Perceptions of a Disability Sport Unit in General Physical Education

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to assess the effectiveness of a disability sport unit in shaping perceptions of disability. Data from interviews, observations, and documents were collected on 87 elementary-aged students, one physical education teacher, and one teaching intern. Comparisons were drawn between fifth graders engaged in a five-week disability sport unit to fourth graders participating in their standard physical education curriculum. Findings revealed differences in the way fourth and fifth graders came to view individuals with disabilities. The results support an analysis of curriculum development that underscores the significance of the social model in positively impacting constructions of disability. Recommendations include the use of disability sports in physical education as an effective strategy for educating students in game play, knowledge of the Paralympics, and the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in a variety of sporting venues.

Keywords: social model, curriculum development, disability sports

Inclusive education is a philosophy that supports and celebrates diversity through the active participation of all students in the school culture (Kugelmass, 2004). It is seen as a comprehensive, school-wide effort that encourages teachers to maintain high expectations and to ensure flexible groupings in the development of appropriate curricula (Villa & Thousand, 2000). Despite this longstanding endorsement of inclusion, there is little within the physical education (PE) teaching literature that specifically targets the pedagogy of disability sports. Barton (1993, 2009), for example, argues that sport is one example in which ableist assumptions about whom and how performance occurs permeates sport and athletic discourses.

Conceptualizing disability in a social, rather than a medicalized, view has been endorsed by advocates of disabled individuals (Evans, 2004; Oliver, 1990). The social model of disability advances the notion that restriction in sport and physical activity is not simply a result of individual impairment, but the societal practices that
disable individuals through a lack of accommodation and the attitudinal barriers that influence perceptions of disability (Brittain, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2006; Grenier, 2007; Oliver, 1990). The social model is part of a family of social contextual approaches that locate the individual within a larger sociopolitical realm (Shakespeare, 2006).

Within the area of disability studies, some have begun to examine conceptions of ability, arguing that a rather limited perspective on skill and competition shape characteristics of the good student (Penney & Hunter, 2006). More troubling is how ability is reconfigured within the context of the curriculum as a static entity and unchanging condition (Biklen, 2000). For persons with disabilities whose physical and psychological dispositions fall outside established norms, differences translate into deficits (Davis, 1997). This was highlighted over 20 years ago by Barton (1993) who suggested that “Merely adopting a curriculum for able-bodied people without some critical dialogue is unacceptable. The voice of disabled people needs to be heard and seriously examined. This is absolutely essential in the teaching of physical education” (p. 52). While progress has been made, there remain many questions in general physical education regarding placement, programming, and curricular innovation (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007).

Understanding the ways in which teachers enrich the classroom community offers a perspective that moves beyond the function of adaptation and accommodation typically associated with the inclusion of students with disabilities. One issue that requires further examination is the role that physical education can play in mediating perceptions of disability of school-aged students. Alternative approaches to programming should be considered as a way to introduce students to a range of possibilities that expand conceptions of ability and effort (Barton, 2009). One such approach is the use of disability and Paralympic sports within the school curriculum (Davis, 2011; Wilhite, Mushett, Goldenberg & Trader, 1997).

Disability Sport

Current trends in physical education advance a connected curriculum to community and schools with an appreciation of skilled movement (NASPE, 2006). For example, the Connecticut state standards identify a “respect for individual similarities and differences through positive interaction among participants in physical activity. Similarities and differences include characteristics of culture, ethnicity, motor performance, disabilities, physical characteristics (e.g., strength, size, shape), gender, age, race, and socioeconomic status” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2006, p. 9). While there appears to be a professional commitment to addressing social justice, little knowledge exists on how this can be applied to diversity. As one of the largest sporting events in the world, the Paralympic movement has a profound influence in reshaping the meaning of human performance, generating debates about ability and performance, while promoting avenues for participation (Howe, 2012; United States Olympic Committee, 2013). These disability sports can be used as an instructional tool to promote respect for differences and diversity within the physical education curriculum (Davis, 2011; Davis, Rocco-Dillon, Grenier, Martinez, & Aenchbacker, 2012; Grenier & Kearns, 2012).

According to DePauw and Gavron (2005), disability sports were created in response to the growing desire for disabled athletes to compete in sport. Specific
equipment (wheelchairs or ice sleds, for instance) may be used or modifications of the sport may be involved in game play, such as sitting volleyball. Disability sports promote the practice of reverse integration, which includes the participation of individuals without disabilities in sports specifically designed for the disabled. The sports have the potential to transform the way in which skill-based competencies are evaluated by exposing children to sports played by individuals with limited physical functioning. For example, drawing comparisons between sitting volleyball and traditional volleyball raises questions that can challenge myths associated with ableism by highlighting the performative and tactical skills needed for success (Hehir, 2007).

**Research on Perceptions of Disability**

To date, there is limited research on the effect of Paralympic programming and disability sports in shaping perceptions of disability within the physical education curriculum. Wilhite et al. (1997) conducted an exploratory field study to evaluate the effectiveness of a Paralympic Day in the Schools (PDIS) and selected behaviors relative to sport and leisure. Students with and without disabilities were surveyed before and after completion of the Paralympic day, which consisted of viewing videos of the sports, interacting with Paralympic athletes and participating in Paralympics sports. Student responses on demographic and psychosocial variables between students with and without disabilities were similar as was their overall commitment to sport and leisure. Students with disabilities felt their disability was a constraint with fewer opportunities to participate in sport at the community or recreational level.

Panagiotou, Evaggelinou, Doulkeridou, Mouratidou, and Koidou (2008) conducted a study examining the effects of a similar Paralympic program on gender and inclusion variables in physical education. An experimental and control group were administered the Children’s Attitudes Toward Integrated Physical Education—Revised Questionnaire (Block, 1995), before and after the daylong event. Results indicated significant differences in the group that participated in the Paralympic School Day on general attitudes toward inclusion, while no differences were found between the genders or sport specific rule adaptations in the sports.

Krahe and Altwasser (2006) compared scores of 70 ninth-grade students between two groups that addressed (a) cognitive or (b) cognitive and behavioral components involving two sport sessions conducted by disabled athletes. The cognitive group was provided information about the disability that challenged stereotypical notions. In the comparison group, a cognitive behavioral component that included both knowledge of and participation in disability sports was found to be successful in reducing negative attitudes while the cognitive intervention failed to produce any significant effects. The combined strategy of personal contact and accurate information produced positive attitudinal shifts by providing information that refuted misconceptions on individuals with disabilities (Lee & Rodda, 1994). It was determined that contact positively impacted attitudes.

Two other studies used academic interventions designed to measure change toward the disabled. Ison et al. (2010) examined a two-session disability 90-min awareness program conducted by disabled athletes on students between the ages...
of 9–11. Although the study did not involve the use of sport as a curriculum intervention, improvements were found in knowledge, attitudes, and acceptance of disability. Again, the combined cognitive-behavioral approach of using sign language and knowledge of the Paralympics in concert with a presenter who had a disability contributed to the positive outcomes.

Godeau et al. (2010) designed a comprehensive educational disability intervention for seventh-grade students comprised of a work project on disability that assessed students’ attitudes toward their peers with a disability. A total of 1,509 seventh-grade participants of 12-paired schools were randomly allocated to an intervention or control group. The intervention consisted of a mandatory comprehensive educational project on disability. All teachers in the intervention group were briefed on the rationale of the study as well as the educational materials associated with the inclusion of students with disabilities in the schools. They were then asked to organize a series of lessons on the topic of disability that included a film depicting stories of disabled adolescents in the school setting and asked students to work on related tasks. No significant improvements were found in either of the groups, which the authors attributed to several factors. These factors include teacher flexibility with the delivery of the curriculum and that the studies were conducted in schools with students who had both cognitive and psychological impairments.

In their analysis of the disabled individual experience of physical education and disability sport, Fitzgerald and Kirk (2009) outlined some of the primary concerns when using disability sports as an avenue for change. Because having a disability is often associated with a deficit perspective, by default then, disability sports must be a lesser form of sport. As a result, disability sports could be viewed as either accommodating the dominant practices inherent to mainstream sport or as sports suitable only for disabled individuals. In seeking to explore these issues they state: “There remain important questions unanswered about how disability sports are used within physical education, how young disabled people, and others value them around them, and what this all means for the ways in which disability, more generally is understood” (p. 94).

The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of a disability sport curriculum in upper level elementary physical education classes on both students and teachers. Particularly, how does knowledge of disability sport inform the construction of disability at the student and teacher level? What are the conversations that emerge when disability is embedded within the learning experience and how are they articulated at the student and teacher level? A fundamental premise for undertaking the research was the belief that the introduction to disability sports as a curricular unit in the physical education program would influence perceptions of disability though the discourses that challenged stereotypes and identified mechanisms for full sport participation. In doing so, we draw attention to the initiatives within the school curricula that attend to socially just teaching and learning practices (Young, 1998).

Method

Research Design

The research employed a case-study approach to data collection and analysis (Stake, 1994). This method was selected to provide a richer understanding of the research questions consistent with a social model perspective (Oliver, 1990).


**Participants and Setting**

Purposeful sampling was employed to obtain age-relevant data that informed the research questions (Patton, 1990). The study was conducted in an elementary school in New England that consisted of 400 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The school was selected because of the interest of a Master’s program teaching intern in piloting a disability sport curriculum. Three \( (n = 41) \) fifth-grade classes and three \( (n = 46) \) fourth-grade classes participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was 10.2 years. None of the students participating in the study had physical or cognitive disabilities. School demographics were predominantly Caucasian, although 20% of the population comprised of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and/or mixed race students. A total of 15% of the school population was identified with disabilities that required individualized education plans.

One physical education teacher and one teaching intern also participated in the study. In addition, Kara (pseudonym) was enrolled in a Master’s program in Education and completing the elementary physical education portion of her internship to receive her K-12 certification. Her previous teaching experiences included two 60-hr practicum courses during her sophomore and junior year in college. Her cooperating teacher, Sean (pseudonym), was a 30-year veteran who had served as a university teaching mentor for over 15 years. As the only physical education teacher in the school, Sean was familiar with all the students in the school including those with disabilities. The University Research Ethics Board at the primary researcher’s university approved this study. Consent was obtained from parents for all students participating in the study and informed consent secured from both teachers. Treatment of all participants was in accordance with the university ethical standards outlined by the American Psychological Association and only participants for whom informed consent was received took part.

**Disability Sport Curriculum**

The research consisted of a five-week, disability sport unit administered to three fifth-grade classes once a week during a 50 min class \( (n = 41) \). Comparisons were drawn with three fourth-grade classes participating in their regular PE program \( (n = 46) \). The timing of the unit was scheduled in conjunction with the winter Paralympic Games of 2010, which helped serve as a venue for examining some of the sports included in the games. Four sports were introduced to the fifth-grade students: wheelchair basketball, goalball, sit-volleyball, and sledge hockey. Sledge hockey was the only sport of the winter Paralympic games.

All of the sports were played with equipment typically associated with the sport. Twelve wheelchairs were rented from the local university for the basketball unit and sledge hockey used scooters and short sticks to emulate the game. The planning process began with the selection of disability sports with age-appropriate learning outcomes that could easily be taught to elementary-aged children. Primary teaching goals for Kara included familiarizing students with the sports, opportunities for skill development, and small-sided games in an effort to maximize participation.

Each disability sport class began with a brief video clip intended to familiarize students with the sport. During that time, Kara reviewed the sport, and provided background explanations on the rules and overall goals of the game. Students were given the opportunity to ask any clarifying questions about the sports and the Paralympics. Students then were instructed in requisite skills for modified
games. For example, goalball, a game traditionally played by those with a visual impairment, has a simple 3 v 3 formation and uses a ball with bells. When teaching a class on goalball, Kara began the session having students pass the ball in groups of four to five without eyeshades. From there, they were asked to perform the same skill wearing eyeshades. Target practice was then introduced in the same sequence, followed by a goalball game played with three, nonsighted players and one sighted coach. The classes concluded with a question and answer session, designed to elicit students’ feelings on the activity and their understanding of the skills needed to participate in the sport, as well as those that might be necessary to play as a person with a specific disability. For example, students were asked the questions, “What did you think of the activity?” and “What were the things you needed to do in order to be successful in the game?” Kara felt this was essential for connecting students’ physical experience with knowledge of the sports and the disability experience without the pretense of simulation.

**Traditional Sport Curriculum**

Throughout the school year, Sean’s teaching curriculum was comprised primarily of skill themes, health and fitness, and adventure programming. The normally scheduled units of study during the five weeks the research was conducted consisted of one class of chasing and fleeing games, two classes of floor hockey, and two classes of basketball during their weekly physical education class. Each of the fourth-grade classes began with a series of locomotor patterns that were conducted back and forth in the gymnasium. From there, students circled up for stretching and flexibility exercises. Skill development within each of the sports followed a progression with passing and striking drills for floor hockey and passing and shooting for basketball. After about 15 min of skill practice, students were organized into small-sided teams. Each class concluded a debriefing session that included a review of the cues and questions regarding game play. No videos were introduced during the traditional sports curriculum as it was assumed that students were familiar with the games. All of the fourth- and fifth-grade classes in both curriculum areas were taught by Kara and assisted by Sean.

**Data Collection**

Because the primary (first author) and secondary (Kara) investigators were interested in capturing multiple students’ and teachers’ perspectives of disability, multiple data collection methods were used in the study (Denzin, 1989; Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Melhuish, Taggart, & Elliot, 2005).

**Focus group interviews.** Each of the fourth- and fifth-grade classes were interviewed in audiotaped, focus groups consisting of four to six students before the first class and at the culmination of the last class of their respective units. Before the start of each interview, students were read an assent form that described the questions and reassured them there was no pressure to provide responses. The intern, cooperating teacher, and the primary investigator generated a list of questions that they felt would elicit responses on students’ perceptions of disability that reflected the social model of disability and intended purposes of the study. For example, one of the first questions asked in the interviews was what the word
disability meant to them. After reviewing the disability sport curriculum and the stated purpose of the study, questions were then reviewed and revised based on feedback from the fourth- and fifth-grade classroom teachers. To ensure the questions were effective in eliciting responses, a pilot study was conducted on fourth-grade students enrolled in a neighboring school to check students’ comprehension of the questions and the relevance of their responses. Both classroom teachers as well as the two primary researchers reviewed the responses and were in agreement with both content and sequencing (see Figure 1).

Before the interviews, Kara, Sean and the primary researcher met to establish protocol and review prompting techniques in an effort to maintain consistency, as all three conducted the interviews simultaneously during the class. Both groups of students were asked the same series of questions on their perceptions of disability, if they could distinguish between the Olympics, Special Olympics, and Paralympics, and whether they thought changes should be made in their PE programs to accommodate students with disabilities.

1. Define what you think the term disability means.
2. Can individuals with disabilities participate in sports?
3. If yes, do you think they can be good at sports?
4. Should disabled people follow the same rules in sport as everyone else?
5. Do you know what the Olympic Games are about? What are some of the events?
6. Do you know what the Paralympic Games are about? What are some of the events?
7. Do you know what the Special Olympics are about? What are some of the events?
8. Do you think changes need to be made in your PE activities for students with disabilities?

Figure 1 — Focus group questions asked to fourth- and fifth-grade students.

Semistructured interviews. The primary researcher conducted two audiotaped interviews with Kara and Sean for the study. The first was conducted before the start of the disability sport unit, and the second was conducted after completion of the unit. Interviews lasted approximately 30 min, and questions were developed in concert with the theoretical framework that addressed teachers’ construction of the term disability, knowledge of disability sports, observations of students’ engagement, and whether they felt the disability sport curriculum was impacting students’ overall perceptions of what it meant to have a disability (see Figure 2). Informal debriefing interviews also were conducted with the teachers immediately following each of the classes to discuss what they felt went well, observations on student learning, and what changes they would put in place for the following class.

Field notes. Observations of 15 disability sport classes were recorded using the Schatzman and Strauss (1973) system of organizing notes during all of the disability sport classes. The primary researcher noted the interactions between teacher and students, and how students responded to the skill or game challenges.

Documents. Documents collected for review included lesson plans for the disability sport unit and writing prompts. Lesson plans addressed learning outcomes
Pre-implementation questions
Describe your current curriculum before this.
Was planning for a disability sport curriculum any different than other types of units you have developed? Please explain.
Why have you chosen to implement the sports?
Do you have any concerns about the implementation of disability sports?
What student outcomes would you like to see at the end of this unit?
Do you expect your teaching to change in any way to accommodate the sports?
How do you think the students will react to the unit?
Will you make any changes for students with disabilities in your classes?

Post-implementation questions
Discuss your overall impressions of the disability sport curriculum? Did it meet your expectations?
Were student outcomes met?
What surprised you the most about the unit?
Was the unit effective at introducing students to disability sports?
If so, what worked? What didn’t work?
Did it have an impact on student attitudes toward disability?
In what ways was it different from your other units of instruction?
Would you adopt it permanently as a program of instruction?

Figure 2 — Questions for teachers.

and detailed descriptions of the activities. Writing prompts were done on two occasions during the disability sport unit. Students were asked to answer the following questions on a small piece of paper: “Describe at least three things you’ve learned about the Paralympics” and “What have you learned about individuals with disabilities?”

Data Analysis

Responsibilities for transcribing all of the interviews were shared by the primary researcher and Kara. From there, the transcribed data were analyzed using a generative thematic approach that included three phases of analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the first phase, both Kara and the primary investigator read each transcript to identify initial patterns. For example, prefocus group interviews with both fourth and fifth graders revealed a strong bias toward a medical model of disability. The second phase of analysis consisted of coding initial patterns into categories by examining the data, line by line to explore relationships between the interviews, field notes and documents which provided an organizational structure. Careful examination of these categories translated into generative themes that hinged on the research questions. The content of these questions included student and teacher views of disability and disability sports, and what it is meant to be an “able” participant in both sport and physical activity. For example, interview questions that focused on the Paralympics and performance showed marked differences pre and post in how students came to view disabled individuals’ participation in
sport. Therefore, a theme of “everyone needs a challenge” emerged, and hinged on the students’ views of sport as a universal experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In the third and final phase, both researchers compared and contrasted their potential themes over several meetings for reliability and consistency to produce a more robust analysis.

Through multiple data sources, improving credibility though triangulation was established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this, peer debriefing between the four authors occurred throughout the study to make explicit aspects of the data that might otherwise go unnoticed. Coherence between the research questions, data collection, and analytical procedures was established by revisiting the interview questions and checking lesson plans to insure they were meeting the research goals (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). The development of theory between the data sources and the theoretical perspective was an aspect of the research that exposed surprising findings particularly from the students’ perspective.

Rigor was established through investigator responsiveness to the research questions and the observed practices of the participants via field notes and interviews (Creswell, 2007). Further, ongoing discussions between the investigators ensured the themes were representative of the social model perspective.

**Results and Discussion**

In the next section, we endeavor to explain more fully the views of the students and teachers from a sociological perspective. In the end, three primary themes emerged from the data: children’s construction of disability, cultural capital gained through the participation in disability sports, and everyone needs a challenge. Initially, focus interviews suggested students’ conceptualized disability as a state of being deficient and loss of autonomy as identified in the medical model. Over the course of the research, participation in the disability sports reconfigured students’ perceptions of what it meant to be disabled and how that impacted performance in sport.

**Children’s Construction of Disability**

*They are just like you and I.* A primary finding of the study revolved around changes in students’ definitions of the term disability as posed in the focus group question, “Tell me what you think the term disability means to you.” A central premise underlying the question was to nest constructions of disability in or between the social and medical models. What follows is a small sample of both fourth and fifth grade responses before the start of the disability sport unit:

“...disability means that they can’t do what other people do” (fifth).
“When I think of a person with a disability I think of someone who needs help from you or others” (fifth).
“. . . something that doesn’t function correctly” (fifth).
“. . . people um, who um, really they are not formed exactly like some other people are” (fourth).
“Some poor person who doesn’t have regular arms and I feel bad for them” (fourth).
“People who can’t do many things” (fourth).
**Fifth graders.** After the disability sports unit, students in the fifth grade continued to describe the term disability as atypical; however, statements were populated with phrases that suggested some similarities between individuals with and without disabilities. As one student noted, “Yeah, I used to think disabled people were a little bit disadvantaged but now that I have played some of the sports, I think they are just like you and I” (fifth). Comments from other students suggested similar feelings:

I used to think a disability was somebody who couldn’t really do anything or they would just have to sit on the couch and they wouldn’t do anything active for the rest of their life. Now I think a disability is just a setback. It’s not the biggest thing (fifth).

Another student:

My thoughts have definitely changed about people with disabilities because before, you know, I used to think that they were able to have fun but I didn’t think that they could do the same stuff that we could do . . . but now going through the cycle of the different games they can play I know that they can have as much fun as we can (fifth).

The introduction of Paralympic sports into the curriculum connected the students to the experience of the sport. Lesson plans were organized into skill-specific activities that enabled students to participate in age-appropriate game play. For example, students were not required to wear eyeshades when beginning initial activities with the goalball. As they progressed to more advanced skills and their comfort level increased, they were encouraged to wear eyeshades to enhance their auditory skills for game play. This enabled the fifth-graders to experience the game of goalball and the unique skills necessary for success (field notes).

It has definitely changed [disability]. I used to think that a person with a disability was a lot different than the way I think now. Now I think that a person has to go through something and they ended up the wrong way. Like if someone had cancer, they might not be able to work their right or left arm (fifth).

Um, it means that they can’t well . . . there is something wrong with their body that limits what they can do. But because of their creative minds, they can do just as much stuff as we can do” (fifth).

I agree with Logan. I’ve actually been friends with someone who is disabled and it wasn’t actually that difficult; we got really close. We learned what she could and could not do and it gave me a different perspective (fifth).

**Fourth graders.** As Rieser and Mason (1990) point out, children’s perceptions of disability are acquired from the way in which society represents disability. Because the fourth graders played sports traditionally associated with having the full use of all limbs, they had little insight to counter traditional stereotypes that portrayed people with disabilities as deviations from the norm (Lee & Rodda, 1994). Postfocus group interviews revealed these sentiments:
“Maybe someone is in a wheelchair who has lost a leg or something.”
“I think a disability would be something that like, it’s hard for you to do something physical. Like you can’t participate in many things because you don’t know how to act. I think that is a disability.”
“Some people can’t really speak as well and some people don’t have any body parts so it is kind of sad for people.”
“Somebody who can’t walk and has to use a wheelchair all the time; that is pretty sad.”
“Some people have a hard time walking or maybe have a problem with their heart.”
“Either you are missing a body part or you can’t do something as normally as other people can.”

Paralympics or paralyzed Olympics? When asked during the prefocus interviews about the differences between the Olympics, Special Olympics, and the Paralympics, most fifth graders associated the Paralympics with Special Olympics without distinguishing between the two.

“I think of it as special education people in the Olympics.”
“. . . parallel, I kind of think of it as paralyzed and I think it has people with disabilities.”
“I think it’s games where people with disabilities come together and do a sport that they like. I think it’s a thing where disabilities [sic] people get to come and do a sport with all their friends with disabilities and enjoy themselves.”

The fourth-grade focus groups revealed similar beliefs.

“I think they might be for people with disabilities.”
“Someone who is paralyzed in their legs or something.”
“Some people are paralyzed in their legs and they can’t walk and they need to go in wheelchairs.”
“I have no idea what they are.”

The value of the Paralympics as an inherent component of the curriculum was essential for reducing the belief that individuals with disabilities are in some ways inferior to their nondisabled counterparts. The sports highlighted avenues of human performance and athletic competition not generally valued by the general population. When asked to identify differences between the three sporting events in the post interviews, fifth graders articulated a clearer association with the Olympics: “The disability is just a minor setback. It doesn’t mean you can’t excel in what you want to do and the Paralympics games are a great way to show that even if you have a disability you can still do what you want.”

More so, the sports encouraged a particular kind of questioning that addressed the consequence of being different and having or not having access to sports. As a sporting event, the Paralympics gained credibility through its association with the Olympics.

“It’s [Paralympics] for people with physical disabilities that limit them from playing the same sports that we do but after seeing the different tapes that
people can do . . . yeah, like ice hockey and the people with leg dysfunction disabilities; like they could ski and they could play ice hockey. It was really amazing what they could do” (fifth).

**Cultural Capital Gained Through the Participation in Disability Sports**

*I thought it was going to be lame.* For many teachers, sport and team games are salient features of their identity and one of the primary reasons they become PE teachers (Evans, 2004). Traditional notions of what it means to be competent inform perceptions of disability and can give way to disability sports as a lesser form of sport (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009). Sean’s previous experience with disability sports was quite limited, and, as such his beliefs revealed a development from the sports being only for disabled individuals to activities that could be played by everyone. The introduction of the disability sport unit was something new for Sean:

“First of all, I didn’t even know what a goalball was, so seeing the piece of equipment and hearing the bell sound and actually being part of the activity blind the first day made me realize that the experience is fun and worthwhile. It was fun doing the circle game. The whole thing was fun and also seeing the looks on the kid’s faces.”

His thoughts underscored an interpretation that constructs disability as a lack of physical or psychological functioning, creating a particular reality for educators that privilege culturally specific behaviors.

“I really did think it [disability sports] was going to be lame because it is not able-bodied and not real; it is non-traditional and for disabled people. I thought it was going to be slow, not exciting and no fun…I thought there was going to be a lot of griping and whining. These kids, after hearing from the classes that had it this week, were very excited about playing.”

Over the course of the unit, Sean became more fluent in the skill requirements of the sports. In the final interview, he remarked how the curriculum had changed his thinking:

“I learned just as much as these guys did. Um, I learned enough to make me want to go out and buy some little hockey blades so we can play sledge hockey . . . And I’m going to be more aware of people with disabilities and have my kids be more aware of people with disabilities and the Paralympics.”

Because individuals with disabilities are often viewed in a negative light, they are “assumed to be inferior and are subject to a decrease in inclusion in society” (Devine, 1997, p. 4). The combination of explicit information, in tandem with participation in the sports, disrupted the traditional view of needing all one’s body parts in order to play a sport. According to Kara’s post interview:

“I think they [students] learned a new vocabulary about the Paralympics for people with disabilities. I think a lot of them, from what I was hearing, a lot of
them really seemed to change how they thought about people with disabilities. Because they didn’t know . . . but now they have this vision of people with disabilities who are working so hard to be masters at their sport just like a regular Olympian or a regular athlete would and so I think they sort of gained a new understanding of people with disabilities that they can be equal, if not better at sports, and that they are completely capable.”

**Everyone Needs a Challenge**

For some, the prefix “dis” is a reminder of the inferior relationship between disability and ability. Discourses within physical education emphasize ability as a fixed entity with broad generalizations on performance (Evans, 2004). While both fourth and fifth graders felt that individuals with disabilities could participate and actually be good at sports, post interviews with the fifth graders revealed an association between being good at something through practice and dedication.

“. . . I think people with disabilities can be good at sports. If you watch the Paralympics, you can see how people have done these things. It is just amazing . . . skiing and sled hockey. It is just amazing watching them.” (fifth)

“. . . if they practice hard enough, they can do things very well.” (fifth)

“When I watched the downhill skiing they were going so fast . . . I would be freaking out screaming at the top of my lungs. I could never attempt to do that.” (fifth)

“. . . if they put the time and heart into it they can definitely turn out to be the best players.” (fifth)

In their final focus group interviews, fifth-grade students noted the high level of skill needed for participation in the sports. This served as a mechanism that reassigned fairness from making it fair to actually challenging the students in the same way they were challenged by the activities. Simply being included was not enough; support was less critical than the need for autonomy and self-satisfaction (Goodwin, 2008). These sentiments contradict Kalyvas and Reid’s (2003) and Panagiotou et al. (2008) findings that children did not agree with changing the rules of sport because it could potentially minimize the level of competition. Unlike game and skill adaptation associated with modifying traditional sports, the disability sports were inherently challenging because they provided a vehicle for competitive game play that allowed students to experience a sporting venue that required a unique skill set (Davis, 2011).

“. . . yes, if there is anyone who comes in here I think we should change it because it is not right for them to be sitting out. They should somehow fix the game and let that person play. It is more fun for them and just more equal” (fifth).

“I don’t think there should be a big change either because kids with disabilities should have the full experience” (fifth).
The fifth-grade students came to understand that they were not “naturally” better than a person with a disability. As with any athlete, training is a necessary component for success:

“I think it has definitely changed for me. I used to think that having a disability you wouldn’t be able to do anything. Now that I have played the games, I realize that disabled people can get off the couch and do something” (fifth).

In contrast, the fourth graders equated fairness with compassion, which does not necessarily lead to equitable practices. When asked whether changes should be made in their PE classes, students stated:

“I think yes, because um, the person with the disability may not be able to do it, and I think we don’t have the disability so I think we should feel lucky and I think we should like the changes that we make” (fourth).

“. . . because most of the time they kind of want to play like everyone else would but they kind of do need the help” (fourth).

For the fifth graders, equitable PE centered on changing the physical environment to make the sports accessible. Through a process of mutual respect and acceptance of difference, this interdependence focused on “capacities rather than deficits” (Goodwin, 2008, p. 178).

Over the course of the disability unit students came to understand that the sports provided opportunities that challenged assumptions on the location of difference “. . . they are not different just because the way they look” (fifth). This understanding supports a social rather than medical position as students negotiated what it meant to have a disability while still being able to participate in activities that brought meaning to their lives.

**Conclusion**

The findings support the implementation of a disability sport program in a PE curriculum as a strategy for positively shaping students’ and teachers’ perceptions of disability. In addition, the findings advance the social model as a way to mediate negative responses to difference. According to Barton (2009):

Understanding disability as a significant means of social differentiation and the need to develop a critical analysis which challenges the barriers to inclusion within society and particularly in terms of PE and sport can be seen as an integral and serious necessity (p. 46).

The curriculum enabled the fifth graders to view individuals with and without disabilities as complementary entities, rendering a more accurate picture of disability. Moreover, the current study elucidated how beliefs about disability represent different points in one’s learning, as evidenced in both the teachers and the students. Kara was able to use disability sports to challenge myths perpetuated by a medical ideology. Within the general physical education setting, teachers and students moved beyond the deficit discourse, which can play a part in structuring perceptions of and actions toward individuals with disabilities (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007).
Pre and post focus group interviews reflected differences in how fourth and fifth graders viewed disability. Fourth graders’ understanding of disability remained grounded in the medical tradition with associations to abnormalities and lack of mobility. Bird (1994) offers an analysis of the way in which children develop views on ability and effort grounded in their personal experience that prioritizes circumstance, language, and location. In the earlier years of a child’s schooling, attention is directed at civility, good behavior, and moral character. As students progress through the educational system, a more restricted view of ability and effort is adopted. Performance is prioritized with a ranking system that classifies students in linear fashion with ability and effort more clearly differentiated in response to cultural expectations of performance. Based on her analysis, one could argue that Kara’s implementation of a disability sport unit came at a seminal point in the children’s development. Since misconceptions toward people with disabilities arise from both the social conditions that positions them as less able and limited opportunities to engage in activities associated with the disabled, it seems only logical that educators like Kara create experiences during the child’s development that could potentially disrupt the influences of a medical model that does not always portray disability in favorable fashion (Lee & Rodda, 1994).

The major contrast between fourth and fifth graders was found in the language used to describe individuals with disabilities. Fourth graders tended toward a deficit perspective, whereas fifth graders used language that reflected possibilities and prospects. These findings provide educators with an important starting point when considering outcomes designed to promote the tenets associated with an inclusive pedagogy. However, to avoid sentiments reflected in Sean’s comments as disability sports being lame, caution should be exercised in who the sports privilege (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009).

The findings would also suggest that school settings offer a porous space, which can provide children with a foundation for challenging myths perpetuated by the medicalization of disability. In tandem with the growing popularity of disability sports and increased coverage of the Paralympics, teachers have the opportunity to “tackle prejudice” and “develop values” in the development of an inclusive pedagogy (Beckett, 2009). In this study, the disability sports program broadened knowledge of the sports and the skills needed for participation. In doing so, the deficit narrative that portrays the disabled as incomplete and passive challenged common stereotypes of incompetence (Barton, 2009).

Limitations
There were several limitations to the study. While changes were evidenced at the fifth-grade level, it is difficult to fully ascertain the impact of developmental levels on perceptions of disability between fourth and fifth graders. It also is difficult to generalize whether these changes will have a long-term influence; however, a disability sports curriculum is now a permanent element within the curriculum. A second limitation was the influence of a disability awareness program presented by an individual with a disability that occurred for both grades during the first week of the program. This was designed as an experiential exercise during the PE classes in which the children played chasing and fleeing games using the wheelchairs. Despite his experiences as a disabled athlete, field notes revealed the games were simply designed for the students to have fun with very limited discussion associated
with the larger issue of disability. His lack of formal training in physical education prevented him from incorporating some of the higher-level discussions that ensued during the class closure (document). Both sets of students participated in wheelchair activities in their physical education classes; however, there were marked differences in the focus group interviews that followed the disability sport unit.

Recommendation

Three suggestions can be offered as recommendations, based on this study’s findings. Firstly, teachers should consider the nature of their classrooms and how selected curricula inform their students’ perceptions toward individuals with disabilities. Within these conversations distinctions should be drawn between the disability itself and the limitations presented by environmental constraints. A second recommendation of this research is the use of the Paralympics and disability sports as a tool for examining what it means to be disabled and still lead a “normal” life that includes physical activity. Given the recent attention to disabled athletes, implementing disability sports within the physical education curriculum encourages a broader understanding of inclusion and sport (Barton, 2009). Playing the sports enhance the sporting experience of refining skill, adhering to rules and engaging in active game play. The third recommendation is that further research is needed to expand on the paucity of literature that shapes perceptions of disability through a disability sport curriculum. For educators to live up to the principles of inclusive education, future work must craft alternative curricula that tackle the structural forces that shape disability and the growing need to examine curricula that contribute to a more just society.

End Note

The authors of this manuscript acknowledge the controversy surrounding how disability is expressed and represented between and across cultures. The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (PMAPA; 2010) for example, states that “people first language to describe groups of people with disabilities” (p. 76) should be used. However, disability rights activists denounce “person-first language as offensive, claiming that it was promoted by powerful nondisabled people, particularly advocates for persons with developmental disabilities” (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001, p. 3). The preference for using the term disability first aligns with minority group politics which is our elected practice in this manuscript.

References


