

EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF ABLE-BODIED ATHLETES IN WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL

N. Spencer-Cavaliere and D. L. Peers

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Introduction

Within the sport of wheelchair basketball in Canada, athletes with and without disabilities compete with and against each other. This type of reverse integration is made possible by a functional classification system, wherein athletes are assigned a point value based on limitations in functional skills. Able-bodied athletes (AB, those without functional limitations) are assigned a value of 4.5. Classifiable athletes (those with disability) are assigned a value ranging from 0.5 to 4.5 depending on the degree of functional limitation. This classification system is intended to balance the functional potential of competing teams. Brasile (1990, 1992) suggested that reverse integration in wheelchair basketball has increased opportunities for all athletes to take part, while at the same time promoting an equitable platform for competition and socialization. In a study examining the perspectives of classifiable women wheelchair basketball players, Spencer-Cavaliere, Peers and Watkinson (in preparation) also found significant support for reverse integration. Athletes suggested that wheelchair basketball reduced differences between athletes without and without disabilities through the promotion of valued roles, teaching and athletic identities. Conversely, Thiboutot, Smith & Labanowich (1992) have argued that reverse integration devalues the athleticism of athletes with disabilities and limits their competitive opportunities. Although reverse integration is becoming more widespread (Medland & Ellis-Hill, 2008) research investigating its impact is still limited.

Objective

The purpose of this study was to explore reverse integration from the perspectives of female, able-bodied wheelchair basketball athletes. This is a follow-up to the study by Spencer-Cavaliere et al. (in preparation) that looked at the perspectives of classifiable women athletes. As with this previous study, athletic identity, or an individual's identification with the role of athlete, served as the foundation to investigate reverse integration. According to Brewer, Van Raalte & Linder (1993) athletic identity is positively associated with increased motivation, sport performance improvement, and developing a salient sense of self, but negatively associated with exclusivity of identify. Issues related to differences between athletes with and without disabilities as revealed in the initial study were also explored.

Design

Qualitative semi-structured interviews.

Setting

Western Canada

Subjects

Nine Canadian women aged 22 to 47 (mean age 32 yrs, 7 mo) took part in this study. All participants had or were currently playing wheelchair basketball at a competitive level as an able-bodied athlete. Competitive was defined as involvement in tournament play including the National Club level. Approval

for this study was granted by a University Research Ethics Board.

Intervention/Main Outcome Measures

Interviews consisted of two parts. In the first part, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993) served as the basis for the semi-structured interview guide. This scale contains 10 items with 4 subscales that assess self-identity, social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity (Martin, Mushett & Ecklund, 1994). Participants responded to items on a 7-point Likert scale and were asked follow-up questions to explore responses within the context of reverse integration. The second part of the interview involved exploring the themes from the previous study (Spencer-Cavaliere et al, in preparation). The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach (Morse & Field, 1995).

Main Results

The analysis resulted in the emergence of five themes. Four of these themes provided support for the inclusion of AB athletes: (1) athletic identity, (2) teaching and learning, (3) teamwork, and (4) opportunities. Only the fifth theme, (5) outsider perspectives, was identified as a challenge to reverse integration. All participants expressed a strong identification with the role of athlete, and perceived athletes with disability as able and athletic. A number of participants also expressed that the athletes with disabilities were better than the AB athletes. Teaching and learning were important components of the wheelchair basketball context. Athletes with disabilities played a critical role in the teaching of wheelchair skills, game play and disability awareness. Aspects of the game related to teamwork were apparent as athletes discussed the importance of classification.

Classification was primarily associated with diverse, yet valued player role expectations as opposed to disability. Teamwork related to these different roles facilitated the execution of specific wheelchair basketball strategies. From the perspective of the AB athletes, their involvement in the sport increased opportunities for the athletes with and without disabilities to compete at higher levels, to develop more teams and to promote awareness of wheelchair basketball. Finally, participants referred to the misconceptions of outsider perspectives about AB involvement. These misconceptions included thinking AB players were mocking people with disabilities and taking away their spots on teams. Participants spoke about the need to educate the public about reverse integration.

Conclusions

The results of this study support much of what was found in the study by Spencer-Cavaliere et al. (in preparation). Collectively these themes challenge many of the assumptions of disability as difference. Furthermore, these results suggest that reverse integration in wheelchair basketball may provide an important and unique opportunity for the development of equal status relationships and to create awareness of the abilities of people with disabilities.

Source of funding:

Sport Science Association of Alberta (SSAA) through the ASRPWF.

For more information contact:

Dr. Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, E-488 Van Vliet Center, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2H9.

