

# Challenges to inclusion of people with disabilities in sport



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The full inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream sport and physical activity is impractical and unachievable

## Introduction

When thinking about the meaning of the word 'inclusion', we must think of sport as a context, which is voluntary. The provision of opportunities and structures to enable participation in sport are generally oriented towards the choice of those who decide to participate in sport. It is crucial that we understand sport as a right, and that we consider access and participation as a matter of individual choice of a sporting activity across the options of segregated, integrated and inclusive sports, rather than placing an individual in a certain context (Kiuppis, 2016). In the context of sport participation, the goal is to enable people with a disability to make their own choice in the type of sport they wish to participate and with whom they wish to participate with (Misener and Darcy, 2014).

The council of Europe's European Sports Charter has defined sport as meaning casual or organised physical activity in all forms which not only aim to improve or express physical fitness and mental well-being, but also to form relationships and obtain results in all levels of competition (Article 2). Participation in sport and physical activities offers numerous benefits to people with a disability such as increased levels of self-esteem, self-perceived body image, quality of life and social integration (Blauwet and Willick, 2012). There is also evidence that sport involvement reduces the risks of developing heart disease, obesity and type II diabetes (Jaarsma et al., 2014). However, the participation rates in sports of people with

disabilities are much lower than those of people without disabilities. For example, in Ireland the Irish Sports Monitor series 2017 identified that only 29.5% of people with a long-term illness or disability participate in sport compared to 46.6% of people with no long-term illness or disability (ISM, 2017). According to Thomas (2003), the reasons for lower participation rates in sport and physical activity of people with disabilities can include; a lack of support from family and friends, negative school experiences, lack of knowledge of available opportunities, issues with transport and physical access. Another barrier to participation in sport stems from the attitudes of people towards those with disabilities. Through interaction with socialising agents such as family, friends, peers and the media, people tend to take on the values of their society, which tend to reinforce negative stereotypical view of those with disabilities in society and sport (Thomas, 2003). It is the aim of this essay, to discuss the barriers which currently prevent or deter people with disabilities from seeking inclusion in sports and physical activities, regardless of it being in a segregated, integrated or inclusive context.

### Social support

Social support refers to the instrumental, informative and emotional assistive functions performed for an individual by significant others in their life (Thoits, 1995). When it comes to those with a disability, social support does not refer to just emotional support and companionship but may also represents the need for very real aid to participate in physical activity, such as planning and transportation. Social support may be also a necessity for some, just to become aware of the options for physical activity available to them, such as <https://assignbuster.com/challenges-to-inclusion-of-people-with-disabilities-in-sport/>

people with reading difficulties (Bodde and Seo, 2009). A study by Jaarsma et al (2013) found that athletes with a disability reported social support as the greatest environmental facilitator towards sport participation. Due to the critical influence that socializing agents have on people with a disability participating in sports, it is extremely important that a greater level of education and information be provided to these socializing agents, as they are often unaware of the opportunities available to those with disabilities, how to increase the accessibility of these opportunities, and also the benefits of participation (Roux, 2012).

### Negative School Experiences

Previous studies have found that students with a disability often have a negative experience with physical activity in school due to their interactions with others. Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) have reported that a major barrier of physical activity for children with a disability, is that other children question their competence to complete the required tasks of a physical activity and suggested that there were standards of acceptable performance which people with disabilities were incapable of matching. Students with disabilities are often not seen as essential to performance during games, and thus are not passed to, ignored or are given roles seen as less meaningful, such as a goalie in soccer (Goodwin and Watkinson, 2000). Bredahl (2013) found that most negative experiences for students with a disability regarding physical activity, stemmed from their experiences in physical education in school. Through interviews with students, three common themes emerged, 1) not being included, 2) experiences of failure, 3) experiences of not being listened to. Most participants reported that it was mainly teachers as the

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source of their negative school experiences. Participants found that teachers lacked knowledge of their situation or failed to take its relevance into account. At times, this led to activities not being adjusted to suit their abilities, resulting in embarrassment or failures. On the contrary, for some their abilities were completely overlooked resulting in exclusion. The participants in the study reported that their positive experiences of physical activity in school could be attributed to times when their abilities rather than their disabilities were demonstrated. There is clearly a greater need for teachers to be educated in strategies to include students with disabilities in physical activity in a way that emphasises their ability rather than disability in order to create a more positive school experience.

#### Knowledge of Available Opportunities

In general, there is a lack of knowledge and information available on inclusive sporting and physical activity opportunities for people with disabilities. Many parents are unaware of the sporting opportunities that are available to their children outside of school. In general, it seems that many parents rely on schools to provide sporting opportunities for children, thus parents tend to lack information seeking skills along with the necessary social networks to ensure the sport participation of children with disabilities outside of school. This in turn can result in children dropping out of sport once they leave school, highlighting the need for coordinated efforts in the promotion of inclusive sport (Tsai and Fung, 2009). According to Jaarsma et al (2013), it is also important that people with disabilities have enough information on the opportunities to play in either team sports and individual sports to ensure maintenance of physical activity participation.

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## Transport and Physical Access

Transport issues have commonly been reported as a major barrier to physical activity participation among people with disabilities. Many do not possess a driving license and must rely on the support of others to facilitate their transport requirements, or public transport. This reliance on public transport presents another problem in the fact that many sporting events take place on weekends and possibly far from public roads or access routes such as golf and sporting fields (Darcy and Dowse, 2013). This also leads onto the issue of physical access to certain facilities which can represent a barrier to physical activity for those with certain disabilities (Jaarsma et al, 2013), with many people with a disability reporting natural terrain as being extremely inaccessible (Rimmer et al, 2004) and a lack of sidewalks, paths, trails and accessible fitness facilities (Bodde and Seo, 2009). There is clearly still a greater need for investment in transport and accessibility of fitness/sports facilities for those with disabilities in order to ensure participation in physical activity.

## Attitudes of Others

Central to the processes and mechanisms of inclusion within the sporting context, is what happens once a person with a disability enters a sporting environment (Spaaij, Magee and Jeanes, 2014). Incidences of hostility, negative reactions and actions and a failure to recognise, accommodate and engage with people with disabilities act as a significant barrier to inclusive sports participation (Darcy and Dowse, 2012). Based on a single disability, a person is usually attributed several other characteristics and this one feature

of this person then becomes the “ label” for the classification of this person. Prejudice then occurs when people agree with this label, resulting in certain behaviours and emotions towards this person (Kasum and Mladenovic, 2017). People often prejudge the skill level of those with disabilities which hinders their participation in physical activity (Goodwin and Watkinson, 2000). Negative attitudes towards inclusive practices remain as one of the greatest barriers to inclusive physical activity (Devine, 2012). A review of the literature by Shields, Synnott and Barr (2011) outlined negative societal attitudes as a major barrier to physical activity participation among people with disabilities. Attitudes are regarded as concealed and present psychosocial processes within a person that remain dormant until evoked by specific situations. Attitudes are acquired through experiences and can predispose an individual’s reaction to another individual, as well as certain events (F. Antonak and Livneh, 2000). One such medium for the attitudes developed towards those with disabilities may be attributed to the way in which people with disabilities are portrayed in the media as suffering, sick and in need of help (Krahé and Altwasser, 2006). This is evident again in how Paralympic sports are portrayed in the media. The media tends to focus on athletes with disabilities seen as less “ unpalatable” such as wheelchair athletes and those with partial missing limbs rather than someone who may have cerebral palsy (Thomas and Smith, 2003). There is a tendency to use a tragedy narrative of athletes with disabilities as heroes with extraordinary qualities which have allowed them to overcome their disability, which may disconnect them from the lives of others with disabilities and portray disability as a problem which must be overcome (Weed and Dowse, 2009).

There is clearly a change needed in our attitudes towards those with disabilities if we are to have inclusive sport and physical activity.

## Conclusion

The combined effects of the barriers presented in this essay to the inclusion of people with disabilities in sport and physical activity, present a massive obstacle which must be overcome before we can begin to discuss if the inclusion of people with disabilities in sport and physical activity is achievable. We can't begin to say that we can or can't include those with disabilities in certain sports, if we can't even get them to consider the thought of participation in these activities due to the barriers that our attitudes and the social and physical environment present to them. Greater efforts need to be made to ensure that the social support is available to those with disabilities to ensure that they have the knowledge of the available options to them, and the emotional support to ensure they feel confident in pursuing these options. There also needs to be a greater provision of transport options available to people with disabilities who wish to pursue these options, as many do not have the option of driving themselves or access to public transport. This essay also highlights the fact that work is still to be done in the area of physical access if sports grounds/facilities are to be more accommodating and appealing to people with disabilities. Another area highlighted are negative school experiences which deter those with disabilities from participating in physical activity and sport, which can be attributed to the way in which other children develop attitudes towards those with disabilities. Due to the fact that we develop our attitudes from our experiences with the world in which we live, there is <https://assignbuster.com/challenges-to-inclusion-of-people-with-disabilities-in-sport/>



change required in the way in which we portray those with disabilities in the media and the way in which we educate children on disabilities if we are to ever get to the point where inclusion in sports and physical activity is possible.

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