Article

Inclusive Leisure as a Resource for Socio-Educational Intervention during the COVID-19 Pandemic with Care Leavers

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a reduction in leisure activities involving human contact. Social isolation has increased, particularly amongst vulnerable individuals with a fragile support network, as is the case with young people who have left care. The aim of the present research was to identify socio-educational proposals and interventions implemented during the pandemic pertaining to leisure as a form of promoting social inclusion of these young people. To this end, a qualitative study was carried out in which twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people who had left care system, in addition to fifteen interviews with professionals working with this group when delivering socio-educational interventions. Discourse analysis revealed that isolation due to the health crisis had greater repercussions in normalised settings in which leisure activity was reduced with this increasing risk of social inclusion amongst these young people. Proposals and experiences emerging from this setting provide evidence that socio-educational interventions targeting leisure facilitate social inclusion. In this sense, future lines of research are suggested to optimise the outcomes of socio-educational interventions within this group.

Keywords: leisure time; COVID-19; care leavers; transition to adulthood; social inclusion

1. Introduction

Over recent decades the importance of leisure has been argued as a fundamental pillar of human development [1–4] 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.

The present article explains the outcomes of a qualitative study that examined the testimonies of young individuals who had left the care system and the discourse of professionals working with them via socio-educational interventions. The preliminary aim of the study was to describe the activities engaged in by these young people in their free time and to identify the challenges that stood in their way in order to determine the impact of the health crisis on access to leisure. Overall, the main aim was to identify the leisure-related socio-educational proposals and interventions implemented during the pandemic to promote the social inclusion of these young people.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 35 participants. Of these, 20 were young people from Aragon (Spain) whose stay in the infant and children's care system had come to an end, either because they had moved on to a program supporting transition to adulthood or because they had reached adult age whilst completing a legally stipulated period of internment. Inclusion criteria were as follows: Be aged between 18 and 21 years and have stayed within the care system for more than two years. The remaining fifteen participants were professionals with at least two years professional experience working with socially disadvantaged young people via socio-educational interventions in residential care facilities.

The sample of young people was made up by 18 men (90%) and 2 women (10%). This distribution is proportionally representative of the study population according to data provided by the entities participating in the research. With regards to the professionals, 10 men (66.7%) and 5 women (33.3%) were included. Similarly, populational distribution was respected in accordance with the makeup of the pertinent bodies overseeing social resource provision. Average professional experience working at either public or private

centres was 10 years and 3 months. The majority of these professionals were exercising their profession in residential care facilities (N = 13, 86.7%).

2.2. Instruments and Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted [31]. One interview was conducted with professionals and two with young people, with one being performed with those who were in care facilities and another with those who were completing a judicial order at a detention centre. Responses were processed systematically through a coding process applied to information nodes. This gave rise to both descriptive and axial levels of coding [32]. As a consequence, a system of three main codes and ten sub-codes was identified which were fitted to meet the study aim and allowed content pertaining to questionnaire responses to be analysed (see Table 1). In order to evaluate the reliability of the coding system, four expert coders on the topic were enlisted. Following this, the *Fleiss Kappa* agreement coefficient was calculated. This produced a value of *k* = 0.909, which indicates very good agreement strength [33].

Table 1. Codes and sub-codes derived from data analysis.

Codes	Sub-Codes
Leisure activities engaged in. Comments that indicated the activities chosen by these young people to engage in during their free time with regards to their opportunities and statements pertaining to the benefits they induce for their psychosocial development.	*Sport and physical activity*. Testimonies were compiled that reveal that the preferred type of leisure activity amongst these young people is physical activity or sport.
	Being with partner or friends. Statements that indicated that they majority of free time available to these young people revolves around relationships with peer groups without a specific activity type being needed for this interaction.
	Digital leisure. Comments showing that the main leisure activity engaged in is related with digital leisure.
	Other activities. Manifestations showing other leisure alternatives engaged in by young people.
Challenges to engagement in leisure activities. Testimonies that shed light on the reasons why young care leavers do not engage in the leisure activities they enjoy on a daily basis in their free time.	*Economic aspects*. Statements that identify the economic factor as the main reason preventing these young people from engaging in their preferred leisure activities.
	Repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Comments that suggest that the health crisis we are currently living is acting as a factor preventing these young people from accessing the leisure activities which they would most like to engage in.
	Psychological factors. Testimonies that reveal the psychological factors associated with the life trajectory of these young people and personal characteristics which make engagement in inclusive leisure more difficult.
	Other challenges. Manifestations that point to other challenges when it comes to engaging in the leisure activities preferred by these young people.
Socio-educational actions pertaining to inclusive leisure. Proposals that point to the need to respond to the psychosocial crisis caused by the pandemic by developing socio-educational interventions which promote the social inclusion of these young people via leisure. This also includes manifestations that refer to educational interventions, which have been developed during confinement and the following months, promoting the educational inclusion of these young people through activities performed in their free time.	*Socio-educational proposals for inclusive leisure.* This sub-category groups together the proposals developed to promote the social inclusion of these young people through socio-educational leisure activities delivered in the near future.
	Performed actions. Testimonies that share experiences and describe leisure-related resources which have been implemented during the pandemic and whose results could serve as a reference for inclusive leisure proposals for possible use in the near future.

2.3. Analysis and Data Handling

In accordance with Kuckartz and Rädiker (2019) [34], preliminary data codes were established through open coding of information nodes developed inductively from participant discourse. Associations were found between data codes following successive coding. For data handling, the software program MAXQDA Analytics Pro-2020 was employed in its version for Windows 10.

3. Results

The examination of the gathered quotes and the percentages obtained demonstrate that less evidence was produced from the textual nodes gathered from young people (N = 34, 41%) than from professionals (N = 46, 59%). With regards to the statements made, 41.1% (N = 32) were housed within the coding category pertaining to *leisure activities engaged in*. The quotes grouped within this code were distributed as follows: *sport and physical activity*, N = 21 (65.6%); *being with partner and friends* N = 6 (18.8%); *digital leisure* N = 3 (9.4%); and *other activities* N = 2 (6.2%). With regards to the code pertaining to *challenges to engagement in leisure activities*, 31 coded segments (39.7%) are framed by the following sub-codes: *economic aspect*, N = 14 (45.1%); *repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic*, N = 10 (32.3%); *psychological factors*, N = 4 (12.9%); and *other challenges* (9.7%). Finally, the code pertaining to *socio-educational actions pertaining to inclusive leisure* corresponds to 19.2% of the statements (N = 15), whilst the sub-code pertaining to *socio-educational proposals for inclusive leisure* was covered by 4 (26.7%) statements and 72.3% (N = 14) pertained to *performed actions*.

Figure 1 presents a relational model of the information processed through the system of codes and sub-codes employed.
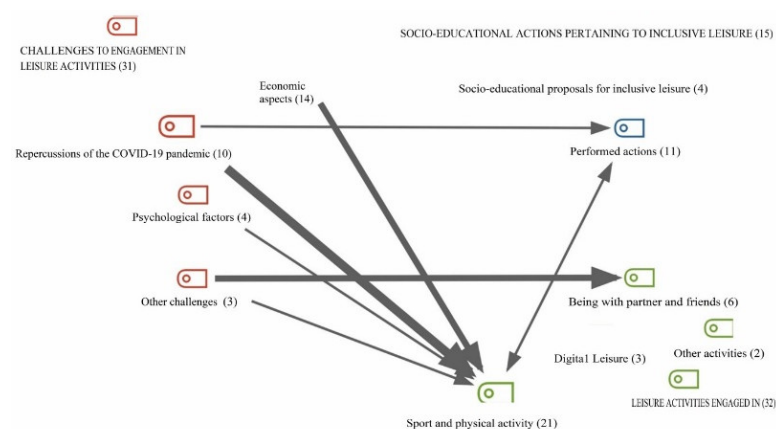

Figure 1. Co-occurrence network of codes and sub-codes.

3.1. Leisure Activities Engaged in

3.1.1. Sport and Physical Activity

Sporting activity stood out as the most engaged in and most demanded by these young people, being reflected in 65.6% of the comments grouped into this code. This response was not conditioned according to gender, as stated by the following professional:

> "(. . .) the majority are sporting. And I don't know if it's also influenced a little bit by . . . , I was going to say a little bit by gender, but not, because girls also demand to play sport quite a lot". (Coordinator.P8-30-30)

Within the coded segments in which the most desired activities were specified, playing football stood out as being mentioned by 47.6% (N = 10) of the quotes, with going to the gym also being referred to by the same number of quotes. Some respondents also showed a preference for swimming (N = 1, 4.8%), basketball (N = 2, 9.6%), athletics (N = 1, 4.8%) and boxing (N = 1, 4.8%).

Sporting activity brings with it benefits that are therapeutic in nature given that it allows young people to unburden themselves and channel accumulated tension, as shown by the following quote from a participating educator: *"what they need is to burn off energy and vent and sport is what most helps them to do that"* (Educator.P2-32-32).

The findings demonstrate that team sports performed via activities run by the facility allow for opportunities to be opened up to develop socio-educational interventions which would be more difficult to deliver in other settings, as discussed in the following quote:

> "We promote them and if we can we participate, because it makes it much easier at the moment of interacting with them. Well, I have mediated with them and have been able to talk with them much better after physical activity or even whilst we are doing a sporting activity than sitting at a table and trying to talk". (Educator.P1-18-18)

Nonetheless, these types of activities tend to transcend to the outside world due to their inclusive nature which enables the young people involved to increase their peer network: *"Here I have signed up to a football team, I made new friends and with what's going on with COVID it has now stopped"* (Youth. JE18.4-4).

3.1.2. Being with Partners and Friends

This sub-code was outlined by 18.8% of the developed textual nodes (N = 6). Within these, not a single testimony was gathered that explicitly demonstrates the benefits dedicating free time to this activity given that most utterances were descriptive (N = 4, 66.7%), as shown below:

> "But normally leisure is related with their peer groups, they spend, like us before, a lot of time on the street". (Educator.P3.32-32)

Despite this, 33.3% (N = 2) of the remaining statements highlight the fact that the vulnerability of these young people sometimes opens them up to criminal circles: *"I was going out with boys, I was going out and stealing and I don't want to do that when I get out because I will go to jail"* (Youth. JCI13.20-20); and contexts in which harmful substances are consumed, as mentioned by the following educator: *"I think that the leisure time they have available they like to spend with their friends, with their peer group, doing certain things such as consuming a wide array of drugs"* (Educator. P9.30-30).

3.1.3. Digital Leisure

According to the statements grouped under this sub-code (N = 3), digital leisure is engaged in via smartphone use (N = 2, 66.7%) and video game consoles (N = 1, 33.3%). In the case of the latter, the following gathered testimony reflects how this activity is associated with passive leisure:

> "Kids who end up stuck to the PlayStation for hours and hours a day, at home, without going out and with very little contact with others". (Educator. P10.34-34)

Nonetheless, other testimonies reveal that smartphones are used as a means of forming relationships and interacting, as can be seen in the following testimony:

> "Interacting with the mobile, isolated from company, although deep down they are not isolated, because they are talking. This has been most noticeable in the arrival of the mobile as a communicative mediator". (Educator.P3.15-15)

3.1.4. Other Activities

The quotes gathered in relation to this code (N = 2) from the contributions of young people uncover leisure alternatives linked to the socio-community resource network. Both quotes reflect a high level of satisfaction with leisure activities in which young people are positioned as role models of intergenerational support relationships, with this being reflected in the following quote:

"I started to go camping and acting as an assistant monitor and these days I'm a monitor of younger kids, obviously, and it really has given me a lot. These 10 days at camp are really important for me during the year". (Youth. JE9.43-43)

3.2. Challenges to Engaging in Leisure Activities

3.2.1. Economic Aspects

As shown by Figure 1, there is a very strong link between the challenges to access that are economic in nature and the sub-group pertaining to sport and physical activity. Specifically, 42.9% (N = 6) of statements associated these access challenges with sporting activities outside of those organised by the entities themselves. This can be seen in the various testimonies given by young people: "(. . .) *money problems, if we don't work and don't make any money we cannot do anything, not the gym or football . . .* " (Youth. J20.50-52). The perspective taken by professionals in this respect coincides, as can be seen in the following testimony: "*Problems are to do with the economic aspect, because it's just that if you want to go to the gym you pay, you want to go and play in a football team, you have to be really good or you will have to pay a lot*" (Educator. P2.18-18).

All of the above makes the inclusion of these young people more difficult as it distances at least a part of the peer group from accessible leisure activities, with this being reflected in the following statement:

"Really the leisure demands of these young people are no different qualitatively from those of any other young person, what happens is that the path that this society takes us down is to commercialise everything, you have to pay for everything and the leisure on offer to other young people these might not be able to access due to the economic aspect". (Educator. P3.38-38)

Faced with the impossibility of these young people being able to fund these activities autonomously: "(. . .), *they demand, for example, the gym and they can't pay for it with their weekly allowance*" (Educator. P7.26-28). These entities strive to find solutions such as sharing the expenses derived from the activity:

"There is a problem that is economic, a lot of times the activities that most appeal to them cost money and the entities don't have a budget to be able to tackle that. We try to reach an agreement in some way, that the young person pays half and we make up the rest". (Coordinator. P8.26-30)

In addition, sporting activities are organised at the facilities themselves in order to compensate for the lack of access to that on offer in the outside world:

"We promote them [the activities] ourselves, this has meant that the relationships between them are really good, as they don't know each other between themselves, because each one lives in a flat, three live in each flat and they know each other between these three. But then, between the rest they don't know each other either. So, setting up football teams or running Sporting activities, in the end it creates a line". (Educator. P1.59-59)

3.2.2. Repercussions of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite being a phenomenon that started barely a year ago, challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic is the factor with the second heaviest weight in this sub-code, being referred to by 32.2% of examined quotes (12). The majority of the gathered testimonies came from young people (N = 7, 70%) and demonstrate the ways in which the cessation of leisure activities has limited their exposure to settings that allow them to broaden their social capital. This is evidenced in the following testimony:

"It is a group that was set up by a teacher and so we go there. And there are sometimes that the teacher says to me, right, stay behind to give whatever class and you don't have to pay the member fee because she knows that I don't have any money. Well you remove the membership fee and teach classes in

the afternoon with the littlest ones. You're entertained, you feel good. It's very important to me, I meet people and on top of it, it makes me feel good to help the kids. But it's on hold because of COVID". (Youth. JE6.59-59)

Along the same lines, another young person recounted:

"At the town hall, also, I signed up to theatre and I had an interview for a casting and they had accepted me for this last summer and two weeks in its suspended because of COVID. You have also had a lot of issues with COVID calling off gym and football. We aren't keen to do anything, not sport at home or anything else". (Youth. JE20.36-38)

The preventative measures introduced to avoid the spread of the disease have not only limited access to fun activities outside of the entities, but these entities have also been obliged to halt their internal provision for these young people. This is captured in the following testimony:

"It has been noticed in the camps that we organise. They are with young people of their age and they come to us really happy, however, now with COVID everything has been halted". (Educator.P2.34-34)

In tune with this same argument, the following professional highlights the way in which this impacts the isolation of these young people:

"It has been a shame, simply, we, we were going once a week and we were cooking and we spoke with them whilst they were eating, well this you can't do now, this has meant that the kids suffer more isolation". (Educator. P3.40-40)

In the case of young people who are in a situation of enforced internment, their responses, framed by this sub-code (N = 2, 20%), show that the challenges caused by COVID-19 have conditioned their outings to the outside world with a concomitant impact on their mental health, as discussed by the following young person:

"Uff, . . . it has f***** me. I completed more than half of my term without a special permission, without going out to the street for anything, all day cooped up in these four walls, well, I went out one day. I've still got seven months to go, I've been here 2 years and eight months, at this point I would be going out to do a course outside, going out for the evenings as I wanted to start basketball and instead not going out a single day. I'm depressed and will be worse if this carries on and I get out without having set foot on the street". (Youth. JCI15. 50-50)

3.2.3. Psychological Factors

The four comments related to this sub-code (12.9% of all quotes) were made by professionals. These comments identify self-concept as a factor that influences fear of rejection in leisure activities engaged in within normalised settings. This is shown in the following quote:

"Well in general I see that they are timid, embarrassed when one of them goes alone and is put in a group of people they don't know, like the need, for example, to go accompanied in order to integrate or relate better, this fear of being rejected limits them a lot from signing up to activities, even when they are motivated". (Educational assistant. P14.46-46)

3.2.4. Other Challenges

With regards to this sub-code (N = 3), we find two quotes that refer to the information channels through which the leisure on offer to the public reaches the facilities themselves, as shown by the following testimony:

"And then there is a communication problem, because nobody knows how to transport the existence of programmed leisure activities to the care cen-

tres and housing for emancipated minors and kids with these characteristics." (Coordinator.P5.32-32)

In another sense, the following professional referred to challenges derived from the migratory process of some young people:

"Well sure, until they have a residency agreement they can't access gyms because they can't do them a contract. When they do get there, language limits them a lot, although there are activities that language doesn't affect as much there are others where it does limit them." (Educator. P2.32-32)

3.3. Socio-Educational Actions for Inclusive Leisure

3.3.1. Socio-Educational Proposals for Inclusive Leisure

The first of the proposals framed within this code proposes the reconfiguration of formative settings, such as spaces for inclusive leisure, outside of teaching hours, through network working with socio-community resources. This is outlined in the following testimony:

"What I would propose in some way is that schools not only be open for classes, but that they are also open during the afternoon and all-day Saturday. Because in this way you create a safe place, where the kids go with their friends simply to talk, see each other, play sport, prepare concerts, prepare festivals, prepare theatre shows, . . . But to do it in collaboration with schools and youth residences. To use the school space as a central setting around which formative activities and those of healthy leisure revolve". (Educator.P3.50-50)

The promotion of network working emerged in relation to the effectiveness of information channels, with this allowing public leisure provision to reach care facilities:

"If we carry on line this, in this situation, we will have to reach out and do more network working. With those in charge of the youth department at the town hall, so that they know that we are here, who we are and to include us in their planned activities and allow us to get involved". (Coordinator.P5.42-42)

In another sense, when alluding to sporting activities and the challenges posed to access by economic issues, the following educator proposed that alternative sport networks should be created and set up by social entities with a view to catering to different groups. To these challenges, the following participant added:

"Now that what they most call for are football teams, well to propose any initiative of this type, that they don't have to pay a fee or don't have to pay sign-up costs because a lot of the time they can't. Set up an internal little league in which the different entities, volunteers participate, and teams from other groups who find themselves in the same circumstances". (Educator.P7.36-38)

Finally, raising awareness of these young people is approached through awareness campaigns in which these same young people actively participate in their design and implementation:

"I think that raise awareness at a general level and make the reality lived by these kids known. Include them in it. Run some sort of campaign where the reality of these kids is explained a bit and they themselves tell their own story. This would not only open them doors to integration due to awareness of people, it would positively impact their fear of being rejected". (Educator. P15.28-28)

3.3.2. Performed Actions

Of the performed actions, it serves to highlight those that were conducted during strict confinement, with five quotes (45.5%) being gathered in this regard. Of these, three referred to activities that are artistic in nature. These were implemented by professionals at the facilities with the aim of them being continued in the outside world, as reflected by the following young person:

> "Well here, with the educators we are doing a lot of things, I learnt to draw here at the centre, I would like to sign up to drawing when I can. It was something I didn't know and I like it". (Youth. JE18.48-50)

The remaining two testimonies referred to an activity that was attended to by young people, together with other volunteers, to make masks. This was recounted by the following young person:

> "Well at the beginning, nobody was going out, they were afraid, not like now and we were going out to help, you felt useful helping people when everybody was afraid and there weren't any masks. We were with other people and we were reported in the newspaper". (Youth. JE19.38-38)

In this same sense, one educator highlighted that community services had filled the hole left by the absence of recreational activities at their entity through the de-escalation of safety measures:

> "But well, right, they ran leisure and free-time activities Fridays and Saturdays in the afternoon and they offered them to those who wanted to come and they came. Now it's complicated and now there are some who have asked to keep going and as there aren't any activities being run, they come from volunteers to other programs and they keep in touch with people". (Educator.P1.26-26)

The remaining testimonies describe actions performed during the period of de-escalation. Concretely, three quotes (27.8%) refer to the promotion of cultural activities, as demonstrated by the following quote from an educator:

> "Nonetheless, when it is suggested to them to do cultural activities, in other words, going to the cinema and going to see a show at the theatre, going to an exposition, they tend to turn them down. But during this time, we have encouraged them to do the few activities that were on and it has had an enormous result. They live it, they enjoy it, they appreciate it. And this type of thing. What we were talking about before allows them to have a relationship with people in normalised environments". (Coordinator. P5.28-28)

The other textual nodes (18.2%) refer to the reconfiguration of the spaces and dynamics inherent to the facilities as an alternative to circumnavigate the limitations imposed by the crisis due to COVID-19. This is shown in the following comment made by a professional:

> "Right, we do, in some way, for example, now we are going to start back up something that we postponed in 2020, they went to cooking workshops in the "bubbles" of those who they live with in a flat come to do a workshop and then go. What we are going to try, in some way is to do one workshop a week, well maybe the same "bubble" does one every two months or every month, we're going to try it always respecting the bubbles to be able to do it in line with measures". (Coordinator.P8. 52-56)

4. Discussion

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 [10,35]. 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 [36–38]. 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 [39], emphasising their strengths [40] 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 [41]. 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 [42]. 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 [43].

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.

5. 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 [44], 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 [45].

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.

The present study gathered a large number of testimonies about access challenges from key informants from a limited geographical context. For this reason, it is important that present findings be compared with those produced by other similar studies conducted in other regions. One possibility is to broaden the study population to include vulnerable young people in general.

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