

## **No Use Preaching to the Converted: Lets get Physical!**

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### **Abstract**

When it comes to answering the question, how do teachers make classroom activities fully inclusive, attention usually focuses on changes to be made to the teaching of academic or life-skill based activities. Yet how often are assessments of adaptations to physical education classes included as an essential component of inclusive lesson planning? Despite national strategies, international conventions, policy pronouncements, research about the benefits of physical activity for disabled people and a certain level of grassroots willingness in respect of the global issue of inclusive practice, the reality is that when it comes to participation in physical activity, children with impairments more often than not only participate minimally in whole class physical education programmes. In the experience of this author it has been hard to persuade people to adopt a different understanding of this issue. Many have needed to be convinced and the more ‘hands on’ experiences are involved in this process, the easier it is for attitudes to alter and new understandings to become fully inclusive practices.

This paper looks at key issues involved in promoting full participation in an inclusive physical education programme through a summary of the experience of student teachers enrolled in a physical education module at Waikato University in 2009. It briefly outlines student’s entry levels of expectation of this module and how prior misconceptions about participation are challenged through a ‘hands-on’ teaching practicum. It suggests that this experience will encourage course participants as new teachers or community recreational providers to cater more fully for the physical education and recreational needs of children with imparments so that members of this group have the opportunity of engaging with the range physical education activities that it is their right to enjoy.

### **Setting the scene**

As a woman with a congenital physical impairment, I have experienced looks and comments about my walking style and other different characteristics from children and adults in New Zealand over the years. It is from my own experience that I understand how the attitudes that underpin these behaviours can have a negative

impact on an individual. Unless individuals have a level of personal understanding through lived experience, family connections or in-community involvement with people with impairments, they are more often than not regarded by wider community members as far less than able, and it does not seem to matter whether the impairment is physical, intellectual, sensory or emotional.

I know that if there is understanding about and a valuing and celebrating of a person's difference, negative myths and attitudes can be removed. The recent "Like Minds" programme provides an excellent example of how 'not-able' social myths about periods of mental illness can be addressed in a positive and empowering way (Bishop & Hennessy, 2008; Like Minds, 2008). This campaign challenges the negative attitudes that surround people with mental health difficulties in this country, with a view to uncreasing levels of understanding and support in the community in relation to individuals who live with this impairment effect. In my opinion the outcome of this campaign should apply to all who experience disability in New Zealand society.

I chose the title of this paper deliberately because over many years I have found that those who do understand about the effect of impairment and related disability aspects read papers and attend seminar presentations, while those who don't really should. If those who don't decided to opt into these opportunities, they would encounter a consistent message, that disabled people need to be valued and accepted in all their diversity in today's world. Disabled people should be active participants at all levels of society because it is their right to do so. This right has been reinforced at an international level by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability [UNCRPD, 2006]. Article 30 of this Convention in particular refers to physical activity for disabled people suggesting that, with a view to enabling persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in recreational, leisure and sporting activities, those who coordinate these activities should take the following measures:

- (a) To encourage and promote the participation, to the fullest extent possible, of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels;
- (b) To ensure that persons with disabilities have an opportunity to organize, develop and participate in disability-specific sporting and recreational activities and, to this end, encourage the provision, on an equal basis with others, of appropriate instruction, training and resources;
- (c) To ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting, recreational and tourism venues;
- (d) To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system;
- (e) To ensure that persons with disabilities have access to services from those involved in the organization of recreational, tourism, leisure and sporting activities.

New Zealand is one of many countries to sign this Convention and thus is committed on paper to taking action on these statements. In fact this country was already committed to these ideas through prior policy statements that ensure that the rights of children in New Zealand to be readily accepted as participants in the school physical education (PE) programme (e.g. SPARC, 2005) and for adults to participate in regular sport and recreational activities at a level considered equal to their non-disabled peers (MOH, 2001).

In addition to international and national policy initiatives, research in the area of physical activity and disabled people has shown how beneficial it is for people with impairment conditions. In a recent article Fittipaldi-Wert & Brock (2006) comment on the importance of physical activity for disabled people as their day-to-day lifestyles tend to be less active. Other studies indicate that people with impairments who are physically active are better adjusted and more satisfied with life, report having fewer days of pain, depression, anxiety, or sleeplessness and have generally improved vitality that substantially increases their life expectancy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2001), Active disabled people are stronger and have more stamina (Wells & Hooker, 1990), have improved cardiovascular health and fitness (Corbin & Pangrazi, 1999), experience fewer and less severe secondary health conditions (CDC, 2002), and develop positive self identity (Blauwet, 2005; Groff, & Zabriskie, 2006; and Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Groff, 2005). Finally participation in sporting activities gives opportunities for disabled people to experience feelings of empowerment and improved psychological well-being (Hutzler, 2003).

However, my own research in this area suggests that restricted opportunity to participate in sport and physical activity imposes a major constraint that limits the ability of people with impairments from benefitting from these positive outcomes (Neilson, 2005b). In reality, sporting activities for people with impairments are just not as readily available as activities for individuals without significant limitation (see also Smith & Thomas, 2006). This lack of equality can be measured in limitations in opportunity to participate, a lack of financial support for disabled sports people, a lack of media attention and spectator attendance at events that include people with impairments. As Jerlinder, Danermark, & Gill (2009) suggest, true parity of participation in physical education will be difficult to achieve for anyone with a physical disability. Yet does this comment say more about the maintenance of a rather rigid and narrow status quo in relation to the idea of sporting 'achievement' than any intrinsic lack of use related to supporting the development of individual ability and aspiration in this area of life? If a student progresses through their schooling in an inclusive school environment where participation in physical activity is an expectation, it is not seen as an issue because of this expectation (Neilson, 2005b). Encouraging young children to participate from an early age establishes 'being a participant' as an integral part of any sporting activity. However, "excluding students because of disability or for other reasons lowers teacher's expectations and ultimately results in lowered performance from the students themselves (Johnson, Kasser & Nichols, 2002, p.36).

Since 2001 I have been the Course Co-ordinator of the second year Physical Activity and Disability Course in the Sports and Leisure Department of the School of Education, University of Waikato (SPLS212). Over the years students have consistently and enthusiastically reported a fundamental change in their attitude

between beginning and ending this paper. In particular they report a change in their personal perspectives about people with impairments and that this change has impacted positively in the development of their more inclusive perspective. The remainder of this article reflects on the value of this paper - "Physical Activity and Disability, SPLS212" - to the students who have chosen to add this course to their Bachelor of Teaching or Sport and Leisure.

### Teaching "Physical Activity and Disability"

It is always educative to ask new students why they are taking this university course. In my experience, students who enrol seldom appreciate the concepts that underpin the paper unless they are themselves disabled people. When disabled students themselves enrol they almost become co-educators. Comments on reasons for enrolment in SPLS212 include "fitted timetable," "no exam" "I want to work in this area in the future" "I was told it was fun," and "I was told you actually got to have time with people with disability". In my experience these comments have not changed in my time as course coordinator. In 2009 four of the previous years students asked if they could speak to the current year's group to share their passion and enthusiasm for the challenge this course presented and the steep learning curve this particular paper offered to the incoming group. This was an unprecedented event, but it also reflects what many students feel they get out of this paper. It is important to stress that it is not myself who makes this paper so valued, but the value is in the opportunities for SPLS212 students to spend quality time really getting to know disabled adults and children. Disabled sportspeople also come in as guest speakers to share their stories and achievements. Consistently over the years of course evaluations, overall satisfaction with the paper is between 70-80%.

### **The Camp**

As well as formal lectures, SPLS212 students take part in a practical activity where they have a one-to-one contact with a disabled child and support them through six Physical Education lessons. However, the highlight of the paper is when the students spend quality recreational time with a disabled person over a 30 hour period. The disabled adult and their SPLS 212 'buddy', who have had prior time together getting to know each other, then share a weekend of outdoor activities concluding with staying a night together on the University marae (1), an activity referred to as "The Camp".

There is no limit to what kind of disability is 'acceptable' for The Camp. This decision depends on the disabled individual, their parents/caregivers or their support organisation. Students get into groups prior to the event and give themselves a group name. This creates a degree of fun and friendly competition between groups and a sense of belonging and comradeship, all part of the plan.

The Camp begins with a day of activities starting at a local physical activity Skills Centre. The Centre provides the opportunity for all to test themselves on a number of challenges including high wire work, rock wall climbing and rafting on the local Waikato River. It is interesting to observe some SPLS212 students, very fearful of heights, being encouraged to push their boundaries by their disabled buddies, who have achieved the challenge - a real reversal of usual roles! Late on the Saturday

afternoon the group go back to the University Campus where activities begin with a formal powhiri (2) on the marae.

After sorting out sleeping arrangements a dinner is provided. After dinner everyone is expected to help with cleaning up, including those with impairments. Each group then leads a short fun activity where everyone, whatever their impairment, must be able to take part. For example, 'Whispers' is not a good game if there are people with hearing impairments. That night all students and their buddies sleep in the wharenuī (3). This in itself is a very interesting experience with all the noises of 50 plus people sleeping together in one big room. When several people using wheelchairs for mobility as part of the mix that creates some very interesting accommodations.

On campus the next day each group arranges another activity that encourages full participation, group competition and lots of physical activity. Boccia, parachute games and 'bum' volleyball are popular. The final organised activity takes the groups through the campus following an adapted orienteering challenge and ending up with a shared picnic. By then everyone has been stretched to their limit and are very tired! When it comes time to say goodbye there is an amazing feeling of comradeship, mutual respect and acceptance of each other's strengths and weaknesses. There is no display of feeling of difference or marginalisation. One year a young male (disabled) buddy burst into tears saying he did not want to go home as he had "had so much fun and felt so accepted." (Personal communication, 2008).

### **Reflections On SPLS 212**

In my experience negative attitudes create some of the greatest barriers for people with impairments. Attitudes need to be challenged to create change so that individuals are valued for their diversity. In this regard, it is The Camp that has the greatest impact on the students because of the 'hands on' practical character of the interaction. Over the years The Camp has catered for people with a real mix of impairments. Young adults with physical, intellectual, sensory or with emotional health issues all have fun together with the companionship of their SPLS212 buddies. Mixing different people with disabilities together can be a real challenge to some disabled individuals as well. As students spend a lot of time with their disabled buddies they get to know them really well. Contact and time together achieves great outcomes. SPLS212 students find the 'disability disappears' and their buddies come through as interesting and valued individuals with personalities, dreams and desires just like everyone else. Students realised that disabled people are actually more like everyone else rather than they are different. At the end of the course differences are not seen as deficits but rather as valued individuals with interesting elements that adds spice to the diversity of life (Neilson, 1996). The following brief personal comments made by students exemplifies what taking this paper has meant to them.

I thoroughly enjoyed it and learnt so much so thank you!!

I have thoroughly enjoyed the course. What has been a great eye opener for me, has been the fact that I now look at people with a disability in a new light. I now understand that people with disabilities are human beings too. They have feelings like me, and also can do as much as I can

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Thank you very much for your inspiring and eye opening paper.

Thank you for giving L... the opportunity to experience the camp with R... L... talks about R... being her friend a lot.

Thank you so much for the year. I had an awesome time.

The strong involvement of people with disability is the key to the success of this paper. This comes through most clearly in final oral presentations and paper evaluations, where many report having learned much about themselves and their new friends. The disabled adults themselves have a wonderful time and value the opportunity to get physical!

### **Discussion**

The UNCRPD (2006) and the NZ Disability Strategy (MOH, 2001) endorses the notion that there should be “nothing about us, without us” in terms of the presence and participation of all disabled people in all everyday community activities. Yet the majority of the population who do not have disabilities (and also some who have disabilities) remain influenced by past practices that reinforce negative attitudes and assumptions about the rights of people with impairments to full participating in physical activities and sporting events. Researchers have highlighted disablist community attitudes that create barriers to the participation of disabled people in all aspects of community life. (Ballard, 1994; Fine & Asch, 1988; Morris, 1991) and it is of concern that individual impairments continue to be seen as the dominant and overpowering aspect of an individual (Deegan & Brooks, 1985; Lawrence, 1989). I did experience this personally as I grew up.

The social or rights model of disability views disabled individuals as equal citizens in the community, empowered to make decisions about their lives at all levels. (Neilson, 2005a) This of course includes their expected participation in physical activity and/or recreation. So what are the issues that create barriers for children and adults who live with disability from participating in physical or recreational and sporting activities? Is it only a question of rectifying ‘bad’ attitudes ... or is it about giving people the opportunity to get to know each other as individuals and to enjoy these opportunities to be together?

### **Conclusion**

Disabled people are more like everyone else than different but rarely are they afforded the opportunity to be valued as such. As disabled people we need to be seen and valued for our sameness as much as for the unique qualities that are our impairment effects. As the experience of The Camp illustrates, when disabled people develop quality friendships with people who do not have disabilities, perceptions of difference disappear. When disabled people take part in physical activities that challenge, they also extend their own boundaries and can sometimes end up in a support role with those who do not have disability. I believe that this is the social model in action - where everyone is valued for their uniqueness and enjoys equal opportunities to be active participants in their community.

#### Footnotes

- 1) A marae is a Maori meeting house used for a variety of short and long stay communal activities
- 2) A powhiri is a formal welcome given to visitors to the marae
- 3) A wharenuui is a designated sleeping area within the marae

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