NOT BROKEN: IMPROVING DISABILITY SPORT

by

Sarah Horrell

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Sarah Horrell

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:

Dr. Stacy Warner

Department of Kinesiology, College of Health and Human Performance

Abstract

Disability sport provides an outlet for physical activity as well as a community aspect that can create bonds between people who are working for a common goal. However, because of the lack of disability sport opportunities, as well as various other reasons, individuals with disabilities meet the recommended amount of daily physical activity 4.5 times less than their typically developing peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This indicates that a better understanding of how disability sport can be improved is needed. This study aimed to better understand this issue by conducting a survey of leaders (n=35) of organizations focused on disabilities (e.g., The Autism Society, The Special Olympics). Using a mixed method approach, the online survey consisted of two sections. The first section included open-ended questions and sought to better understand why the organizational leader chose to work in their field, capture how they believed disability sport could improve, and encourage more involvement. The second section sought to measure and quantify the participant's view of disability sport by using 5-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, strongly agree) statements. Descriptive analysis was used to determine the participants' perceptions of disability sport. The survey responses indicated that the participants were led to work in the field that they do by four main themes. These themes were identified as: Physical Activity Interest, Personal Connection, Job Placement, and a Desire to Help Others. Further, the participants were asked what they believe could improve in disability sports. The themes were identified as Inclusion, Awareness, and Increased Adaptation and Accessibility for Participants. The Likert scale questions helped gauge barriers and facilitators of creating more opportunities. The focus of this study is to capitalize on these experiences and identify barriers and facilitators of disability sport through the survey responses.

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Introduction

Individuals with disabilities are similar to those that are typically developing in that both have a need for community as well as physical activity. The daily recommended amount of exercise is 30 minutes and statistically, individuals with disabilities are less likely to meet this (Laskowski, 2016). While "normally-developing" people are given numerous opportunities to meet these physical activity recommendations, fewer opportunities exist for those with disabilities (Nixon, 2007). Despite U.S. laws requiring schools and communities to provide equal access and opportunities for extracurricular activities (i.e., Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act), people with disabilities have limited participation opportunities. Thus, explaining why physical activity is 4.5 times lower for children and youth with disabilities than their peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This staggering statistic also is likely due to the lack of volunteers and employees willing to give time and effort to programs targeting individuals with disabilities. The variables that cause people to be willing and/or unwilling to work with individuals with disabilities requires further study. The unwillingness to work with individuals with disabilities has led to a shortage of disability sport programs and/or integration into typical programs (Shields & Synnot, 2016). Strategies to better recruit and educate people about individuals with disabilities requires further attention. More specifically, the variables that lead to volunteering needs to be explored and implemented into volunteer recruitment programs.

Ill-informed perspectives

The lack of disability sport programs may stem from ill-informed perspectives of people with disabilities, the unwillingness of people to volunteer, and the segregation of the people who are willing to be involved (Nixon, 2007). The fulfillment of the basic needs for physical activity

and community are stunted when there is no one to facilitate these programs. These ill-informed perspectives about individuals with disabilities fuel false assumptions as well as hesitancies about being involved with programs geared towards individuals with disabilities. A study on public attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities indicated, "Negative attitudes towards persons with intellectual disabilities are often the consequence of lack of knowledge about ID [Intellectual disabilities] as well as negative and erroneous stereotypes" (Morin et al., 2012, p. 9). Supporting this idea with better education, more positive and accurate views of people with disabilities can be formed.

Unfortunately, most of the negative feelings such as fear and pity stunt a person with ID's willingness or ability to be social and achieve goals. If a person with a disability feels they are not wanted in a program or that they do not belong, they will be less willing to attend (Vornholt, 2013). A sense of belonging can motivate individuals to complete a myriad of tasks. With the right training, employees and volunteers can gain helpful knowledge to increase client participation in physical activity. A study of a group of students at a community college, all with differing levels of disabilities or marginalization (like race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) revealed that an environment that promotes self-efficacy, a need to master the student role, and supportive relationships is best for implementing a sense of belonging (Vaccaro et al., 2015). This can be applied when thinking about what these extra-curricular activities should look like in terms of the social dynamic. Maximizing factors that can lead to successful lifestyles as well as minimizing toxic factors should be key to helping individuals with disabilities meet the recommendation for daily physical activity.

Lack of Awareness

Most people are simply unaware of the difficulties that many people with disabilities face. A study of a ballet class that paired typically developing students with girls with Erb's palsy revealed that most participants had little to no involvement with individuals with disabilities prior to the class. Many of the study participants reported being more aware and even more willing to become involved in programs with people with disabilities (Traver & Duran, 2014). Immersion into such programs is an effective way to better educate one's self and become more aware of difficulties people with disabilities face daily. Without firsthand experience, one might miss the fact that individuals with disabilities suffer from varying barriers such as lack of physical accessibility, lack of assistive technology, crippling negative attitudes from people around them, etc. (CDC, 2018). These barriers could be easily avoided if individuals were more knowledgeable about intellectual disabilities. Issues such as individuals with disabilities not meeting recommended physical activity can be addressed too. This problem tends to be overlooked because few typically developing people are meeting these expectations, as well. Only one in three typically developing children and less than 5% of typically developing adults are meeting the recommended 30 minutes of physical activity (HHS Office & Council on Sports, 2017). This statistic shows that physical activity is not a priority in America and is causing health issues for all populations.

Low Physical Activity Levels/Increasing Barriers

When it comes to the glaring fact that individuals with disabilities are even less likely to meet the recommended physical activity guidelines, and not much is being done about it, it becomes a cause for concern. As previously stated, individuals with disabilities are meeting recommended physical activity duration 4.5 times less than those that are typically developing (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Adults with disabilities attribute their lack of physical

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activity to difficulty finding transportation to the extracurricular, high costs of memberships to fitness centers, lack of accessible facilities/programs/equipment, and also the misconception that fitness centers are just not for people with disabilities (Department of Education, 2011). Some of these obstacles could be avoided if there was more effort given to educating fitness center staff, or if they were properly trained on how to work with those with disabilities. Researchers have also found that children with disabilities conform to a very sedentary lifestyle. This could be due the lack of opportunities given them in schools (Sit et al., 2017), after school, or at home (Foley & McCubbin, 2009). This is then translated to a vicious cycle that continues into adulthood unless otherwise altered. Implementing awareness training and teaching employees how to create programs that are specific to people with disabilities could turn extracurricular activities and exercise into something more would want to take part of. A study that assessed an Adapted Physical Activity (APA) class for people who had stroke noted the effectiveness of the program:

It does not require costly equipment or room modifications and is taught by exercise professionals who have been hired by local gyms and received specialized APA-stroke instructor training. A major factor in sustainability and expansion of APA-stroke is that participants pay for the courses and cost is relatively low. (Stuart, 2009, p. 732).

This indicates that if more effort is put into the training of exercise and fitness professionals, people with disabilities are more likely to meet the physical activity recommendations and become involved in their communities.

Willingness to Work

When it comes to examining why people *are* willing to work with people with disabilities, there is limited research. The research that has been done thus far has focused on the barriers to working with individuals with disabilities rather than the variables which enhance

someone's likeliness to work with individuals with disabilities. However, a recently published testimonial highlighted the benefits of volunteering with someone with a disability (The Kennedy Center-Trumbull, 2017). The author stressed the positive aspects such as learning how to work with people with diverse needs, obtaining special companionship, and making an overall difference in one's community. If these aspects could be maximized and implemented into training programs for volunteers and employees, the likelihood individuals would become more aware and encouraged to participate in disability programs may be enhanced.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of barriers to, as well as facilitators of creating more opportunities for disability sport programs, approximately 150 participants were chosen based on their occupation and level of authority in the organization that they work in.

Specifically, people who are in the sports/exercise studies, people who work with the disability population, or people who can have a general impact on providing opportunities for individuals with disabilities opportunities for extracurricular activities.

Procedure and Analysis

The participants (n=150) were contacted and asked to participate in the survey study in person or by email. They were then provided an informed consent sheet to read. Following this, asked three demographic questions, four open-ended, and 10 Likert-scale questions to answer via a Qualtrics survey. The open-ended responses were analyzed to determine specific barriers and facilitators of the implementation of disability sport and extracurricular activities. The Likert-scale questions were analyzed through basic descriptive statistics and were coded based on if the participant agreed or disagreed with a positive or negative statement about the disability community.

Based on the response rate, 23% of participants (n= 35) completed the survey and provided the data for this research. Using NVivo 12 software to code responses, data were analyzed to determine the participant's primary motives for working in the field that they do now, as well as identifying perceived barriers and facilitators of creating disability sport opportunities.

Results

A total of 37 surveys were received for the study, but only 35 were considered completed and usable. The survey responses indicated that the participants were led to work in the disability related field by four main themes. These themes were identified as: *Physical Activity Interest*, *Personal Connection, Job Placement, and A Desire to Help Others*. Further, the participants were then asked what they believe could improve in disability sports and those themes were identified as *Inclusion, More Awareness, and Increased Adaptation/Accessibility for Participants*. Each theme will be defined and the representative examples will be provided.

Reason for working in their chosen field

Physical activity interest. The *physical activity interest* theme highlights the people who are mostly in the adapted PE field. They have taken interest in the benefits that come from partaking in physical activity and see the importance of it. Of the 35 people who responded to the survey, 28.6% reported that they were motivated by an interest in physical activity to work in the field that they do now. One female (age 25-34) stated, "I love being active and teaching students. My elementary PE teacher was the teacher I remembered the most. She made me love being active." Another female in the (age 25-34) responded with "I have a passion for people and active recreation. It is important to me that all people have several recreation opportunities." This

demonstrated that there is a desire out there to create opportunities for "everyone" and not just "some."

Personal connection. The *personal connection* theme was the most anecdotal out of all of the themes. The participants were given an opportunity to share why they work in the field that they do. Many gave stories about loved ones that have disabilities or moments where they felt like opportunities fell short. Out of the 35 responses, 22.9% reported that a personal connection with someone with a disability is the reason that they have the career that they do. One female (18-24 years old) wrote about an experience that she had growing up. She recounted a time watching her brother struggle by saying, "My brother has sensory processing disorder, falling right below the autism spectrum. I watched him struggle in school and always pushed aside when he should have been given extra supports." This, in turn, encouraged her to work in the disability field and help make opportunities more tangible for people like her brother.

Another participant, a male (45-54 years old) shared "I have a child with special needs who passed away. Inspired me to become a special education teacher." This theme indicated that the participants all have their own story and varying motivation behind why they have chosen their career.

Job placement. The *job placement* theme was the second most prevalent theme, which was surprising. Most responses were that they just fell into the job, or they had an internship that led them to stay in the field they are in. Out of the 35, 31.4% of participants are in this category. A female (age 18-24) responded about a volunteer opportunity that changed her career path. She wrote "After volunteering with an organization called DanceAbility, I realized that I wanted to work in a field that brought me as much joy as the organization did." Another female (25-34)

years old) said that she is in the field because of "My placement in Teach for America in a self-contained [Autism] classroom in Eastern NC."

Helping others. The *desire to help others* theme was the most salient theme when it came to responses and reasons for working in their chosen field. When asked, the participants shared their concern for others and their willingness to make a change in the world in order to give individuals with disabilities the opportunities they deserve. 42.9% of responses recorded people wanting to make a difference or help others have a voice who are so often swept under the rug. A female (age 18-24) wrote "My passion to teach kids that are over looked and told they cannot make it. I believe in the underdog!" Another female (age 25-34) spoke about her desire to see growth by saying "I love helping people! I have always loved and wanted to work in a field where you can see growth in people each and every day."

What can improve about disability sports?

Inclusion. Inclusion seemed to be a salient theme regarding what could improve about disability sports. When asked, 42.9% of participants responded that inclusion was at the top of the list. A female (age 25-34) answered "I believe creating more inclusion in extracurricular activities is important. Having programs where typically developing peers and individuals with disabilities can interact is so important." A male (age 45-54) pointed out "There should be more school based athletics for children with special needs" where it could also be more convenient for families who may not be able to transport their child to extracurricular activities.

More awareness. An increase in awareness of individuals with disabilities was most important to 11.4% of the survey participants. They believed that in spite of already implemented awareness events, this could still improve. A female (18-24 years old) responded with "I think there should be more acknowledgment of them in the first place. People only really hear about

the involvement of people with disabilities when it comes to big events like the Special Olympics." A female (age 45-54) replied "Bringing awareness that all people with disabilities can benefit from adaptive sports. More advertisement about activities in the area to help people who benefit, to become aware of these activities. Train more people/coaches." This can be taken into consideration when thinking about how to increase the "reach" of the program.

Increased adaptation/accessibility. This theme seems to have the most impact on the disability community. 48.6% of survey responses included a concern that there was not enough accessibility or adaptations for those who need it to be able to participate in desired extracurricular activities. A female in the (age 18-24) stated

I believe that people with disabilities should have better access to sports/
extracurricular activities. Many towns have local teams for which nondisabled kids and adults can participate in a wide variety of sports, however,
they don't have special teams or they are very limited. Or the teams that are
available can be all-inclusive, so that anyone who wants to participate, can.

Adaptation and accessibility of disability sport opportunities can open many doors for individuals who currently have limited choice in what sport they want to be involved with.

Disability Community Perceptions

After the open-ended questions were answered, the participants were then asked to answer Likert scale questions that included statements relevant to disability sports and the disability community. They were required to rate to what extent they agreed with each statement based on the scale. These results are based on whether or not the survey participant agrees with each of the Likert scale questions. Some questions were related to a positive viewpoint of the disability community, and some were related to a negative one. They were then analyzed in order

to better understand barriers as well as facilitators of creating more opportunities. Further, it was examined to see how people with the same positive viewpoints can be utilized to possibly facilitate a training program for future employees or volunteers who will work with people with disabilities. The end goal is to help diminish barriers that are preventing more opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Disability Sport Perceptions

Out of the 35 survey answers, 85.7% of participants either strongly or somewhat agreed that "Disability sport is an ideal way to integrate individuals into society". This indicated that this attitude could be considered a catalyst of creating more opportunities. The feeling that there is a supportive community to rely on can be enhanced through disability sport. This can be done through capitalizing on the participant's positive views.

Based on results, 82.8% of surveys showed that the participants strongly or somewhat disagreed with "People with disabilities just aren't interested in sports". This indicated that perception of sport interest among people with disabilities could not be considered a barrier. Interestingly enough, 74.3% of people who responded to this survey either strongly or somewhat disagree with "Disability sport perpetuates negative stereotypes". Again, a negative attitude toward disability sports is not seen as a barrier towards creating opportunities.

Physical Activity and Disabilities

Physical activity can be obtained in many ways. Results show that 94.3% of people either strongly or somewhat agree with this statement. The majority of people agreed that a variety of opportunities could help people in the disability community reach their recommended amount physical activity daily.

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There is a gap in amount of physical activity achieved between individuals with disabilities. Out of the 35 answers, 62.9% of survey participants either strongly or somewhat agree with this statement. This percentage is lower, which can lead to a conclusion that less people are aware of the fact that individuals with disabilities reach the recommended amount of physical activity 4.5 times less than their typically developing peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Disability has no effect on physical activity level. It is shown in the survey that 37.1% of people somewhat agreed with this statement and 31.4% of people somewhat disagreed with this statement. The percentages were close enough to take into consideration when comparing data. The split in these responses could be seen as a barrier when deciding what kind of sports opportunities to provide or what kind of adaptations to make for athletes.

Structured activity and schedules are important for people with disabilities to be successful. The vast majority (91.4%) of survey participants either strongly or somewhat agree that this statement is true. This shows that most of the people who were surveyed believe that structure is a vital part of offered activities. This could be a barrier as well as a facilitator, because it could be time consuming yet effective to implement structure and schedules into extracurricular activities.

Working in a Disabilities Field

I am often nervous around people with disabilities because I do not want to offend them with my actions or words. After analyzing responses, 82.8% of surveys showed that the participants strongly or somewhat disagreed with this statement. This indicates that nervousness around people with disabilities is not a leading barrier to creating more sport opportunities.

It is a waste of time to try to create opportunities for someone who may not even want to participate. Another vast majority (91.4%) of the people that answered the survey questions either somewhat or strongly disagree with this statement. This statistic shows that a negative attitude about creating opportunities is not a barrier among the people surveyed.

If my employees do not have the same values as I do, that is a problem. Showing that there was some ambivalence, 45.7% of participants either strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement, conversely, 25.7% neither agreed nor disagreed with it. Based on results, the participants were unsure about this question as it did not seem to apply to many of them.

Discussion

Overall, themes that can be utilized to help diminish barriers to creating disability sport opportunities can be seen through the survey responses, both open ended and Likert-scale. The Interest in Physical Activity, Personal Connection, Job Placement, and Willingness to Help themes were all important. However, the most salient theme was a desire to help others. The most recorded response in regards to what can most improve about disability sport was an increase in adaptation or accessibility. Each of these themes can be capitalized when deciding how to structure training programs in the future in order to ensure that the perceived barriers will not create problems.

The *interest in physical activity* theme can be expanded upon because of the statistic that individuals with disabilities reach the recommended amount of daily physical activity 4.5 times less than their typically developing peers (US Department of Education, 2011). Using the data from the surveys, people who are interested in physical activity could be utilized to encourage individuals with disabilities to become more active and reach their suggested daily amount of physical activity. Also, people who are willing to be more involved in physical activity can use

their prior knowledge to be able to adapt exercises and sports opportunities in order for them to become more accessible to all populations.

The *personal connection* theme can be capitalized because so many people have their own stories and motivators behind why they care to work with the disability population. They see more of the ability instead of the disability because of their past experiences. People like this can be used in training programs to help others become more aware of the needs that have to be met in order for this population to be the most successful in their participation in extracurricular activities and sport programs. On the other hand, job placement was a theme that could be enhanced by the training programs that come from having a personal connection.

The *job placement* theme seemed to be a reoccurring one in that people just fell into working in the disability community. A great way to learn about how to best help those who may need extra assistance is through a workplace environment. A lot of times, this involves learning through hands-on experiences. People who seemed to just "fall into" their job can be helpful in teaching others about people with disabilities in the same way that they learned. They can teach about how to make more inclusive environments, or how to adapt and create more structure in order to create a more successful opportunity, etc. Workplace environments tend to be more structured than just being out in the community, therefore, can be more conducive for learning.

The *helping others* theme can be versatile when trying to improve disability sports and creating more opportunities. When assessing barriers and facilitators of creating disability sport opportunities, people who are able to see a need and fill it are far more valuable than those who are unwilling to help. Many participants wrote about how they saw that some of the children they work with did not have the opportunities they deserved, and they had a strong desire to change that. This type of attitude can be contagious, therefore making someone with this mindset very

valuable in creating a successful training program or informational approach to people who may have a hand in creating opportunities in the future.

The Likert-scale questions were grouped into four categories in order to better understand barriers or facilitators. These categories included: Disability Community Perceptions, Disability Sport Perceptions, Physical Activity and Disabilities, and Working in the Disabilities Field. When analyzing the Likert-scale questions, many facilitators could be identified as well as a few barriers. One of the biggest barriers included an ambivalence about the discrepancy about actual amount of physical activity between people with disabilities and their typically developing peers. Not many of the survey participants knew that individuals with disabilities meet the recommended amount of physical activity 4.5 times less than others (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This barrier can be made less of one by better educating people who work in the disability field. Another mindset barrier that was identified was that the participants were unsure about whether or not disability has an impact on physical activity levels. This can also be helped by better education and hearing from others who are negatively impacted by lack of adaptability of sports programs.

Conclusion

A better understanding of facilitators as well as barriers to creating disability sport opportunities can benefit those involved. Using the facilitators to diminish the barriers can be a helpful approach when making training programs for people who might possibly work with people with disabilities in the future, as well as those who have more responsibility within organizations that have a hand in creating opportunities. Individuals who have an interest in physical activity can be utilized to ensure that those with disabilities have a better chance of meeting their suggested amount of daily physical activity. People with personal connections to the disability community can be used in training programs to share how important it is to them

and their loved ones that they are given the same amount of opportunities that their typically developing peers are. Employees who just "fell into" their job field can help to create conducive learning environments to minimize ill-informed perspectives about people with disabilities because they learned the same way they are teaching. People who have a strong desire to help others can be versatile in creating a better environment for creating more sport opportunities, because they can see where programs may fall short. Overall, identifying facilitators as well as barriers to creating disability sport programs can be used to create training programs that can benefit organizations and their employees/volunteers and better educate them about the population with which they are working.

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