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THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this study was to explore the extracurricular activity settings of school-aged children with and without disabilities, who selected the activities and whether they meet children's interests.

Material and methods: A questionnaire was developed specifically for this study and included questions concerning children's extracurricular participation.

Results: 90% of children from group A, 66% from group B, and 69% from group C participated in extracurricular activities. In group A, 67% of children chose activities together with parents, while in groups B (18.2%) and C (30.4%) teachers were often involved. Activities met the interest of most children, although the number of children for whom activities met their interest differed depending on who selected them.

Conclusions: The study found that children without disabilities were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities than their peers with a disability rating.

Key words: children's participation, children's interest, parents, types of activities

Introduction

The meaningful involvement of children in activities related to their interests contributes to their development by helping them in their self-realisation, attaining good physical and mental health and making them participate in social life [1,2]. The international Convention on the Rights of the Child indicates that each child – regardless of their state of health – should have the opportunity for personal development and to participate in social life actively [3]. Ensuring that children and young people with disabilities have opportunities, access to and participate in typical childhood activities, including leisure activities, might help them to achieve positive long-term developmental outcomes [4,5].

Leisure and recreational activities have often been classified as formal and informal, with the first being organised and having rules and structure and the latter involving activities, which children often initiate and carry out on their own, such as watching sports, playing cards, or going for a walk [6,7]. Although the formal activities have been linked to various developmental benefits [2], both types are thought to be important, as it is the child's meaningful involvement that is the crux of the matter [8,4]. Meaningful involvement in free time activities has been positively associated with the physical and mental health of children, as a source of satisfaction, helping young people to develop self-identity, and providing opportunities to participate in the social life of a peer group [9].

Although there is a growing body of research about the after-school participation of children with disabilities [e.g. 5,10–14], there might be some differences in how children spend their time after mandated school hours in various social and cultural contexts. Within the Polish context, Okoń defines free time activities as optional activities, which take place after school lessons on the school premises

or elsewhere. The latter might include activities with youth organisations, special-interest groups, after-school clubs or outdoor and indoor sport-related activities. These activities can be organised outside school by such institutions and organisations as youth centres, community centres, or children's activity centres [15]. Free time activities typically focus on developing interests in different fields of science, art or sport, developing talents, skills and self-determination, and participating in social life [9,15]. The issues of free time activities have been discussed in the Polish context in relation to students without disabilities [16], but not in relation to children and young people with disabilities.

Despite the well-recognised developmental and health-related benefits of free time activities, we still know little about the activity settings of young people with disabilities, who selects these activities and whether they meet young people's interests. The purpose of this study is to gather preliminary general information about participation in the extracurricular activity settings of school-aged children with disabilities in Poland. Specifically, the aims were to (a) explore whether young people with and without disabilities take part in free time activities to the same extent, (b) identify the most frequent activity settings, (c) assess whether activities met children's interests, and (d) assess the children's role in selecting activities.

Material and method

This is a cross-sectional descriptive study for which ethical approval was granted by the appropriate ethics board in Poland.

Participants

Participants consisted of 457 parents of young people aged 8–17 (mean = 12 years 9 months), pupils with and without disabilities from the province of Małopolska. The pupils were from five schools in two different locations (i.e. one small town with a population below 84,000 and one large city with a population above 750,000). Each school represented a different school board district. All five schools were regional schools that are attended by children from cities and surrounding villages (i.e. urban and rural representation).

The pupils represented three groups, which reflect the educational system in Poland. Group A consisted of 239 young people without impairments, group B contained 67 adolescents with impairments who attended integrated schools, and group C included 151 young people with impairments who attended special schools. In group B there were children with special education needs who had a mild or moderate level of disability. These were children with visual, perceptual, auditory as well as motor impairments. Group C included children with a moderate and high level of disability and children with severe visual, auditory, motor and multiple impairments.

The hypothesis being evaluated was that the samples being compared were drawn from populations with the same distribution or from distributions with the same median (median = 13 years). Thus, the way the test was performed and its interpretation was identical to the parametric one-way ANOVA, except that it was based on ranks rather than mean values (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test

Depend: Number of children	Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA by Ranks; Number of children (Dane_publ_new2023.sta)				
	Independent (grouping) variable: age [yrs] Kruskal-Wallis test: H (9, N= 30) = 17,86246 p =,0368				
	Code	Valid N	Sum of Ranks	Mean Rank	
8	8	3	18,00000	6,00000	
9	9	3	44,00000	14,66667	
10	10	3	25,50000	8,50000	
11	11	3	59,00000	19,66667	
12	12	3	80,00000	26,66667	
13	13	3	66,00000	22,00000	
14	14	3	68,00000	22,66667	
15	15	3	40,00000	13,33333	
16	16	3	20,00000	6,66667	
17	17	3	44,50000	14,83333	

Source: own study.

The calculated *p*-value equals 0.0368, so the test statistic according to the Kruskal-Wallis test is not highly significant (*p* > 0.001). Therefore, it can be concluded that the numbers of age groups in the different experimental groups did not differ significantly between each other.

Measure

While there are a few relevant participation measures available, they have not yet been translated or validated in the Polish context. Therefore, a survey was selected as the appropriate method to obtain a general initial, scoping view of children’s participation in extracurricular activity settings and to provide a foundation for further research in this area in the Polish context. A questionnaire was developed specifically for this study and included eight closed and open-ended questions concerning children’s extracurricular participation (see Table 2 for details).

Table 2. Questions included in the questionnaire

Did your child participate in extracurricular activities?
If the child is not participating in the class:
What is the reason for not attending the extracurricular activities?
If your child participates in the activities:
What extracurricular activities does he/she participate in? (Please tick all the activities in which your child is participating)
Who decided to enrol the child for extracurricular activities?

Are they consistent with the child's interests?

Is the child willing to participate in them?

Have you noticed a positive effect on your child's independence/development?

Will your child continue to participate in the activities next school year?

Source: own study.

Procedure

The study was conducted following parent-teacher meetings, which were regularly scheduled at schools every two months. Parents who attended the meetings received information about the study and volunteered to complete the survey. They were given a hard copy of the questionnaire, were asked to respond to the questions in writing and return the completed surveys to the researcher. The participation was anonymous; parents could return either a completed or empty survey. They were asked to note their child's age on the questionnaire form. Parents were given as much time as they needed and could withdraw at any point. A researcher was available to answer any questions prior to and during the study. No questions were asked during the study.

Data analysis

To examine data distribution for all three groups, descriptive statistics and frequencies were calculated using the program STATISTICA. The Chi Square Pearson test was used to explore the relationships between the role of young people in choosing the activities, if they wanted to participate in them, and if the activities met children's interests. The level of significance was assumed at $\alpha < 0.05$.

Results

All parents who attended the parent-teachers meetings volunteered to participate and returned completed questionnaires. According to parents, 90% of youngsters without disabilities (group A) took part in free time activities. Young people with disabilities who attended integrated schools (group B) or special education schools (group C), participated less (66% and 69%, respectively). Almost half of children from group A (49%) and from group B (46%) took part in free time activities both at school and outside school, while 59% of those from group C participated only in the activities organised on the premises of their own school (Figure 1).

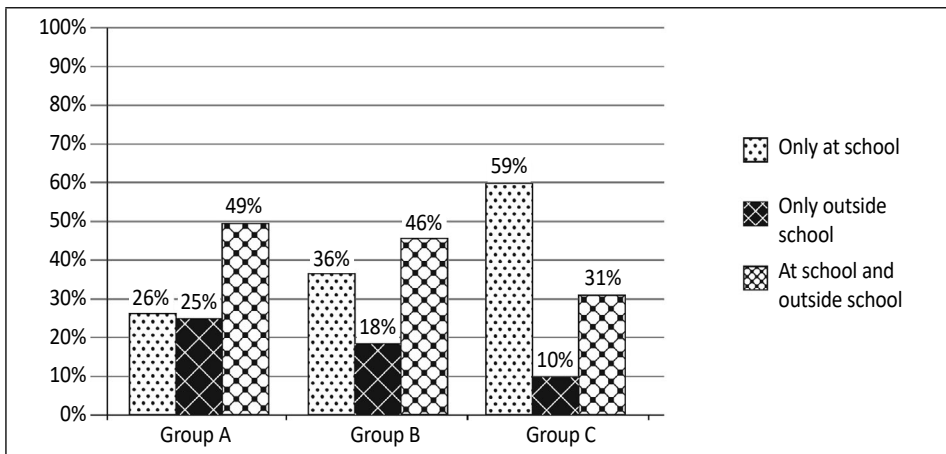
The parents selected multiple reasons why the young people did not attend extracurricular activities. As shown in Table 3, a lack of spare time (group A – 54%; group B – 83%; group C – 32%) and no desire to take part in activities (group A – 50%; group B – 74%; group C – 32%) were the most frequent obstacles.

Table 3. Reasons for not taking part in free time activities (the sum is greater than 100% because respondents could give more than one answer)

	No desire to take part	Lack of time	No interesting offers at school	No interesting offers outside school	No disposable income	Parents don't want their children to take part in such activities	Other
Group A	50%	54%	37%	0%	42%	0%	4%
Group B	74%	83%	26%	17%	30%	4%	8%
Group C	32%	32%	11%	6%	8%	2%	2%

Source: own study.

Figure 1. Place where young people take part in free time activities



Source: own study.

Table 4 illustrates that the majority of young people from all groups attended sports activities (group A – 67%; group B – 61%; and group C – 45%). The students without disabilities and those from integrated schools were also often engaged in special-interest groups (43%, and 30%, respectively), while the participants from group C – special schools – attended music-related activities (26%). A large number of parents in group B (50%) and in group C (35%) provided other answers, most frequently indicating compensatory education classes or therapy as their children’s extracurricular activities (Table 4).

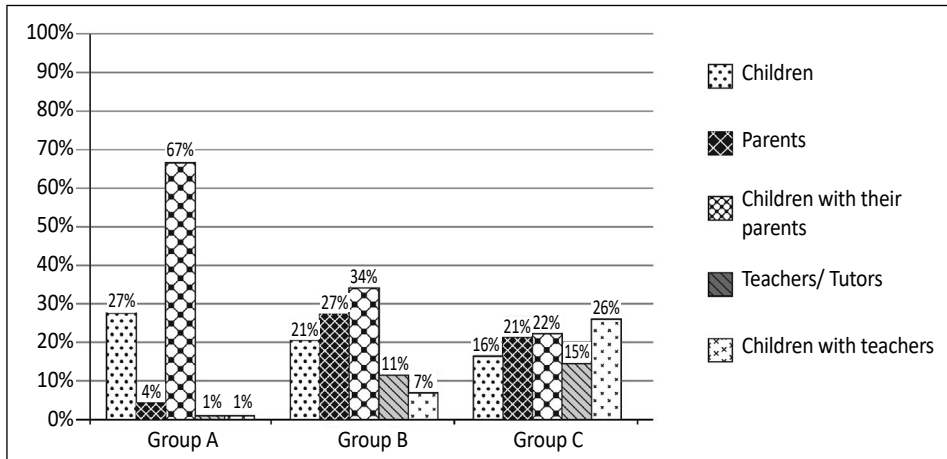
As shown in Figure 2, the majority of the young people without disabilities chose free time activities together with their parents (67%), or by themselves (27%), while in the groups of young people with disabilities (B and C) that decision was often made by parents or teachers.

Table 4. Types of activities chosen by children (the sum is greater than 100% because respondents could give more than one answer)

	Sports	Dance	Special-interest groups/ foreign languages	Music	Arts and crafts	Theatre/ the arts	Other
Group A	67%	18%	43%	21%	16%	7%	11%
Group B	61%	11%	30%	7%	16%	5%	50%
Group C	45%	17%	13%	26%	16%	8%	35%

Source: own study.

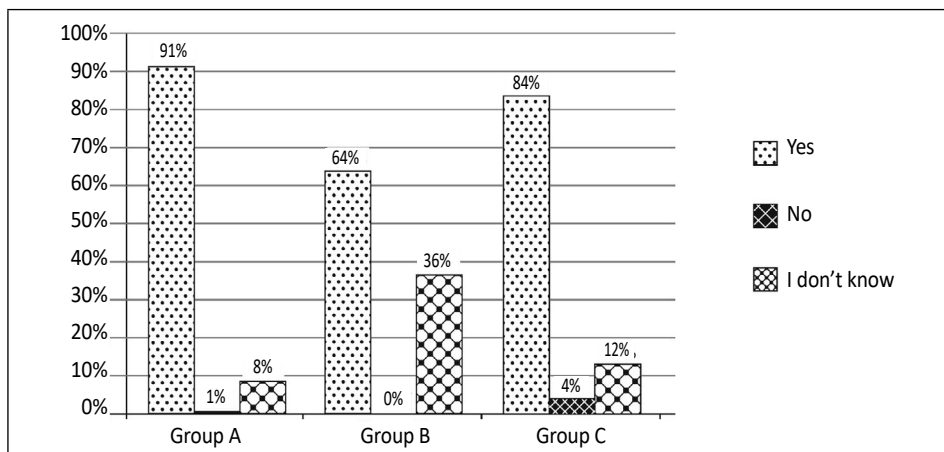
Figure 2. Role of children in selection of free time activities



Source: own study.

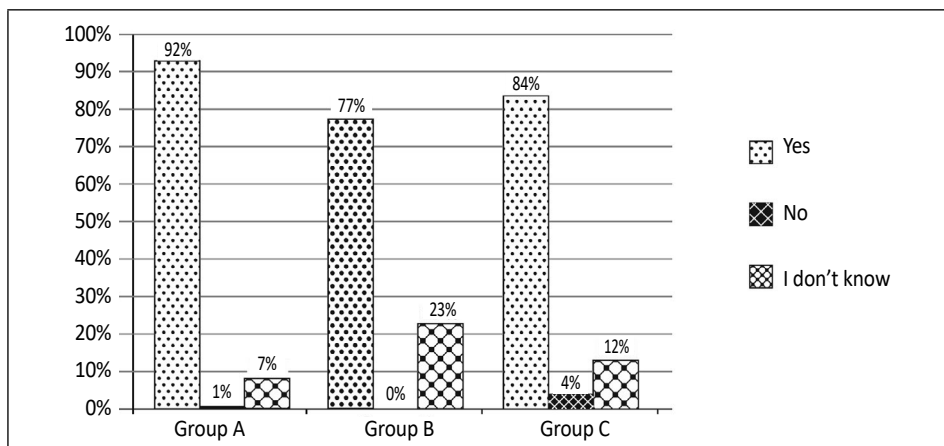
According to the parents, free time activities met their children’s interests in most cases (group A – 91%; group B – 64%; group C – 84%) (Figure 3). Furthermore, parents indicated that most of their children wanted to attend these activities (group A – 92%; group B – 77%; group C – 84%) (Figure 4). In groups A and B, the vast majority of parents noticed beneficial effects of extracurricular activities on the self-determination of their children (91% and 77%, respectively), while in group C, most parents reported that they did not notice a positive influence of these activities on their children’s self-determination (Figure 5).

Figure 3. Did free time activities meet the children's interests?



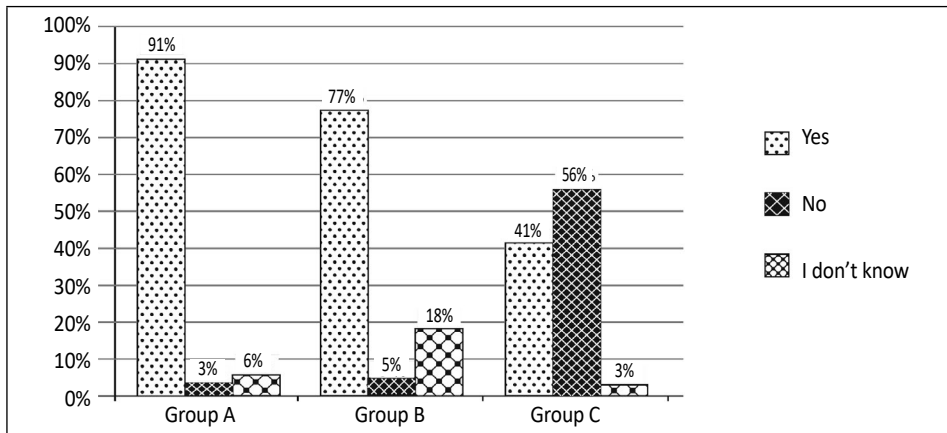
Source: own study.

Figure 4. Did the children want to participate in free time activities?



Source: own study.

Figure 5. Did free time activities increase independence of children?



Source: own study.

Relationship between variables

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between who selected the activities and whether children participated in activities with interest, as well as between who selected the activities and whether young people liked / wished to participate in them.

The percentage of all children who attended activities according to their interests differed depending on who selected the activities [$\chi^2(8, N = 457) = 23.72, p = .003$]. The children were reported to be interested in the activities in 90% of cases when they themselves selected the activities, compared to 89% when children chose activities together with their parents, 79% if parents alone selected activities, 78% if teachers with children made choices and 62% if teachers alone picked the activities. When the activities were selected by children alone or by children with their parents, the children were more likely to show interest in them.

Such a relationship, however, was not present for the individual groups [group A: $\chi^2(8, N = 239) = 5.85, p = .66$; group B: $\chi^2(8, N = 67) = 4.61, p = .33$; group C: $\chi^2(8, N = 151) = 8.56, p = .38$].

Although there was no statistically significant relationship between who decided about children's activities and whether children wanted to participate in them, this association approached the level of significance [$\chi^2(8, N = 457) = 15.30, p = .05$]. A similar relation was present for children from special schools [$\chi^2(8, N = 151) = 15.39, p = .05$], although not for children who attended integrated schools (with and without disabilities) [$\chi^2(8, N = 239) = 1.05, p = .99, \chi^2(4, N = 67) = 2.76, p = .59$; respectively].

Discussion

Taking part in activities which improve the health and well-being of their participants is considered to be of key importance for all children [17–19]. The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises that each child, regardless of their state of health or physical fitness, should have the opportunity for personal development and to participate actively in different forms of life in their communities (e.g. school or housing estate community) [3]. This also includes the opportunity to select and take part in activities organised at and outside school. This study suggests some differences between children with and without disabilities as well as children attending integrated and special schools, in relation to after-school activity settings and the child's involvement in selecting activities.

Specifically, the results of our survey show that more pupils without disabilities participate in extracurricular activities than pupils with special educational needs who attend integrated schools, and pupils with disabilities who attend special education schools. As such, our study supports previous research that reports similar differences in the participation patterns of children with and without disabilities in other countries [5].

According to the parents, their children, regardless of the type of school they attend, take part in sport activities. Such activities may offer a chance for integration between peers with and without disabilities [20]. However, differences were observed as to other activities. Young people without disabilities and those with disabilities who are from integrated settings often join special-interest clubs, while the young people from special education schools usually take part in music and activities such as compensatory education classes or therapeutic sessions, not connected to leisure or recreation. A lack of participation in play and recreation activities and too much emphasis on compensatory classes have been identified by many authors as an issue concerning children with disabilities. This is particularly important as leisure activities offer opportunities to meet peers, interact with them and may form a basis for developing long lasting relationships and friendships with others [10]. Furthermore, involvement in activities that develop interests and create favourable conditions for social contacts is thought to be an important factor in a child's development, which may affect the quality of children's present and future life [19,21].

The parents of young people from different groups reported differences related to their children's extracurricular activity settings. According to them, the majority of young people with disabilities attend the activities organised at school. However, these activities might have been more easily accessible to them than the ones outside school. The students without disabilities participate in a wider choice of activities both at school and outside school. This trend has also been observed by other researchers, who report on home and school-bound participation of children with disabilities [5,10,11,22–24]. In Poland, free time activities

are often organised at schools in accordance with Art. 42 of the Teacher's Charter [25], which indicates that teachers should organise extracurricular activities at school and offer them to families for free. Outside of the school setting, parents need to pay for their children's activities, for which they can seek financial support from the government or foundations.

Young people without disabilities mostly made the decision regarding the activity they selected themselves or together with their parents, while their peers with disabilities usually made this decision either with their parents or teachers, or the decision was made independently by their teachers or parents, without including the child. Children's involvement in selecting activities can ensure that activity settings reflect the child's preferences and it might be crucial to the child's meaningful engagement in those activities [4,26]. Exercise of choice and participation in decision making may have also much further reaching consequences, as power and control in children's lives have been linked to resilience [27].

The parents mentioned lack of time, no desire to take part in the activities, or a tight budget as main factors preventing their children's participation in activities. In special schools and integrated schools the participation of young people in after-school activities might depend on the distance from home to school and the mode of transport provided by the local government. Because free time activities organised on the school premises are most often free of charge and conducted right after mandatory classes, a lack of family disposable income (in the case of the parents of young people with disabilities) may prevent parents from signing up their children for activities organised outside school. Similarly to previous studies [4,28], this findings of this study suggest that appropriate support for families (e.g., transportation or financial support) may increase the likelihood of children with disabilities participating in activities outside of home and school and together with their peers without disabilities.

Lastly, the parents reported that the activities in which their children took part met children's interests in most cases, and that the children wanted to take part in them. Worth noting, however, is that many parents did not know if their children participated in activities that were interesting to the child; this was especially prevalent for children with disabilities who attended integrated schools (36%). Similarly, findings of a qualitative study indicated that parents of children with disabilities lacked in-depth knowledge about children's participation at school [10].

Implications

This article supports the importance of considering 'activity settings' as a concept combining two equally important elements, namely, activities and settings [29]. Our study highlights that children with disabilities may still participate in the same settings after school (i.e., school), rather than in the community programmes similarly to and together with their peers. The need to create opportunities to be

with peers and for out of school participation experiences, including fun ones and those of social belonging, have been clearly articulated in the literature as important goals of therapy [30,31].

Limitations and future directions

This cross-sectional study is not without its limitations, although it provides the first information about extracurricular activity settings of children with disabilities in Poland. Although convenience sampling was used, the selected schools represented rural and urban areas, different sizes of schools, as well as different economic backgrounds / neighbourhoods. Parents completed the surveys on school premises and this could have potentially influenced their responses. All data, however, were collected in exactly the same manner.

In the future, it will be important to examine the quality of participation in activity settings and the meaning of participation to the child and family. Moreover, it will be crucial to ask children directly about their experiences, as participation and experience have a personal / subjective dimension [4,32]. The measure of Self-reported Experiences of Activity Settings, which is currently undergoing validation in the Polish context, could be used to obtain views of children about their particular participation experiences of specific activity settings [13,33]. Lastly, it might be interesting to examine the relationships between young people's involvement in the decision about free time activities and their commitment to these activities.

Conclusion

This study provides the first account of participation of children with disabilities in extracurricular programmes and activities in Poland. Similarly to the emerging body of research from other countries, it indicates that children with disabilities participate less than their peers without disabilities, although also that extracurricular participation opportunities might be linked to the child's specific school setting. Furthermore, this study illustrates that activities might be selected differently for children with and without disabilities. Future studies that take account of children's perspectives might help us to better understand how children's choices may be linked to their meaningful involvement and better direct our programmes towards the desired benefits.

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Uczestnictwo dzieci pełnosprawnych i z niepełnosprawnością w zajęciach pozalekcyjnych i pozaszkolnych

Streszczenie

Wprowadzenie: Celem pracy było zbadanie, w jaki sposób dzieci z niepełnosprawnością i dzieci pełnosprawne uczestniczą w zajęciach pozaszkolnych, kto wybiera te zajęcia i czy odpowiadają one zainteresowaniom dzieci.

Materiał i metody: Specjalnie na potrzeby badania opracowano kwestionariusz zawierający pytania dotyczące uczestnictwa dzieci w zajęciach pozalekcyjnych.

Wyniki: 90% dzieci z grupy A, 66% z grupy B i 69% z grupy C uczestniczyło w zajęciach pozalekcyjnych. W grupie A 67% dzieci wybierało zajęcia wspólnie z rodzicami, natomiast w grupach B (18,2%) i C (30,4%) w wybór często angażowali się nauczyciele. Zajęcia spełniały zainteresowania większości dzieci, jednak liczba dzieci, dla których zajęcia spełniały ich zainteresowania, różniła się w zależności od tego, kto je wybierał.

Wnioski: Z przeprowadzonych badań wynika, że dzieci pełnosprawne częściej uczestniczyły w zajęciach pozalekcyjnych niż ich rówieśnicy z orzeczeniem o niepełnosprawności.

Słowa kluczowe: uczestnictwo w zajęciach, zainteresowania dzieci, rodzice, rodzaje aktywności