

Investigating the Accessibility to Sport and Physical Activity for Individuals with Disabilities in Minnesota

Collaborative Policy Analysis Research Paper

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October 2018

LEAD 4961W (004)

University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

Leadership Minor

Definition of the Issue

The existence of intellectual and physical disabilities, in a general sense, predates most of the knowledge that has been recorded on them. As the human race has evolved and progressed, our understanding of disabilities has evolved in the same direction; yet there are still a lot of questions surrounding the population of individuals with disabilities and concerns regarding how we, as a society, incorporate accessibility and integration. We know this is an issue because according to the World Health Organization, “About 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability...,” an estimate that is considered to be on the rise (World Health Organization, n.d.). Closing in on a more local lens, the 2016 US Census estimated that 573,406 Minnesota residents live with a disability including 46,811 aged 5-17 years (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). These individuals deserve to live a healthy, active, and normal life so their disabilities shouldn't be holding them back from participating in physical activities and sports.

Our purpose for this project will be 1) investigating the level of accessibility to physical activity and sport for youth with intellectual and physical disabilities and 2) researching effects that increased accessibility has on community attitudes and awareness toward individuals with disabilities. Physical activity programs specifically designed for members of the community with physical and intellectual disabilities, such as those provided by the Special Olympics, have already been introduced and have grown within the last half-century. What we don't know at this time is the level at which these programs engage existing and prospective participants. There has been a limited amount of research done that explores these programs and their effect on social inclusion of the athletes. This information and insight could increase both the efficiency and the effectiveness of programs across the world (McConkey et. al., 2013). Within investigating the

past and current efforts made towards increasing accessibility to physical activity opportunities for individuals with disabilities, we will look at perspectives from the United States as well as Nigeria and Germany. We want to research the obstacles that restrict individuals with disabilities from participating in physical activity, as well as the proceeding social awareness that surrounds existing initiatives and programs, which are both key components for promoting social inclusion.

History of the Issue

This issue has been relevant as long as disabilities have been affecting individuals. In response to acknowledging this population, much progress has been made regarding how individuals with disabilities are integrated into society. In the late 1900's laws began to get passed to ensure more equality for the rights of people with disabilities. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 established a foundation for future federal legislation, which included the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994. Additional antidiscrimination laws were passed in many states (Jones, 2003). The American with Disabilities Act of 1990 became the first comprehensive civil rights law in the United States that addressed the needs of individuals with disabilities, providing legal reinforcement against discrimination within publicly-available spaces (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). While this law was passed in 1990, some organizations and movements began decades before. For example, the Special Olympics is one of the largest organizations which began a movement for inclusion and increased accessibility to sport for participants with disabilities in the late part of the 1960's, including the First International Special Olympics Games held in Chicago, Illinois, United States in 1968. Today, there are

currently 8,100 local Minnesotans with intellectual disabilities who participate and compete in 17 Olympic-type sports through the accredited organization of Special Olympics (Special Olympics Minnesota, n.d.). Going beyond our local community, there are a total of 5 million Special Olympics athletes from 170 countries around the world (Special Olympics, n.d.). The Special Olympics is a very successful program that has a large reach, but we perceive a discrepancy between the number of individuals in the world living with a disability and the number of individuals who are actively participating in this opportunity is large enough to warrant further research.

Global Perspectives

The three global perspectives that were chosen to explore are the United States, Nigeria, and Germany. This list was narrowed down to five perspectives after we found a five nation study comparing the promotion of social inclusion (McConky, 2013). We researched each of the five nations and landed on the top three that had the most research from a variety of additional sources. These perspectives provide the best insight because they uniquely represent different perspectives and have a significant amount of evidence to consider. The United States, specifically Minnesota, will be used as the context. These global perspectives will be helpful in understanding the issue more comprehensively because they will provide specific examples on how people around the world are addressing this issue in diverse ways.

Like stated previously, there are varying degrees of programs in each of these countries that are working to promote social inclusion and accessibility of sports to individuals with disabilities. There are numerous initiatives each with their own specific reach and mission. Some examples range from large, established programs such as Special Olympics which was founded

in the United States to small improvements such as promises from the Nigeria Tennis Foundation president, Mr. Dayo Akindoju, to focus on growing the game of wheelchair tennis (Ngobua, 2018) to starting the conversation in Germany's Parliament about demanding equality in participation (Deutscher, 2012). No matter the scale or focus, each effort is a step in the right direction. A study conducted in Germany analyzed over 1,700 adolescents aged 11-17 in over 160 German communities to gain an understanding on their accessibility levels to sport facilities. The results lead to some interesting insights including the fact that there is a significant interaction between the distance to a facility and the likelihood of participation (Reimers, 2014). This proves that logistical barriers such as distance are relevant and important to keep in mind. The Paralympic Games has been a driving force when it comes to raising awareness, which is another barrier to participation. With its media coverage and platform to showcase disabled athletes, it has been a catalyst in raising awareness of inclusion and accessibility in sports around the world (Blauwet & Willick, 2012).

These global perspectives will help us to understand what is currently happening around the world as well as point us to insights that can be addressed in our strategy. By starting with the outer layer of our system which is the three global perspectives, we will acquire information that will affect the entire system down to the "hurdles" which are the barriers to participation. By starting with the big picture, we will be able to create a well-rounded strategy that takes different perspectives and insights into consideration.

Understanding the System as a Whole

Visual Depiction of the System



Figure 1. Visual depiction of the system of accessibility to sports for persons with a disability

Narrative of the Visual Depiction

The visual depiction of our system was created using a combination of images in order to show a layered progression of the system. Each layer represents a different layer of interaction with the issue, starting with those who are directly involved, moving to those who are aware of the issue and support it, then out to the unaware general community, which then expands to the global scale. In order to explain the narrative of our visual, each layer will be described below. Within this narrative, the explanations of each layer will enhance the understanding of the issue at hand, providing current context moving forward with this analysis.

1. Participants & Internal Hurdles

The participants of this issue are represented within the first layer of the visual: the track. The track features a runner, which would be the participants, and five (5) track hurdles, which represent the internal hurdles that the participants have facing them within their efforts to participate, promote and improve the accessibility of sport for all members of society (for the purpose of this project, members with disabilities). The participants in this primary layer are not limited to the individuals with disabilities since they also include the individuals and organizations that directly provide opportunities for physical activity and sport to those with disabilities. Their internal efforts are progressed along the track as they encounter the hurdles that obstruct social mobility and inclusion, which act as negatively reinforcing feedback loops. These hurdles, or feedback loops, restrict the improvement of accessibility and the efforts of the primary layer are being done in order to intervene and assist the disabled individuals over the hurdles. Each of the hurdles is explained below:

Internal Awareness

The first hurdle represented in this visual is the awareness of the population with disabilities towards the existing programs and opportunities available for them to participate in sport and physical activity. According to SportandDev.org, an online resource for sport development throughout all levels of society, “limited access to information and resources” is listed as a top barrier for participation amongst the disabled population (Sports and Development, n.d.).

If the population that is in need of adapted programming doesn't even know about existing programming, then there is the initial barrier to overcome.

Desire to Participate

Second comes the desire of individuals with disabilities to seek out and partake in sport/physical activity. As noted by Moran and Block (2010), children with disabilities "may be reluctant to sign up for youth sports fearing injury, lack of success or being teased by peers," (Moran & Block, 2010, p. 3). Addressing this fear, furthermore, entails the desire and willingness of individuals/organizations to enter the race and work to provide welcoming opportunities for disabled individuals.

Transportation/Distance

Another barrier that exists within this first layer is the modes of transportation available to each individual with a disability to travel to the location of programs and/or opportunities, and the distance in which they have to travel. In a study completed by Neuberger et al. (1994) involving individuals with arthritis that utilized a survey assessing barriers and facilitators related to participation in exercise "reported inaccessibility of exercise programs due to lack of transportation and accessible exercise facilities," (as cited in Rimmer, Riley, Wang, Rauworth, & Jurkowski, 2004). A similar study from 2008 involving adults with unilateral stroke ranked "no means of transportation to a fitness center" as the second most common barrier to exercise, yielding 57% of responses (Rimmer, Wang, & Smith, 2008).

Cost & Funding

Furthermore, the cost that individuals have to pay in order to participate and the funding in order to support the operations of programs and opportunities also present themselves as a barrier to participation. Surveys conducted in 1990 and 2000 by Sugerman and Jones, respectively, revealed that community recreation administrators “cited limited financial resources and unqualified staff as the major reasons people with disabilities lacked community recreation services” (Jones, 2003). More recently, Moran and Block (2010) reported that a lack of appropriate programs offered “is especially true in rural and inner-city communities due to decreased funding, facilities and qualified coaches” (Moran & Block, 2010, p. 9).

Adaptations to Sport/Physical Activities

Lastly, due to the variety of limitations that coincide with disabilities, there exists a barrier that involves the logistical adaptations of the sports/physical activities that are necessary to be made in order for disabled individuals to successfully participate. Lieberman and Houston-Wilson (2009) point out that most youth sports programs can be adapted to accommodate the needs of children with significant disabilities through universal design (Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2009). Thus, the barrier exists in the level of feasibility and, more so, the willingness to do so.

Similar to the fear presented in “Desire to Participate” barrier above, Moran and Block (2010) also advance the idea that leaders of programs have a

fear of liability for injury or other damages to occur (p. 4). Expanding from that, in a report published this year on the barriers to participation, Morey, Ennis and Katsiyannis (2018) prove that Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act protects from discrimination in services, programs and activities to where “not only equitable access is required, but also reasonable accommodations to ensure that students with disabilities are benefiting from such activities,” (Morey, Ennis, & Katsiyannis, 2018). This complexity presents a two-fold barrier in which physical activity opportunities must be analyzed for how they can be adapted, and then there must be a motivating cause to overcome the hesitation and fear by the involved parties to incorporate the adaptations to the extent that participants with disabilities *enjoy and benefit from* the programs.

2. Supporters in the “Arena of Awareness”

The secondary layer is the crowd in the stands, which represents the supporters of the participants or the issue itself. These supporters can include family members, volunteers of programs serving this issue, and individuals/organizations that both acknowledge and support the cause of increasing accessibility for disabled members of society. The integral component that each of these supporters in the crowd has is awareness: awareness of disabilities, the promotion of physical activity for the disabled, and the opportunities that are currently available for those with disabilities to participate. Within this consideration of awareness, we place these supporters within the “Arena of Awareness” that is the track arena where the participants are “running their race”. There metaphorical cheering in support of the participants act as a positively reinforcing

feedback loop since it promotes the continuation and improvement of accessibility to sport and physical activity for the disabled population. A survey study based out of the Netherlands collected responses from six hundred forty-eight individuals with visual impairments found that the most important environmental facilitator for participation in sport and physical activity was support from family (Jaarsma et al., 2014a). This study found the support of family and friends to be essential for reinforcing positive attitude towards participation and this support is included within our visual in the crowd.

Understanding their connections and motivations to the issue provides the opportunity to intervene and replicate beneficial factors in order to grow the amount of supporters that are cheering in the crowd.

3. Outside Community & External Gate

The next layer of the system is the outside community, which resides through the external gate of the “Arena of Awareness”. Considering the supporters described in the previous paragraph as inside the arena, that arena then acts as a gate which portrays the possession of awareness towards the issue and disabled population’s accessibility to sport and physical activity. This outside community is represented in this visual by the skyline of Minneapolis that you can see behind the crowd, outside of the arena. The individuals and organizations that make up this layer are not aware of the issue for disability physical activity; they are unaware of the “race” taking place inside of the arena. This presents a larger hurdle, or another negative feedback loop, for both layers 1 (participants) and 2 (supporters) to overcome as they work to increase the capacity of awareness on the issue, which returns rewards of societal support in recognition, assistance and donations.

Through this promotion of awareness, we see a variety of methods for advocating disability inclusion within mainstream sport and physical activity. Andrea Bundon and Laura Hurd Clarke (2015), however, categorize advocacy approaches in two ways: honey, for a more congenial approach, or vinegar, for a more confrontational approach (p. 359). With a similar mindset, the outside community can be approached through similar methods of advocacy in order to promote knowledge and awareness on this issue.

4. Global Perspectives

Once you expand further away from the “Arena of Awareness”, country borders start to be crossed and the global layer is introduced. This global layer is portrayed in the visual by the Earth, shown behind the skyline. In this layer, the size of the unaware, Outside Community grows larger, increasing the negatively reinforcing feedback loop that restricts social inclusion of disabled individuals within society through sport and physical activity. However, the original “Arena of Awareness”, depicted in Layer 1 to be in the Minneapolis area, is not the only “Arena of Awareness” for the issue globally. Global perspectives now come into play as other communities can be found around the globe that are running their own race to improve access to sport and physical activity for those individuals with disabilities in their respective regions. In the visual depiction, these global perspectives are represented by the country flags of the United States of America, Germany, and Nigeria, which are the three global perspectives that are included within this analysis of the issue.

Who Has the Power and Influence within the System?

The power and influence is in the hands of the government and many sports administrations of each country. As depicted in our visual, there are many roadblocks that get in the way of participants having the opportunity. As this may differ in all countries, including the United States, Nigeria, and Germany, each stakeholder has a different role and purpose in each cultural perspective.

Who are the players in the system? What are their interests and gains?

The Special Olympics, an internationally recognized organization, is one of the large actors in this system and had created a large network of opportunities for those who are in reach of them. The Special Olympics plays a role in the United States, Nigeria, and Germany. Nevertheless, Special Olympics has been criticised by some for encouraging segregation from mainstream sports and perpetuating negative stereo-types of persons with IDs (Storey, 2008). However, its Unified Sports® initiative may be conceived as an attempt to promote the social inclusion of young people with IDs with their peers in local communi-ties (Dowling et al. 2012).

In the United States, NCHPAD (National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability) is a center supporting people with disabilities and other chronic health conditions to increase participation in many different types of physical and social activities to achieve health benefits. The NCHPAD provides information for those who are looking for available sports programs through schools, park districts, and clubs around the United States for youth with physical disabilities to participate in. The Nigeria Government contains lack of support for disabled youth, and a lack of physical activity experts overall (Charles & Chinaza, 2018). The Bundestag Sports Committee (German Parliament), chaired by Dagmar Freitag contains a large

amount of power over this system in Germany. The focus of the Bundestag Sports Committee was to create full inclusion for disabled people in competitive sports, along with finding the obstacles they need to overcome. They also showed interest in creating school sports inclusion, wanting to find the root of the problem to finance disability-related expenses for sports equipment (Deutscher Behindertensportverband, 2012).

Who is being harmed by the system?

Disabled youth, their families, and friends are being harmed by this issue in each cultural perspective. Mental and physical health of all of these people can be affected by the lack of support and opportunities for participants. While levels of physical activity among youth are low in general, levels for youth with disabilities are 4.5 times lower than for their peers without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). As for the mental health of disabled people, “Negative feelings toward physical activity in adulthood often stem from limited opportunities during childhood, and consequently lead to adverse health effects” (Morey, Ennis, & Katsiyannis, 2018). When these physical activity opportunities are not available to all disabled youth, this leaves a gap in the system where they may not get the same health benefits as fully-abled youth. “Morgan stresses some of the physiological benefits include improving cardiovascular endurance, muscular endurance, flexibility and coordination. Some of the psychological benefits include improving self-concept, self-esteem, being able to relate to other kids, improving friendships, as well as improving their overall quality of life” (Foundation for Global Sports Development, 2014).

Social exclusion is a large part of how youth are harmed by the lack of support around this system. “The challenge remains of translating the rhetoric of rights into reality for persons

with intellectual disability (ID) who remain among the most marginalised in many societies around the world (Emerson et al., 2008). The reasons for this are multifaceted. Many are born into poverty and this compounds the impact of dis-ability on their social exclusion within communities. Even in more affluent countries with their welfare benefits and support services, many people with IDs have low levels of social engagement and a dearth of friendships (Verdonschot et al., 2009) The United States, Nigeria, and Germany are all similar in how this comes into play in their cultural perspectives. Funding is a main issue across the board; along with awareness and willingness to adapt activities for disabled.

Who benefits from the current system?

Fully-able youth are currently finding much more accessibility to physical activity and sports than those who are disabled. Youth participating in the Special Olympics benefit from the system the way it currently is. As stated about the physical and mental health of participants, “past research has documented the benefits for participating athletes primarily in terms of gains in physical and mental well-being, sport skills and in self-esteem” (McConkey et. al., 2013). In the United States, the US-based Quality of Life Indices are many times gender blind. Nigerian men are prioritized higher with mobility and physical activity than women are because they are required to work and travel, whereas the females are raised to stay at home and be mothers. Most people, not only those who are disabled, in Nigeria have restricted access to transportation, education, water and electricity, and basic health care. Sport participation in Germany is still higher for able-bodied people than those with a disability, which is similar to both of the others. Many people do not benefit from the positive effects that sport participation offers. (Breuer, 2013)

What Ethical Standards Exist?

Societies are built upon power, privilege and dominance through the behaviors and mindsets of those that possess it. DePauw (1997) argues that social actions should be grounded in the understanding of this presence of power, privilege and dominance, which is based on “alienation from its own cultural base and adoption of the characteristics of the dominant culture,” (p. 416). As society has continued to progress within the past half-century, improvements have been made regarding the attention given towards marginalized groups of populations and communities. The group featured within this case analysis includes individuals with disabilities, which represent a marginalized group since they differ from the “dominant ideology” of a privileged individual.

As discussed in the **Definition of the Issue** section, within the United States, multiple legislative enforcements have been put in place in order to recognize and integrate the disabled, starting with The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and including The American with Disabilities Act of 1990. Globally, the United Nations created and enacted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 which became the first legally binding international instrument to address the rights of persons with disabilities and sport (UN General Assembly, 2007). Article 30, titled “Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport” represents the first legally binding document that declares that people with disabilities should be allowed access to any activities and have the same right as anyone else to participate. This documentation provides great success for the integration of disabled individuals within the common societal progression, however there is little to be known as to whether or not these legislative instruments serve to improve the attitudes of the general society towards disabilities. As touched on within the

explanation of the “Internal Huddles” earlier in this analysis¹, school districts are required to provide reasonable accommodations, although they are not required to provide the best possible accommodations for extracurricular activities (Morey, Ennis, & Katsiyannis, 2018). This attitude represents a surface level of accommodation to integrate individuals with disabilities into the dominant, accepted form of the individual. Where improvement needs to be made is not within the recognition that disabled members of society are marginalized, but within how the individuals are viewed and the efforts done to allow them to live as an equal.

The general ethical boundaries pertaining to this issue follow the moral beliefs of equal opportunity and access for all individuals. Sport and physical opportunity come into the picture because of the importance that society has given to the values that come from sport. A general consensus has been reached regarding the consideration that participation in youth sports offers so many benefits, and every child should have the opportunity to participate in youth sports at least once in their life. Participation in youth sports is just as important to children with disabilities as it is to children without disabilities. In some cases, “opportunities to participate in regular youth sports might be more important to children with disabilities who attend special classes and special schools and have limited interactions with peers without disabilities” (Maryland Disability Law Center, 2009). The simple nature of labeling disabilities as different and requiring of necessary accommodations pushes these individuals away from what is commonly and ethically accepted as unity. Furthermore, opportunities for participation in youth sports, and sport in general, are often limited due to various social and environmental barriers,” (Moran & Block, 2010). Programs as discussed in this analysis, such as the Special Olympics,

¹ see **Narrative of the Visual Depiction**, within 1. Participants & Internal Hurdles, under *Adaptations to Sport/Physical Activities*

serve a beneficial purpose of allowing access to sport and physical activity for disabled members of society, yet ones that are separate from general opportunities. Globally, similar trends are seen in how society views and works to incorporate disabled individuals within general society action.

What Technical Solutions Currently Exist? Why are they working? Why are they not?

Historically, the Special Olympics is a particularly well-known “fix” for addressing obstacles that restrict individuals with disabilities from participating in physical activity and promoting awareness for social inclusion (Special Olympics Minnesota, n.d.). In addition to the Special Olympics, there are other formal organizations for persons with a disability that are currently in place including the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Adaptive Sports programs, the Deaflympics, the Special Olympics, and the Paralympic Games. Outside of formal sports movements, many sports are practiced by persons with disabilities. Some sports include wheelchair basketball, wheelchair dancing, weightlifting, swimming, and others (Disabled World, 2018).

While over 8,100 local Minnesotans with intellectual disabilities competed in 17 Olympic-type sports through the Special Olympics and over 5 million athletes participate in the Special Olympics across 170 countries across the globe (Special Olympics, n.d.), there are still many who do not have the time or means to participate in sports with formal organizations like the Special Olympics. Formal organizations like the Special Olympics, Paralympics, and others provide structure for participation and a larger platform to advocate for promoting awareness for social inclusion. However, looking at the technical fixes of formal organizations according to the hurdles that we defined, there are facets of their structure that are both working and not working.

When it comes to internal awareness, this is where large, formal organizations work the best. For example, the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio hosted 86% capacity for spectators and reached 2.15 million viewers (International Paralympic Committee). With increasing views via internet initiatives, more and more awareness is spread through these organizations, “Online, the Games reached more people than ever before with the IPC’s digital media activities engaging close to one billion people” (International Paralympic Committee).

However, when it comes to the desire to participate and accessibility to participating, therein lies a more complex web of issues--especially on a local level. Barriers like transportation to events and practices, sourcing funding to participate, and finding adaptations to new physical activities, there is a greater proportion of the population of persons with a disability who are not able to participate in a sport or physical activity. In a report about persons with disabilities and their ability to participate in a physical activity, Cosier (2016) remarks, “A lot of people with disabilities have trouble getting from A to B due to various reasons, finance because the unemployment rate for the disability sector is double that of society in general, and then knowledge of where to find out what different activities are available.” Additionally, only 20% of the population of persons with disabilities were able to participate in sports due to various barriers. While large organizations like the Paralympic Games and Special Olympics play an important role for inspiring others and advocating for increased integration for participation in sports by persons with a disability, there lacks a community, grass-roots network to provide more local opportunities for participation.

One notable technical “fix” that works as a community, grass-roots network in the context of Minnesota is the Minnesota Adapted Athletics Association, or MAAA. This

organization works on a community level which promotes sport and physical activity opportunities for persons with any abilities. Promotions run primarily through their Facebook page created eight years ago. This “fix” however has only gained 175 Facebook members to date (Minnesota Adapted Athletics Association, n.d.). Even though opportunities might be out there for the target populations out there, it is clear that there still remains barriers when it comes to awareness of opportunities available.

Summary

In conclusion, there are over 1 billion people affected by disabilities who still deserve the opportunity to participate in physical activities (World Report on Disability). If we do nothing, these individuals will continue to not have access to physical activities which could increase their risk of developing secondary health conditions as well as widen the gap of social inclusion (Jaarsma, 2014b). From our research, we found that similar barriers to participation are relevant around the world. By looking at the United States, Nigeria, and Germany it is clear that these perspectives will help us to strategize a solution that will improve accessibility of physical activities and sports. Our system starts with the participants, moves to volunteers, then to the local community, and out to the global perspectives. Each layer affects the other layers and as we research the global perspectives, we will strategize to improve each layer down to the participants. In each layer there are influencers who hold power, each nation has a governing body but the United States and Germany have more regulation than Nigeria. There are players that are stimulating influence and creating technical applications but by analyzing multiple perspectives, we will create an adaptive strategy to decrease the barriers that individuals with disabilities face when participating in physical activities and sports.

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