-code, it may be explained by the fact that the peer group of these young people is fundamentally composed of other counterparts met during their stay within the care system and in programs supporting the transition to an independent adult life [32][33][34]. Thus, this increases the possibility that, in many cases, it will be formed by people they live with. As indicated by Valenzuela, Gradaílle and Caride (2018) [12], this may be due to the fact that these young people are 46.2% less likely to employ their free time in cultural activities and hobbies than the same age range within the general population. As a consequence, it can be concluded that the social inclusion of these young people, through a factor as important to socialisation at this age such as leisure, has been clearly affected.

With regards to the identified socioeducational proposals and interventions implemented during the pandemic in relation to the promotion of the social inclusion of these young people, testimonies emerged that called for the need to strengthen network working. Furthermore, minimising the economic challenges of access to leisure activities was urged, also acknowledging that this issue existed prior to coronavirus. For this, alternatives that unite different entities, groups and volunteers around sporting activities will be required. Another proposal sought to empower these young people by giving them a leading role in awareness campaigns which strive to break the stigmas attached to them by part of the population and to which they, themselves, often subscribe to. This requires consideration of the need to involve this group in different social activities and mechanisms which promote their active participation [35], emphasising their strengths [36] as a means to overcoming the disconnection that comes from a lack of trust in the system itself and the environment in which they live [37]. Present findings also demonstrate that the conversion of spaces is used as a strategy, with this not only being an approach for the future but one that is also currently being successfully implemented through some socio-educational actions.

With regards to performed actions, community services were observed to have emerged as an alternative that has generated new spaces in which to relate in normalised settings, opening up the possibility for intergenerational interaction. It must be considered that this factor is indispensable for the preservation of social capital [38]. Statements made by young people around these experiences demonstrate that they have a positive impact on their self-esteem due to their effects on promoting processes related with resilience [39].

Finally, the findings reveal that initiative and creativity have been shown by socio-educational intervention professionals to be faced with a lack of leisure options during the period of confinement and its later de-escalation. This has been geared towards the safety and motivation of young people when it comes to managing their free time and orientating them towards artistic and cultural activities. These professionals have sought for continuity outside of the care facilities, implementing educational interventions in a context of lockdown and with scant resources with a view to ensuring social inclusion through leisure time.

3. Conclusions

The initial aim of the present study was to describe the activities that young people in the charge of the childcare system engaged in during their free time. The aim of this was to identify the challenges they face when engaging in activities and determine the impact of the health crisis on access to preferred leisure activities. Likewise, a further aim was to identify the socio-educational proposals and interventions implemented during the pandemic to target leisure and promote the social inclusion of these young people.

Participant discourse in the present study highlighted sporting activities to be the most engaged in and demanded activity type for these young people, with playing football and going to the gym being the most popular. The findings demonstrate that, despite physical activity and sporting activities having numerous social, therapeutic and educational benefits, participating young peoples' access to them was highly limited by economic challenges prior to the pandemic. Participant testimonies also show that prior to the pandemic, there was already a lack of networking between implicated agents with regards to inclusive leisure. This aspect will require a special emphasis at the time of implementing coordinated socio-educational actions to prevent social exclusion. Beyond these issues, outcomes evidence that COVID-19 has proposed a further challenge to these young people accessing their preferred leisure activities, with its strongest impact being seen in relation to sporting activity. This suggests that, alongside social isolation and its implications for psychological, social and emotional development [40], the situation caused by COVID- 19 has acted as an obstructive factor with regards to access to inclusive leisure. Consequences have been especially notable for sporting activities, with this contributing to increased risk of these vulnerable young people crossing the threshold into social exclusion [41].

In considering leisure as an essential element of inclusion and social development [5][6], the planning of inclusive leisure activities, as a socio-educational interventional resource with young care leavers, should be structured as a means to reshape the social fabric of support given to these vulnerable young people so that they can tackle the psychological, physical, economic and social impact of COVID-19. In this regard, the present research examined the socio-educational proposals and actions implemented by professionals working with these young people to ensure that the leisure-related inclusion processes, in motion prior to the pandemic, could resume or be re-routed. Coordinated work between the different agents implicated in socio-educational interventions with these young people must be relied on as a key resource to minimise the economic challenges that obstruct access to some leisure activities. Furthermore, reshaping spaces, raising social awareness, promoting artistic and cultural activities and promoting the use of free time in volunteering activities were revealed in the present work as examples of alternatives which could prevent social exclusion of these young people through socio-educational actions directed from, for and as a result of leisure. All of this opens a line of future research with a view to optimising psychoeducational interventions with this group.

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