Baseball 4 All: Providing Inclusive Sport and Leisure Spaces for Persons with Disabilities

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Persons with disabilities are less likely than their peers to engage in leisure time physical activity (Cunningham, 2015) and these gaps have grown over time (Liu, 2009). Research points to a number of reasons for these disparities, most of which have focused on the constraints people have to leisure activities (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). For instance, Freudenberg and Arlinghaus (2010) observed that while sport participants with disabilities were more likely than their able-bodied peers to experience social benefits, they also experienced more constraints. Similarly, persons with disability face unique constraints to engaging in physical activities (Burns & Graefe, 2007; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2013; Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2014). Recent work also suggests these constraints are complex and multidimensional (Darcy, Lock, & Taylor, in press).

Collectively, this scholarship suggests that persons with disabilities encounter sundry and varied constraints in seeking to participate in leisure activities. The purpose of the current research was to examine the efficacy of efforts to overcome these constraints to ensure persons with disabilities could be active and enjoy the benefits of leisure participation. These efforts coalesced around an integrated baseball league, Baseball 4 All (B4A), designed for children with physical and mental disabilities to participate alongside their able-bodied peers (know as buddies). Thus, the guiding question for this study was: what are factors influencing participation in B4A?

Theoretical Framework
Green (2005) put forth a conceptual sport development model that highlighted athlete recruitment, athlete retention, and athlete transitions. She noted: “Recruitment requires the assistance of significant others, as well as the proliferation of many smaller, local-level sport programs. Retention requires a focus on motivation, socialization, and commitment. Advancement requires that programs be linked vertically and that athletes be aided in processes of locating and socializing into new levels of involvement” (p. 233). Several researchers have utilized this sport development framework in exploring tennis (Brouwers, De Bosscher, & Sotiriadou, 2012), golf (Sotiriadou, 2013), triathlon (Newland & Kellett, 2012; Phillips & Newland, 2014), and even refereeing (Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2013). This research highlights the value of considering the various systems and pathways of athlete and referee development, and also illustrate that much of the sport development scholarship has focused on elite sport. While it is important to develop these pathways, it is vital to consider how a sport development model can be used to structure and deliver sport for (a) persons who want to engage in sport but not at a high level of competition and (b) those who might have otherwise been dismissed or overlooked in other sport and leisure activities. Therein lies the importance of considering how to deliver sport and leisure with a justice orientation and inclusive mindset (Henderson, 2014; Misener & Darcy, 2014).

Research Context
Unified Sports is a global program that joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team (MacLean, 2008). Unified Sports has steady grown in participation, and approximately 19% of the Special Olympians compete in the unified programs (Special Olympics, 2015). Empirical research supports the value of such integrated programs. For example studies comparing unified (integrated) and segregated programs indicate unified sports participants with intellectual disabilities increased social competence, friendships (Özer et al., 2012), athletic skills and performance (Baran et al., 2013; Ninot et al., 2005), while decreasing problem behaviors (Özer et al., 2012). Even more encouraging, individuals without intellectual disabilities benefit through an increased social awareness (Baran et al., 2011; Grandisson et al., 2012; Hassan et al., 2012). Overall, the research points towards unified sport programing aiding in better assimilating individuals with intellectual disabilities into society.

Current Study
In an effort to integrate the aforementioned literature, we utilize a sport development framework (Green, 2005;
Sotiriadou et al., 2008) to explore various factors that influence participation in a sport for development program. The B4A program was designed to deliver sport opportunities for persons with both physical and intellectual disabilities. As we explain in the following section, we focus on the coaches’ perceptions to address the guiding research question of this study (i.e., what are factors influencing participation in B4A?).

Method
Utilizing a case study approach, the primary researcher served as a B4A participant observer and insider-researcher (Munhall, 2007; Yin, 2009) and conducted interviews with B4A coaches (n = 7). Thus, we were able to gather information from at least one coach from each of the teams in the league. While the research question focused on factors influencing people’s participation in B4A, we focused on coaches’ responses because (a) participants were age 4 to 18 and had intellectual disabilities, while (b) the coaches were not members of a vulnerable population and had between 4 to 19 years of experience in working with the players and the league.

Participants took part in semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. In addition to collecting basic demographic information, the participants responded to questions pertaining to (a) why they were involved in B4A, (b) why they believed the participants and parents were involved, (c) factors associated with the culture and cooperation in the league, (d) outcomes associated with participation for the players, buddies, and coaches, and (e) any additional information they sought to add. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded following Munhall’s (2007) recommendations. This included open coding, which grouped data into abstract categories or themes that described salient characteristics of B4A. Member checks, peer review, and subsequent member checks of the emerged themes and conclusions were conducted to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness.

Results and Discussion
Congruent with Sport Development framework (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2008) the results fit into the recruitment and retention phases. Based on participant feedback, upon initial entry or recruitment into B4A two themes emerged: Inclusiveness and Joy. The former theme referred to the overall welcoming of individuals regardless of ability, while the latter captured the candid happiness and delight that was expressed by the participants as they took part in B4A.

The retention stage represents when participants actively choose to stay in a program, and the reinforcements and supports that facilitate this continued participation (Green, 2005). Unfortunately, at this stage it became evident that reinforcements and supports did not exist. Rather the overarching theme that emerged was Organizational Failure. This theme was comprised of elements related to the disorder, communication breakdowns, and lack of strong leadership.

Results point to several implications. Practically, sport and leisure services for persons with disabilities should ensure participants realize many benefits associated with their involvement (Green, 2005). One way to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a program is through a sport development lens. In doing so, this case offers numerous suggested on how a unified program might capitalize on its strengths and begin to address some organizational failures.