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In search of a level playing field – the constraints and benefits of sport participation for people with intellectual disability

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a study seeking to examine the experiences of people with intellectual disability in a sporting context. The research design employed an online, interviewer-completed questionnaire in both a standard and an easy English version designed for administration by a third party for those requiring assistance to respond. Questions sought both quantitative responses about levels of participation and qualitative responses about constraints experienced and benefits received from participation. The results of the study show high levels of participation reported by people who are independent or have lower to moderate support needs whereas people with high to very high support needs had substantially lower levels of participation. Constraints are examined for both those who participate in sport and those who do not. For those who do participate, the benefits were identified as overwhelmingly social in nature, including belonging, companionship and achievement.

Keywords: intellectual disability; cultural life; citizenship; sport; active recreation

Points of Interest

- People with intellectual disability take part in sporting activities much less frequently than other people with disability and those who don't have a disability.
- The research is based on a survey where people with intellectual disability and their families talked about what makes it hard to take part in sport and what is good about it.
- An easy English survey was provided to ensure people who don't read or who need help from another person to express their views could share their experiences.
- Lack of choices, cost, insufficient support to take part, the attitudes of other people and lack of interest are things that stop people from taking part in sport.
- When they do take part in sport, it is positive because they have fun with friends and enjoy a sense of achievement.

The *Crawford Report* (Independent Sport Panel, 2009) shifted the attention of Australian government sport agencies from top world performances and Paralympic gold medals to critically question the sport participation of people with disabilities at the grassroots level. This strategic refocusing of sport-development processes in Australia halted a three-decade obsession with international sporting success by nondisabled and disabled athletes alike. As part of the need to understand the experiences of people with disabilities at the grassroots level, this study presents the experiences of people with intellectual disability in a sport context. This group has been one of the most marginalised in a liberalist state where employment is the overriding discourse of disability citizenship. In the absence of sustainable and appropriate employment opportunities for this group, a great deal of government resources are dedicated to the development and support of independence, life skills and community participation where sport is important in skill development and participation.

While a significant number of studies show people with intellectual disabilities have much lower sport participation rates than the general population and in comparison with other types of impairments, few studies have examined their experiences, the constraints they face, and the benefits they experience from active sporting citizenship. The current study used an online questionnaire with two formats; a standard format and an easy English version for administration by a third-party attendant or supporter for people with limited literacy or who required other forms of support to respond. Questions sought both quantitative responses about the nature and extent of individuals' participation and open-ended responses about the constraints and benefits arising from participation. The paper identifies the most significant findings and discusses the development of more robust community grassroots sporting engagement for this group.

Changing approaches to conceptualising disability

The ways of approaching and defining disability have undergone significant shifts in the past five decades. Sustained political action by disabled people's movements and disability scholars since the 1970s, have challenged traditional ways of understanding disability as personal tragedy or medical misfortune (Finkelstein, 1993; Oliver, 1990) through focusing on disability as a major neglected area of human social experience (Shakespeare, 1998, p. 1). The discipline of disability studies draws on knowledge in social sciences, humanities, cultural and critical studies, and its emerging frameworks for understanding human experience have re-located disability from bio-medical dysfunction or personal misfortune to recognition as a social relationship shaped by the privileging of normalcy, which becomes associated with overarching complex processes of exclusion. In the same way that notions of race and gender have been problematised, contemporary conceptualisations of disability have shifted focus from the individual's body, intellect or behaviour to more complex social, political, material and cultural relationships (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). Consideration of people with disabilities as a group, who experience marginalisation and discrimination and are bearers of human rights, has influenced thinking and action. These emergent understandings, under the rubric of 'social models of disability', have precipitated recognition of the need for shifts in societal organisation, structures and processes to acknowledge access and support for people with disabilities to enable their participation and inclusion in social, political and cultural life including sport.

Recent developments have broadened this thinking, encompassing the influence of impairment in shaping the disability experience. Thomas (2004) argues for recognition of 'impairment effects', which structure experience in different ways; for example, the experiences of a person with vision impairment are qualitatively different from those of

someone with autism. Contemporary conceptualisations of disability urge the re-examination of historical and contemporary conditions that have created and sustained the marginalisation of people with disabilities (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) and call attention to the range of social, political, cultural, economic and individual dynamics that intersect in diverse ways in individual and collective experience of disability.

Locating intellectual disability

The study of intellectual disability is similar to that of disability in general, with the influence of personal tragedy and medicalised thinking predominating until relatively recently. In addition, there has been a tendency to in/advertently conflate intellectual disability into a broad ‘disability’ experience where intellectual disability ‘remains overshadowed by questions regarding physical disability and discussions of disability in general’ (Carlson, 2010, p. 12). With the increasingly critical orientation to intellectual disability, driven by critique from people with intellectual disability and those with impairment experiences including cognitive or neurological dimensions such as autism or acquired brain injury, this conflation is progressively unravelling.

Intellectual disability itself is also far from a static category; its understandings have developed from the earliest accounts of idiocy through the major scientific projects of medicine and education in modernity to contemporary constructions in the neo-liberal era as a lack of competence, social mal-adaptation, and irrationality (Dowse 2009). As a result, intellectual disability tended to remain fixed in the social imagination as associated with limited potential for independence, autonomy and agency and by implication participation in sport.

The basic tenets informing social models of disability enable the identification of political and social strategies to combat exclusion — removing barriers in physical, social and organisational environments. Engagement with these ideas by people with intellectual disability (and their families, supporters and allies) has seen them speak of their own experiences of impairment and exclusion and identify specific barriers, like the need for accessible information, personally and socially sensitive support and politically committed allies. Importantly, this thinking also recognises that barriers are both structural and socio-cultural, necessitating expansion of access beyond the physical and material toward broader support, participation and inclusion. To date there is limited engagement with this broader notion of access for people with intellectual disability within the context of cultural participation generally, nor specifically in the area of sport.

Disability, human rights and sport

Since 1990, many Western countries have adopted disability discrimination legislation that includes the right to play sport, reinforced by the United Nations (2006) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which has been adopted by over 145 nations. Yet, people with disability still have lower participation rates in all forms of cultural life than the general population (Cozzillio & Hayman, 2005), especially sport. Current sport practices for people with disability reflect historical contexts and issues faced by Australia's disabled population (Aitchison, 2003; Darcy, 2003). Research reinforces that Australians with disability have significantly lower participation rates in sport than the rest of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009). Table 1 presents the most recent comparative figures identifying that on average people with disability participate 15% less than the general population.

Further, there are differences between male (55%) and female (51%) participation rates. In addition, the type of disability affects participation; those with intellectual disability having a significantly lower participation rate (40%) than those with other types of disability.

Table 1: Participation in sport by disability status and gender 2002 & 2006

	NUMBER ('000) 2002	2006	PARTICIPATION RATE (%) 2002	2006
Males				
With a disability	1 653.3	1 656.0	57.3	55.3
With no disability	3 152.8	3 147.1	73.5	69.1
Total	4 806.1	4 803.1	67.0	63.6
Females				
With a disability	1 493.6	1 574.9	52.0	51.3
With no disability	2 983.5	3 143.8	67.0	67.1
Total	4 477.0	4 718.7	61.1	60.9
Persons				
With a disability	3 146.9	3 230.9	54.6	53.3
With no disability	6 136.3	6 290.9	70.2	68.1
Total	9 283.2	9 521.8	64.0	62.2

Source: Perspectives on Sport (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009)

Sport participation is a complex interaction between intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints (Jackson & Scott, 1999). If access to sport is constrained, inhibited or denied, the benefits of involvement in it cannot be realised (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Liu, 2009). The *Crawford Report* helped create a new climate in which to assess sport-development processes (Independent Sport Panel, 2009), placing a great deal of focus on the marginalised position of gender, indigeneity, ethnicity and disability but with little consideration of processes of sport development for these groups. In general, sport-development processes seek to attract, retain and nurture athletes through a series of processes, from grassroots to elite competition, as encapsulated by the *Framework of Sport*

Development Process (FSDP) (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008), which identifies processes of attracting participants to sport, retaining them and nurturing performance.

While sport for people with disability has been historically segregated from mainstream sport, over time integration, inclusion and mainstreaming has occurred (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). The disability sport literature has two major foci: elite sport participation; and community recreation and leisure participation (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Smith, Austin, Kennedy, Lee, & Hutchison, 2005). At the elite level, the Paralympics and the Special Olympics present the professional face of disability sport for successful athletes with connections to compete at national and international levels. Elite-level disability sport is well funded in comparison to grassroots sport, is high profile and operates in conjunction with disability awareness and education programs (Cashman & Darcy, 2008). Yet, grassroots opportunities are ad hoc and dependent upon volunteers, who may not have the expertise required for disability sport delivery (N. Thomas & Smith, 2009). In connecting disability sport with a social model, Tregaskis (2003, 2004) noted mainstream sport lacks inclusive practice for people with disability in community settings. Tregaskis suggests the challenge is to engage with a broader group of stakeholders who have always operated in individualised models where the benefits of social-model principles have largely remained unknown in sport discourses. Brittain (2004) is more critical, stating that disability sport is dominated by medical conceptualisations that affect people with disability at all levels, as disability sport classifies participants along medical lines, disability sport administration is dominated by medical-related practitioners and the media reinforce disability stereotypes.

Statement of the problem

People with intellectual disability are marginalised in sport, as evidenced by their low levels of participation. The range of factors that lead to such low levels of participation are not currently understood, nor is the way these factors interact to create the dynamics of this group's exclusion. This study responds to the *Crawford Report's* call to understand the experiences of those who have been marginalised, then formulates strategies to encourage their sport participation, through examining experiences, identifying constraints to participation and arguing the importance of participation through the benefits arising from it.

Research Design

This study was part of a larger project investigating sport and active recreation participation and nonparticipation for people with disabilities in Australia (reference withheld for anonymity). Investigating experiences of people with intellectual disability, the study draws on an online survey made available through nine separate delivery instruments to ensure people across all dimensions of disability and support needs could participate. The online questionnaire comprised four sections: benefits; constraints; patterns of use/non-participation; and demographic/psychographic profile. Each section was informed by relevant theoretical constructs. Questions were developed using relevant literature and items from previous research on participation in sport. The survey was self-reported or completed on behalf of the respondent by a family member, carer or support worker and included an easy English version developed by a consultant experienced in producing easy-read materials to ensure people with limited literacy or who required support could contribute. The questionnaire replicated a nationally administered sport instrument validated by over a decade of implementation, with added disability-specific questions. The questionnaire was developed in

conjunction with the national sports commission and their disability sport unit and piloted in conjunction with disability sport organisations, disability service organisations and the national sport organisation, with adjustments before final implementation.

Population, Sample Frame and Sample Size

The population for the study was people with disability, either participants or nonparticipants in sport and active recreation. The sample was obtained using electronic snowballing to membership of disability-related organisations nationally. The technique follows standard protocols for questionnaire design and analysis but uses an updated electronic platform (Dillman, 2000). This technique has been successful in previous research of people with disabilities (reference withheld for anonymity). A notice about the research was formulated and circulated electronically with a link to the online questionnaire to over 300 disability organisations appearing in a database. The organisations then distributed the notice to their members by direct e-mail, electronic or hard-copy newsletters, website notices or some other means. This paper discusses the results from responses gained from 566 survey informants who identified as having an intellectual disability or those who completed the survey either on behalf of or based on their experience of a family member with an intellectual disability.

Limitations

While the sampling method of electronic snowballing is an efficient means of contacting people with disability, there are limitations to the method in this study. First, the sample will be made up of those who have access to the internet, and/or are members of disability-related organisations that regularly check the organisational website or electronic or hard-copy publications. The other limitation is a self-selection bias in that those who participate in sport and recreation (86%) were much more likely to take part in the study than nonparticipants

(14%). Given the limited resources of the study, this consideration is acknowledged and it is recommended that future studies be better resourced to address this consideration (Veal 2006).

Data analysis

The qualitative data from the online questionnaire and other questionnaire formats comprised short written responses to open-ended questions. These were collected into a document and a basic inductive method utilising analytic coding and categorising was undertaken (Miles and Huberman 1994). Preliminary analysis, organisation and display of information was undertaken by compiling all responses in tabular form followed by an initial reading for the purpose of data familiarisation. Recurring themes and common conceptual groupings were captured in an initial round of open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) of the text. Codes utilised were both *a priori* and emergent in the text. A second reading allowed for exhaustive open coding and the development of a matrix grouping of thematic categories. A process of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) was undertaken on emergent thematic groupings to enable further categorisation of data to reveal key thematic categories and their inter-relationships.

Qualitative Data: Emergent Themes

Constraints to participation

Availability of appropriate and affordable activities. Individuals across the sample repeatedly identified lack of choice in sporting and recreational activities or facilities in their particular geographic locations, both in terms of mainstream sport activities and those specifically for people with disabilities, which often have significant waiting lists. As a corollary, many people cited a lack of information about the opportunities available as a reason for their

limited participation. In addition, respondents also identified a lack of appropriate facilities, for instance where parents or carers can assist with changing before and after activities, which is a disincentive to participation even when appropriate activities are available.

The issue of affordability was identified as limiting participation, since people with disabilities and their families already operate under the cost burden of disability. The costs of participation in activities appropriate for individuals with particular support needs are key, as indicated by these respondents:

The options available are often very expensive, i.e. archery - annual fees and equipment, ten pin bowling - weekly participation is expensive.

Membership of regular gyms is costly and to be effective in training terms for the people with intellectual disabilities, there needs to be intervention by a personal trainer. This becomes prohibitive in terms of cost.

Considering the availability of appropriate activities, many respondents distinguished between mainstream and disability-specific sporting activities. An inability to play 'regular' sport meant choice of sporting activity was limited by lack of appropriate activities catering for different ability levels. This dichotomy between integration into mainstream sporting activities (with or without support) and those specifically for people with disabilities is problematic. There is a lack of fit between these two poles of inclusion and the activities and support needed to enable participation.

Major curtailing factor is when your sporting ability is deemed "too good" for disability specific sports programs but "not good enough" for mainstream sports programs.

The impacts of an individual's capacity to participate in sport and the diversity of support needs problematises the distinction between mainstream and disability sports. This lack of fit manifested in several aspects, including level of ability and age appropriateness:

The swim coach will not let me train with the squad as I am too slow, so he makes me swim in the junior class where they are all younger than me and do not do racing training which is what I want.

This issue is particularly intensified for respondents who participate in team sports where the inherent competitiveness negates their inclusion.

A lot of activities are so competitive that they don't allow for people whose skills are not of a high standard. This in particular makes team sports difficult.

Mainstream sports and people playing these sports do not give a fair go in terms of game time in the case of soccer. I remain sitting on the bench. Also mainstream players who don't recognize I have a disability tend to ridicule me, therefore I tend not to return to the game.

These issues combined demonstrate that accessibility and participation for this group is tied to the complex interconnections between the structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions of access. Further, as Thomas (2004) suggests, an embodied disability existence has ever-present impairment effects. The combination of constraints across these domains for

people with intellectual disability and their families means they have little choice in how, where and when they participate in sport.

Issues of support for participation. Respondents identified a wide range of constraints specifically related to meeting their needs for support to participate in activities. These included lack of paid carers/assistants or volunteers to assist in accessing and participating in activities; transport to and from activities; and that for parents or carers sport activities are an additional commitment in an already overloaded and often exhausting schedule. Once at the sport, respondents reported a lack of assistants/supporters or coaches in chosen activities to provide appropriate support tailored to the needs of the individual.

The most common constraint experienced was the lack of people assisting the individual to access activities, from paid carers in community access services and support workers in group homes to volunteers and other supporters. For many, the absence of this support meant the difference between participation and non-participation. Respondents identified consistency and flexibility as key elements in the provision of support to establish an ‘ongoing pattern of involvement in sport so that it can become part of a routine’. Living situations are also relevant; for those living in group homes ‘staff at the person's home have to look after others with high needs, so the person with disability misses out if no extra staff is rostered on’. Both the nature of the activity and the support needs of the individual are relevant considerations. For example, a keen golfer notes:

[My] main problem is having someone to take me to golf. It is a two-hour activity and I need someone to go around with on the course.

Respondents also highlighted the various roles supporters must play, such as providing ‘full supervision due to intellectual disability’ or where one mother noted ‘a companion is needed to support my son... to constantly encourage him to continue and participate’. These nuanced issues of personal support specific to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities are often invisible and seldom promoted in the community as factors that enhance access for this group, where emphasis on physical access and adapted equipment often constitute all disability access considerations.

Transport featured as a very common constraint that restricted people's access to sport. This was particularly so for those with shared care arrangements such as group homes or who live independently. Not having a driver's licence or public transport related to evening and weekend sport and training activities was a common constraint, coupled with the physical location of facilities such as golf courses and sporting fields, which tend not to be on public transport routes.

For those who relied on family for support, the issue of primary carers being ‘too busy/burnt out’ making it ‘too hard/complex to engage’ was very commonly raised. Several informants who completed the survey on behalf of children noted lack of ‘spare’ time for parents and carers. Without outside and/or funded assistance, the multiple pressures of logistics, caring responsibilities and the competing demands of their other children are cited as powerful disincentives for many parents:

Many carers and parents of (autistic) kids simply don't have any ‘spare’ time to plan, organise and accompany (drive) their autistic kids to activities. It's so much easier for parents (who are tired from caring for kids 24/7) not to organise anything and just

stay home and 'relax'. The irony is that it is better to take the kids 'out' rather than stay at home and remain in the monotonous environment (of home).

Supportive and flexible organisations with personnel, including support people, volunteers and coaches, with an awareness of disability issues and knowledge of appropriate ways to support an individual with an intellectual disability, are a key area of need. Specifically this includes, as one parent articulates, 'knowledge and understanding her condition and how it affects her'. People with intellectual disability identified a 'lack of teaching me the skills to play sport' and 'a lack of flexibility of clubs/other participants to understand and adapt to my needs' as specific issues. One individual summed up the situation:

many sporting groups don't have the means to support people with disabilities if they need one on one care and help/assistance and they don't have the financial backing to provide enough/any carers bar the volunteers that may be there, then there is the issue of training in disabilities and having the knowledge/understanding of the disability to be able to integrate the person in the sport / community.

Attitudes of Others. Many informants in this survey report that others' reactions and actions within sport organisations and during activities are a significant deterrent to participation. These disincentives are identified as occurring at the organisational level where informants identified limited 'acceptance by some sporting groups due to disability and willingness to be supportive', a 'lack of support and interest', that 'they aren't giving me a fair go', with one individual summing up their experience as 'discrimination'.

Resistance also comes from other spheres within the activity or group, including ‘lack of understanding by those without disabled children’ and ‘fear of being bullied by other children’. Gaining acceptance and being included is a particular challenge for those whose behavioural presentation may be outside the norm, as indicated in the following comment:

I have people complain about the behaviour of my son, and try to chastise him and myself. I get to the point where I can no longer be bothered explaining things to them and just leave.

Issues of hostility, the failure of others to recognise and accommodate disability and limited willingness to engage with disabled participants act as powerful disincentives to participation. These barriers, grounded in the attitudes of others, constitute a missed opportunity for all people seeking to participate in sport, as one informant stated,

Lack of understanding that I will not be able to be as fast or clever as others, but still have something to offer

Intrapersonal or Impairment Effects.

While the previous sections have identified structural policy and systemic organisational constraints, and interpersonal constraints, some respondents identified intrapersonal constraints that made them unlikely to participate in sport. These issues are related to the effects of the particular impairments an individual experiences, such as limited physical agility, unclear communication or unpredictable behaviour, as well as their life circumstance, socio-emotional factors and motivation to participate.

Impairment-related issues, highlighted in the disability literature as considerations of ‘impairment effects’ (C. Thomas, 2004) like lack of coordination, likelihood of seizures, poor

concentration, limited capacity to understand rules, difficulty with groups and anxiety about new activities were identified as intrapersonal constraints. In the socio-emotional realm it was clear that many respondents experience issues such as ‘embarrassment due to disability and fear of not being able to participate well’ and ‘fear of failing at the chosen activity’, with one respondent capturing their experience of this vicious cycle: ‘I lack self confidence because I do not have any skills’.

For others, issues involving day-to-day working lives and life preferences preclude participation, including issues such as activities not occurring at ‘the time of day to fit in with work’, ‘sometimes I feel very tired I want to stay at home’ and ‘working...in heat makes me tired. I cut timber.’ Others cited factors such as ‘lack of self motivation’ and ‘dislike of active exercise’ and the fact that ‘there are only so many hours in the day’.

Individuals with intellectual disability experience universal issues involving interest and motivation to participate in sport and should have the right not to participate. Of course, there is likely to be a complex inter-relationship between these constraints, where the physical and psychosocial effects of impairment intersect with the social conditions created within a society where disability and the concomitant issues of access and support are poorly understood and resourced. The following two examples give some sense of the complex ways issues and influences coalesce.

Can't participate in team sports as struggles to understand how to work in a team.
Lack of friends means its hard to exercise as part of general play. Teenage child of a single parent - no childcare available, and disability means has very few friends, must

stay locked indoors at home alone while mother works part-time, means sedentary during this time.

The reason my son does not participate much in sports is because he is disinterested in doing so. Of course, one can unpack reasons for that disinterest. He is autistic and dislikes group activities, high levels of noise etc. He has quite a few coordination difficulties and low muscle tone. Mainly he likes playing electronic games or imaginary games. He is scared of other kids, often for good reason.

Benefits of Participation

Respondents to the survey were asked to identify the benefits to participating in sport. The variety of responses range from a sense of achievement and the associated fun and thrill of competition to social and psycho-emotional benefits such as opportunities for spending time with teammates, friends and family, increased well being and to learn and develop new skills. The social and psycho-emotional benefits dominated but a smaller number of informants wanted the physiological benefits of health and fitness.

Individuals from both elite and recreational disability sports and mainstream activities identified the sense of achievement that participating and succeeding in sport afforded them. Experiences such as ‘winning medals and doing PBs’, ‘being rewarded with certificates, ribbons and trophies’, ‘setting out to improve track times and achieving them’ reflect these positive experiences of achievement. Related to these were ‘feeling proud representing my school... and being acknowledged by my peers’, the associated ‘thrill of competition’ and the ‘great feeling when I win a game’. A corollary to these feelings of achievement and pride is

satisfaction at giving something back to their sport through ‘passing on skills and knowledge’ to others.

Respondents overwhelmingly identified social benefits of their participation in sport. Many comments identified issues such as ‘socialisation’, ‘connecting with the community’, a ‘sense of belonging’ associated with ‘building confidence with others’, ‘enjoyment with friends’ and ‘being part of the community like everyone else’. For many these increase confidence and create a context for isolated individuals to ‘meet new people, enjoy company with friends’ or ‘being one of the boys’ and experience a sense of belonging and inclusion. These positives help to build what respondents in the survey identify as a sense of well being, both physical and emotional, which is identified with increased motivation and self-esteem and has positive effects for overall mental health.

Respondents identified benefits for themselves and their families through increasing levels of independence and building and enhancing family relationships. The capacity for experiencing autonomy through ‘time away from carers’ and ‘being independent from the family’ and as one respondent notes, ‘my parents and I get a break from each other’ is particularly positive. Conversely, participating in sport with one’s family is also identified as beneficial, allowing the family to ‘learn to be cohesive and work together as a unit’. Others identify the simple pleasure of enjoying an activity together as a contribution to family well-being by allowing ‘quality time as a family’ and a sense of being part of a whole; ‘my family are golfers so it is great to feel I fit in’.

Many respondents identified the benefits of participation in sport to improve skills across a range of areas including physical, social, communication and other functional skills. Gains in

the physical area include 'increased coordination' or 'increased flexibility, self-control, self-discipline and better control over my body'. Not only are specific skills enhanced but it appears the overall benefit for physical, social, communication and functional skills becomes more than the sum of the parts. The ways participation in sport can give rise to integrated benefits and opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, their families and friends is described powerfully by one parent:

Its incredible, my mum says he is like a flower that has opened up since he started. He is toned, more coordinated, starting to do the routines more clearly, trying to teach us (tables turned and now he can do something the rest of the family cant, he feels good about that). He runs into the class on Saturday morning. The other members of the class say they like having him there. A few of them are on his Facebook, others want to be, but he is picky!!

Discussion: Implications for understanding individual experience, sport policy and inclusive organisational practice

From this study it is clear that the range of constraints experienced by people with intellectual disability works as a powerful disincentive to their participation in sport. That is, individuals with intellectual disability are simply are not getting access to the level playing field, regardless of what level they try to engage. Those who participate do so in spite of the constraints they face and often participate as individuals in isolation from formalised sporting structures.

In view of these findings, Sotiriadou, Shilbury and Quick's (2008) sport-development framework appears to be lacking a key element at every level — material support for

inclusion, particularly for those with intellectual disability of medium to high needs. The findings show it is not so much the nature or extent of sport modification that is a constraint but the nature of support for those with moderate to high needs. Inclusion here broadly denotes equity-related strategies to mitigate the intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints faced by the group. Significantly, this group lives with the intrapersonal ‘impairment effects’ that further challenge interpersonal and structural solutions. The interrelationship of the constraints requires enabling responses from broader social policy frameworks outside of sport (e.g. transport and attendant care) and from within sport (e.g. appropriate programs and staff training). Without focusing on these separate issues and broadly focusing on how they combine to create the dynamics of exclusion for individuals with intellectual disability, this group is likely to continue to struggle to participate in sport. Moreover, as this project suggests, there is a much larger group of people with intellectual disability who are not engaged in any way with sport and for whom the process of engagement in participation in the sport poses significant challenges to policy makers and sporting organisations. For a small proportion of others who are not engaged, sport is not something they seek participate in. Based on the insights provided by the informants in this study, a range of options for upgrading and enhancing policy and practice are suggested.

Most people with intellectual disabilities on an elite pathway within the key sports contributing to the Special Olympics or the newly re-included Paralympic sports rely on mainstream sport and disability sport organisations for their participation. These elite participants represent predominantly people of lower support needs who require no or relatively minor considerations to participate in their activity of choice. However, these elite participants, as in most areas of sporting participation, represent a small proportion of those who do or could participate in sport for social benefits or revel in their own accomplishments.

Many informants in this study fall into the latter category. This places the majority of people with intellectual disabilities at the front door of local government, not-for-profit and commercial sport providers at the local or regional level. As the experiences of people in this study have shown, there are significant structural constraints, which combine with issues of inclusive practice, attitudes and skills of service providers, that act as constraints to participation. Therefore, the first stage of the sport-development process of attraction cannot perform optimally.

There were many stories of parents searching for programs appropriate for their children because they knew that when they were physically active they were happier. This adversely affects individuals with intellectual disability and further pressures the family unit. Within an inclusive framework of sport development, the benefits identified in this research suggest strategies to accentuate the positives of participation in the attraction stage. Outcomes such as providing participants with a sense of achievement, stimulating them, providing health benefits and socialisation opportunities are key dimensions of sporting involvement. At the same time, the major constraints to participation need to be addressed to assist people with intellectual disabilities to participate, including: increased government support for unmet needs in the community; lower costs of participation in activities, transport and specialised equipment; larger pool of staff trained in facilitating participation; and more integrated sport opportunities.

To retain sport participants the key elements of fun, fitness, enjoyment, healthy lifestyle and being with friends and socialising are important. Regarding supporting a person in casual recreation participation or in more organised sport pathways, both disability service organisations engaged in sport and people with disability identified the difficulty of

maintaining ongoing participation after initial interest through “*Come and Try Days*” or elite talent identification (Cashman & Darcy, 2008). Disability sport organisations need to work together with both mainstream sport and disability-specific service organisations that have most interaction with people with intellectual disability. As outlined by key disability sport texts (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Smith et al., 2005), opportunities must draw on a spectrum of approaches (from segregated to mainstream) to disability sport depending on the context and desires of the individual. Given the move towards individualised funding packages (Fisher et al., 2010), sport participation is something that disability service organisations will need to broker for their clients collaboratively with disability sport organisations and mainstream sporting organisations.

Sotiriadou, Shilbury, and Quick (2008) suggested that sport-development programs comprise three stages: programs formulated for membership/participation-development needs; talent identification and transition to elite levels; and targeted programs for elite athletes. This research has primarily focused on stage one; attraction and retention. Further research is needed to more fully explore the pathway of sport development for people with intellectual disability.

Conclusion

The cumulative effect of the constraints to participation in sport experienced by the people with intellectual disabilities and their associates resonates with the key issues of inclusion and choice. This study reinforces that while people with intellectual disabilities with low to moderate support needs participate in sport, their peers with high to very high support needs continue to be marginalised. Given the illusion of the Australian egalitarian sporting myth, if

sport marginalises this group, what hope do they have in other areas of citizenship? Rather than disability being considered a ‘special need’ the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* clearly places sport within the usual activities of citizenship. The evidence presented highlights that people with intellectual disability seek the same considerations as their non-disabled peers — to participate — to have their issues recognised and to be afforded the right to have a go. One young person eloquently articulates this ethos:

No one seeks out me or my carer to be involved in their program or find out what I'd like to do or provide me with opportunities to try sports on a regular basis like normal kids and if I like it I'll keep doing it but if I don't or it doesn't suit me I want the freedom to choose to do it again but have another option to try.

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