

## EXAMINING TEACHER AND STUDENT DISABILITY SPORTING EXPERIENCES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore teachers' practices and students' responses to a disability sport unit on perceptions of disability. Using a social model perspective, the study was conducted in a K-6 school in New England. One intern, one physical education teacher and three (n=60) fifth grade classes comprised the participants. Data collection included student journals, lesson plans, field notes and semi-structured interviews of the teachers. Thematic analysis revealed two primary themes: navigating the disability terrain and journal as a tool to negotiate difference. The results indicate how beliefs about disability represent different points in one's learning as evidenced in the teachers' perspectives towards what they wanted the students to learn, and the students' expressed views of disability. Recommendations include the use of disability sports in the curricula for enhancing an understanding of ability.*

**Keywords:** *Disability sport, social model, perceptions of disability.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Disability activists have promoted a social model of disability for over 30 years as a response to the shortcomings to the medical model of disability (Evans, 2004; Linton, 1994; Oliver, 1990). First introduced by Oliver, the social model references the definition of disability provided by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the 1970's, situating disability as a feature of the structural or material world, rather than an individual condition (Greenstein, 2016). While there are several iterations of the social model, a fundamental premise of the model is that the way in which society is organized tends to disable individuals through structural, environmental, and attitudinal

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barriers (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Mitra, 2006). As the World Health Organization (WHO) explains, “disability is not an attribute of an individual, but rather a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment” (p. 28).

In the area of sport and physical activity, the social model of disability encourages physical educators to view restricted opportunities for engagement in physical activity as the result of physical barriers, social practices, and negative constructions of disability rather than the biological trait of the individual (Fitzgerald, 2006; Grenier, 2007; Oliver, 1990). This shift emphasizes equal rights, unrestricted access, and universal programming (Shakespeare, 2013).

Advocates of the social model of disability (hereafter social model) underscore the significance of social reactions and attitudes, which can act as barriers to participation and compromise interests (Koch, 2001). For disabled populations whose physical and psychological dispositions fall outside established norms, differences often translate into deficits (Davis, 1997). Compounding these issues for physical education teachers are teacher preparation programs grounded in a medical tradition with an accompanying deficit perspective (Brittain, 2004).

Penney and Lisahunter (2006) call for education to “contest dominant conceptualizations of ability” (p. 206) through alternative curricula and pedagogies. Because the social model treats disability as a discourse that is socially constructed, ability is also implicated as a site of resistance to normative views of competence and a possible avenue for education (Hall, 1988). Normality as ideally constructed contributes to the view that disability is a problem (Davis, 1997; Shogan, 1998). Utilizing the social model “is a deliberate attempt to shift attention from the functional limitations of individuals with impairments onto the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures” (Barnes, 2014, p. 18). However, Haegele and Hodge (2016) identify this as a limitation of the social model as it fails to account for individual differences or the lived experience of the individual.

This line of research suggests that an embodied approach to disability coupled with reflection on disability discourses, can impact students’ constructions of ability (Evans; 2004; Penney & Lisahunter, 2006). If ability is constructed within traditional curricula, then so too is disability, and the dynamic interplay between the two necessitates further inquiry.

School programs can address societal inequalities by advancing a broadened perspective of disability through potential avenues including Paralympic and disability sports (Beckett, 2009). As one of the largest sporting events in the world, the Paralympic movement has had a profound influence in reshaping the meaning of human performance while enabling participation at all levels (Paralympic Committee, 2013). Because of the value attached to the

Paralympics, the venue, including both the participants and the sports, can be used as a mechanism for shaping perceptions of disability (Coates & Vickerman, 2016; McKay, Block & Park, 2015). Though experiencing Paralympic sports firsthand, students can explore alternative representations of competitive activities (Erevelles, 2000; Grenier, Collins, Wright & Kearns, 2013).

Disability sports are traditional sports modified to accommodate disability populations (Davis, 2011). For example, wheelchair basketball has many of the same skills and strategies as stand-up basketball but is played in a chair. Sitting volleyball requires that players have one buttock in contact with the floor when playing the ball. More specific disability sports, such as goalball, were originally developed to accommodate disability specific population such as the blind or visually impaired. Because strong similarities exist between traditional sports such as track and field, swimming, archery and soccer, implementing adapted or disability sports within the physical education (PE) curriculum is achievable for most educators (Grenier & Kearns, 2012).

Researchers have begun to examine student experiences with disability and Paralympic sports, and the corresponding impact of the sports on constructions of disability (Grenier, Wright, Collins & Kearns, 2013; Panagiotou, Evaggelinou, Doulkeridou, Mouratidou & Koidou, 2008). However, it is recommended that disability sports not be measured against the traditional way of playing a sport, nor should they be presented as activities only for individuals with disabilities (Barton, 2009). For example, Fitzgerald and Kirk (2009) found students believed the sports were of lesser value than their traditional counterparts because of the dominant association with masculinity. As a result, the sports are undervalued. The authors recommend stressing the importance of inclusivity and equity when teaching sports to avoid marginalizing the sports. Similarly, Grenier, Wright, Collins and Kearns (2013) found that the primary physical education teacher adopting a disability sports curriculum believed the sports would not be accepted by his students, as the sports challenged features of their identity. These studies reflect the tension that may appear around the worth attributed to ability (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009).

Grenier, Horrell, & Genovese (2014) demonstrated the effectiveness of a disability sports unit in shaping perceptions of disability when the sports were instructed by an individual with a disability. Similarly, Grenier, Wright, Collins, and Kearns (2013) found the inclusion of disability sports program in the physical education curriculum positively shaped students' and teachers' perceptions of disability. Successful elements include demystifying stereotypes and creating awareness of barriers through a variety of teaching and learning experiences.

One intended effect of utilizing disability sports is to break down attitudinal barriers that marginalize individuals with disabilities. Panagiotou,

Evaggelinou, Doulkeridou, Mouratidou, and Koidou (2008) conducted a study examining the effects of a Paralympic day program in physical education. Results between groups indicated significant differences in the group that participated in the Paralympic School Day on general attitudes toward inclusion. McKay, Block, and Park (2016) found positive attitudinal change in peers without disabilities towards students with disabilities after participating in the Paralympic School Day program. Coates and Vickerman (2016) found the Paralympic movement positively affected perceptions of disability for young adults with disabilities. Tindall (2013) demonstrated the positive impact of disability sport instructed through the sport education model of post-primary female students in Ireland. Krahe and Altwasser (2006) found the strategy of both knowledge of and participation in disability sports with 9th grade students to be successful in reducing negative attitudes towards those with a physical disability. Combining both personal contact and accurate information produced positive attitudinal shifts by providing relevant information on disability (Lee & Rodda, 1994).

Despite some of the promising indicators in the literature, researchers have also found teachers continuing to struggle with knowledge of disability and coherent strategies that address student need (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Grenier, 2001). Evans (2004) problematizes the concept of ability and the privileged status that physical ability has in the relationship to physical education teachers and their students as learners. He proposes continued exploration of “what ability means and how it is configured” (p. 99). Given that, this case study explores teachers’ practices and students’ responses to a disability sport unit on perceptions of disability as a result of participation in the sports. Our contention is that challenging constructions of ability will disrupt the normal-abnormal dichotomy often articulated in traditional sports (Evans, 2004; Shogun, 1994).

## **2. METHODS AND MATERIALS**

The intrinsic case explored teachers’ practices and students’ responses to a disability sport unit on students’ perceptions of disability in a physical education curriculum unit (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2008). Intrinsic case study was undertaken as the case presents areas of interest, particularly the pedagogical tools and curriculum used by the teacher to navigate the concept of disability.

### **2.1 Participants**

The study was conducted in a K-6 school in rural New England enrolling 550 students ranging from preschool through sixth grade. The school was purposely selected because of the interest held by a graduate-level teaching intern in piloting

a disability sport curriculum, and the willingness of her cooperating teacher to participate in the research. The intern's recent experiences with disability sports and how the sports could be used to inform constructions of disability provided the inspiration for the research (Patton, 1990).

Three fifth grade classes comprised of 20 students each participated in the study (N=60; mean age = 10.4 years). Fifteen percent of the students were identified with disabilities that required Individualized Education Plans. Two students had the diagnosis of learning disabilities, one other student had a physical disability, and one student was diagnosed with autism. All students were able to participate in the activities. Permission for the study was received from the university review board to undertake the study.

A full-time physical educator, Jocelyn, and a physical education (PE) intern, Emilie, were central participants in the study (both pseudonyms). Jocelyn had been the PE teacher at the school for the past 27 years. She was actively involved in the school and had received several state and district level accolades for her work as an educator. As Emilie's cooperating teacher, she was committed to supporting her intern's interest in developing a disability sport curriculum. Emilie's yearlong internship included a full semester at an elementary school, followed by one semester at a high school. The research was conducted during the first semester of her internship. Prior to her internship, Emilie had accrued 120 hours of teaching at the elementary and high school levels. As part of her undergraduate program, she had taken a disability sport class and was familiar with the content and game play of many of the sports. She had also developed and managed a program for youth with disabilities that included a disability sports unit. Emilie acted as both investigator and teacher for the project. Although considered an insider, potential bias was balanced by outside perspective of the other authors (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

## **2.2 Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews, field notes, and documents, including lesson plans and a student journal were the primary data sources. The student journals were the main documents analyzed, as they made students' thinking and response to the curriculum explicit. Created by Emilie, the journal was designed to give students time to reflect and process the sporting experience. As a pedagogical tool, journal writing has been described as "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them" (Flavell, 1976, p. 232). Hodge, Tannehill and Kluge (2003) further suggest that reflection facilitates appropriate responses to teaching experiences.

## 2.3 Procedure

Prior to the start of the first class in the disability sports unit, each student was given the journal, which consisted of four pages with identified questions and images. During that time students were asked to answer the first six questions listed in the journal. Working alone, students wrote responses to short, open-ended questions that queried them on their understanding of disability and whether individuals with disabilities could participate in sports. After completing the journal entries, students debriefed with the teacher on their responses. Students also responded to journal questions with debriefs at the end of the second and fourth lesson. Students were encouraged to use the journal to express thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and knowledge beyond the structured questions particularly during the debrief. The questions aligned with the overall purposes of the study by eliciting responses on students' prior knowledge of disability, their understandings of disability sports, and their thoughts participating in the sports.

The primary researcher conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the physical education teacher and the intern at the end of the study to gain insight into the pedagogical strategies employed by the teachers and the perceived outcomes of the unit (Cresswell, 2007). Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were audiotaped. As specified in the case, questions addressed the impact of the sports on shaping perceptions of disability, aspects of the program that went well, aspects of the class that could be changed, and the quality of the debrief on student learning. Data collection also included lesson plans and field notes of eight classes. Field notes were recorded during the classroom observations using the Schatzman and Strauss (1973) system of organizing notes. The system utilizes three ways of organizing notes including observational, theoretical and methodological notes enabling the researcher to delve into the classroom activities.

***Disability Sport Unit.*** Because the social model views disability as a social construct that can restrict opportunities for participation (Oliver, 2004), sports designed and/or adapted for individuals with disabilities were selected that could easily be implemented into a physical education curriculum. The sports unit consisted of four, one hour, once a week sessions including sledge hockey, goal ball, sitting volleyball, and wheelchair handball. Both Emilie and Jocelyn selected the sports because they provided a diverse sporting experience. Week one the students played sledge hockey, week two - sitting volleyball, week three - goal ball, and week four - wheelchair handball which was co-taught by an athlete with a disability from a regional disability and therapeutic sport facility. With the exception of handball, the intern was the primary instructor for all of the classes.

At the start of each unit, the children were oriented to the sport by viewing a video clip of a Paralympic performance. During that time, the rules and game play were made explicit and students were able to ask clarifying questions. The videos were used as a tool to provide a visual reference as well as an opportunity to answer any questions the students might have about the sport (Lindsey & Edwards, 2013).

Students then moved into the activity portion of the class. The sports began with the fundamental skills necessary for performance. After a few minutes of exploration, instruction was provided on the skills and rules for modified game play. Post play included a debrief with the entire class on the sporting experience, how different it was from its traditional counterpart, and some of the skills required to play the sport. The primary researcher collected field notes, including lesson plans, throughout the delivery of the unit.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis of the journal entries began by identifying key terms. Similarities and differences were examined as themes arose that identified participants' perspectives. In the final phase, raw data were revisited to support theme development distilled through a social model perspective.

The interviews and field notes were analyzed using a generative thematic approach (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The first level of analysis consisted of transcribing all teacher interviews by the primary investigator and the intern. From there, member checks were conducted to insure fidelity of the content, with Jocelyn and Emilie invited to clarify their interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coding of key terms from the journals were compared with the teacher interviews and the field notes for triangulation. Themes were then compared between the two researchers to clarify differences and expand on concepts (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Continued discussion over emerging themes between investigators resulted in theme clarification. In addition, peer debriefing served to make explicit aspects of the investigation through the assistance of two selected colleagues within the field of sociology and physical education to evaluate the findings. In the end, *two themes emerged, navigating the disability terrain and journal as a tool to negotiate difference.*

## **3. RESULTS**

### **Navigating the Disability Terrain**

Many people have little or no interaction with individuals with disabilities nor have they been educated on the challenges faced by those with a

disability. I wanted to find a way to change that at my internship school by introducing disability sports as a way to better inform my students on what it means to have a disability (Emilie, journal).

Within this pedagogical sphere, Emilie sought to structure learning experiences so that her students would gain an appreciation for difference. Although the expectation that students would know “what it means to have a disability,” resonates with a deficit narrative, her intent was that students might attend to qualitative differences in the movement requirements for skill participation by creating alternative spaces to appreciate the sports. The way the sports were presented and the discussions structured, impacted how and what students learned (field note). Because disability is often viewed negatively, Emilie found it imperative to be clear on the manner of her delivery (Davis, 1997).

I was very direct with what I wanted the students to get out of it and what I wanted them to learn by the end of this unit. And what I found from the students is that if I left it as an open discussion [debriefs at the end of class] and one student starting saying that a student with a disability has something wrong with them, well then the other students may start feeding off of that and it can create a chain effect (Emilie, interview).

Emilie’s statements call forth the concept of “enlightened ableism” (Lyons, 2013, *p.237*); a term used to describe the ways in which Emilie’s discussion on disability unfolded. As Lyons notes, “The rhetoric of enlightened ableism presents a rational, modern, well-informed and humanitarian world view yet allows the continuation of practices that marginalize persons with disabilities” (*p.240*).

The implementation of the sports was a way to draw comparisons between traditional sports challenging the established criteria for competency (Evans, 2004). Emilie pointed to a direct goal of her sports unit: “I wanted them to understand if someone is in a wheelchair there is not anything wrong with them; they are fine, they can do everything. They are just in a wheelchair (interview).”

Despite Emilie’s commitment to the program, she retained a deficit narrative (Magiati, Dockrell, & Logotheti, 2002). Her comment implies a normative judgment of how and what the students should think about disability (Watson, 2014) with the assumption that through knowledge, perceptions will be change. Although well intentioned, her perspective was politically correct but lacked a philosophical coherence (Terzi, 2004).

However, participation in the sports allowed students to see and experience alternatives. After participating in the sports, students described disability as atypical; however statements were populated with phrases that suggested similarities between the disability sports and their more traditional

counterpart. These articulations reflect differences in the degree to which disability can be understood. For example, when asked to identify similarities and differences between hockey and sledge hockey, one student responded simply by saying, “it’s people playing hockey.” Another student noted that “every sport is an alike and so are the rules”. For Emilie, “this was huge. That is exactly what I was trying to get across. The students are just learning a new way to play a game” (journal entry). Her comment, while noting students’ affirmative feelings, underscores how disability is an abstract, general concept and that noting lines of difference can be difficult (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2012).

Emilie’s cooperating teacher, Jocelyn, reinforced this: “I think it was important for students to learn that disabled people have a need to play sports the same as we do and they need opportunities to have exercise and enjoyment that comes with playing sports” (interview).

What the sports did offer, were avenues to practice alternative skills that retained the challenge of competition (Smith, 2004). Changing the environmental conditions supported a cognitive appreciation for sports that the students may not have an opportunity to participate in. As an educator, Emilie was able to acknowledge disability and how the condition of being disabled intersected with experiences beyond the norm. However, her capacity to speak inclusively was limited due to cursory understanding (Lyons, 2013). Access within the physical education program was primarily an avenue for presenting disability sports.

### **Journal as a Tool to Recognize Difference**

The sport unit was implemented to expose students to construct of ability and the journal allowed students to reflect on and share their thoughts during the class (Evans, 2004). At the start of the disability sports unit, Emilie utilized the journal to solicit information on students’ views on disability as a way to gain a baseline indicator. When prompted to respond to the first question “define what you think the word disability means,” the majority of responses contained phrases such as, “someone who cannot do what I can” or “that you have a problem walking or talking.” Students’ responses initially viewed the disability as the individual defining characteristic (Fitzgerald, 2006; Murugami, 2009). Other examples of students’ responses prior to the start of the sports reflected a medical model orientation:

“Disability. It means someone who has to be in a wheelchair or can’t do everything I can.”

“That you have problems walking or talking.”

“I think it means that they broke or have one leg or cannot walk.”

“Someone who can’t use his or her body.”

“They cannot do things other people can. Example they are still nice but they cannot move their legs.”

“A reason that a person might not be able to do something; like missing a leg.”

“They might be in a wheelchair.”

“I think the term disability means paralyzed.”

“Something wrong with your body.”

The presence of the medical model was evident in the students’ classification of what is meant to have a disability. These initial articulations of disability emanated from practices that mark individuals based on their physical manifestations (Brittain, 2004; Rapley, 2004) and the view that individuals with disabilities are in some way inferior (Davis, 1997; Linton, 1998).

Jocelyn, the physical education teacher, provided further insight into students’ responses, “I just think they associate disability with wheelchair. I think that is just their way of associating the two.” For many, a lack of previous contact resulted in unfamiliarity grounded in the medical model that aligned with Biklen’s (2000) “static understanding of disability” (p.338) whereby disability is unchangeable. Bird (1994) offers an analysis of the way in which children develop views on ability and effort that prioritizes circumstance, language, and location. As students’ progress through the educational system with associated cultural values, a restricted view of ability is adopted that locates individual pathology with biological deficiency (Davis, 1997).

**Reflective practice on the sporting experience.** As the students participated in the disability sports unit, students’ responses towards the notion of disability were more insightful. Journal entry for question number 11 shed light on these differences (See figure 1) with the question “can people with disabilities play sports?” Students were then required to examine images between individuals participating in traditional hockey and sledge hockey. Differences were noted with equipment used, whether someone was standing or sitting, and the challenges of the game. When responding to the comparison questions between the two forms of hockey, students’ comments included:

“same rules”

“both are playing hockey”

“both are on ice”

“both use skates”

Responses to differences included:

“equipment: 1 stick vs. 2”

“one sitting, one standing”

“one uses skates to move, one uses sticks to move”

The journal questions allowed students to draw comparisons between the needs of each of the sports, in particular the attention to equipment and rule changes.

Participation in the sports may have resulted in increased athletic identity with the Paralympic athletes (Coates & Vickerman, 2016) and a positive correlation between sport participation and the strength of one's athletic identity (Tasiemski & Brewer, 2011). Recognizing disability as a central and unifying experience enabled the children to align with the athletic experience. In addition, knowledge of the sports and participation in the sports created empathy or understanding unifying students' experiences (Lee & Rodda, 1994). As one student commented, "the term disability means that you can do something just as good but maybe a little different," and "a disability can't stop someone from being good at a sports." Some comments articulated the interplay between disability and impairment: "I think it means people function differently than others but they can still play sports" and "Yes. They can just it might be a little challenge". These quotes indicate a shift from a medical orientation, to one where, when presented with the avenues to support participation, athletes with a disability are able to succeed (Coates & Vickerman, 2016). The coupling of sport participation with video representation reinforced an inclusivity that addressed individual differences, providing the children with a framework for tackling stereotypes associated with a medical model of disability (Beckett, 2009). End of class debriefs facilitated a cognitive appreciation for the performance capacities of individuals with disabilities. Barton (2009) notes the significance of appropriately comprehending disability as a critical tool by reconstructing the meaning of disability. Of particular interest was how Emilie utilized the curriculum to enhance students' perceptions of disability through participation in the sports, thereby challenging the relationship between having disability and being impaired (Blustein, 2012).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Situated within embodied experience of the sports curricula, students and teachers' constructions of disability were shifting and dynamic throughout the unit as noted in the field notes, interviews and journals. Even as Emilie attempted to challenge fixed notions of ability, the findings revealed she herself articulated a normalizing discourse. The current study also indicated how beliefs about disability may represent different points in one's learning, as evidenced in both the teachers' perspectives towards what they wanted the students to learn, and how the students themselves refigured disability.

Jocelyn and Emilie advanced a humanitarian view of disability that at times, marginalized the experience of being disabled (Lyons, 2013). A limitation of the social model is the failure to recognize differences and the reality of disability including the commonalities and the differences. Both teachers

struggled with placing disability within the spectrum of atypical to natural (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2012).

However, the study highlights the value of educational actions that create inclusive spaces (Davis, 2007; Greenstein, 2016;). Emilie and Jocelyn were able to use the curriculum to promote sports through practices that made sense to the children while simultaneously articulating their own beliefs. The outcomes of these strategies were evidenced in multiple ways including discussions of sporting experiences, differences in journal entries, and the observations discussed by the two teachers in the interviews. Playing the sports, viewing the videos of sporting performance, and being taught by an individual with a disability resulted in shifts in students' perceptions of disability. These actions move cultural practices from those that discriminate, to those that promote to social inclusion.

This research also adds to the literature on perceptions of disability when engaged with Paralympic or disability sports. Similar to the work of Grenier, Wright, Collins, and Kearns (2014), interviews before and after participation in a disability sports unit, impacted children's perceptions of the sports. Viewing and then participating in the sports contributed to a more accurate depiction of disability and points to ways teachers can help students examine the sporting experience. Over the course of the disability unit students came to understand that the sports provided opportunities that challenged assumptions on difference, supporting a social rather than medical position as students negotiated participating in activities that brought meaning to their lives.

A primary recommendation is for continued research relative to the way in which disability is constructed through different pedagogical interventions and approaches, particularly as teacher's employ strategies to challenge normative conceptions of skill (Brittain, 2004). As aligned within the social model, physical education curricula should include disability sports as the means to promote equity and foster broader conceptions of competence.

Secondly, research tends to bear out preservice teachers' lack of confidence, composure, and skills when it comes to teaching students with disabilities (Ammah & Hodge, 2005; Hodge & Elliott, 2013). Given that, faculty within higher education preservice programs should consider ways in which disability sports figure into the overall program and the potency of engaging students in activities that disrupt notions of ability (Armour, 2013; Evans, 2004). One suggestion for utilizing disability sports is to incorporate the sports in partnership with their traditional counterparts, similar to those who advocate for the infusion model (Kowalski & Rizzo, 1996; Tepfer, & Lieberman, 2012). By building upon this research and providing further opportunities for students to engage in sports designed for a range of abilities in both the school setting and recreational venues, researchers may begin to find that differences within sports

provide avenues for examining the commonalities between traditional and disability sports, and their participants. Training and knowledge of the sports are essential if these practices are to be put into place.

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