Reverse Integration through Wheelchair Basketball: Motivations and Experiences of Participants

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Reverse integration (RI) can be defined as the inclusion of able-bodied people within adaptive sports (Spencer-Cavaliere & Peers, 2011). There has been debate as to whether RI is positive or negative for the disability rights movement. Thiboutot, Smith, and Labanowich (1992) argued that the concept of RI in wheelchair basketball violated the fundamental precepts and concepts that make up the foundation of adaptive sport and does not allow for true leisure for the participants. Brasile (1992) responded by arguing that prohibiting RI in wheelchair basketball and other wheelchair sports promoted “handicapism,” described as the widespread prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities, or PWDs (Taylor, 2006).

Positive experiences in RI environments have been studied from multiple viewpoints recently. Medland and Ellis-Hill (2008) found that people without disabilities participate in adaptive sport because they desire to share an activity with a friend or family member, and they continued participation due to friendship, the challenge of the sport, achievement within the sport, the competition, and for the opportunity to change public perceptions of disability despite noting a disadvantage due to poor chair skills. Able-bodied athletes said their assumptions that wheelchair basketball was easy were proven wrong, and that they found the game more physically demanding and complex than ambulatory basketball (Bright, 2012).

Fiorilli et al. (2013) found that positive benefits of RI resulted in invisibility of disability (focusing on the sport rather than disability) and an altered view of the wheelchair and sport. Individuals in RI environments have identified the wheelchair as sporting equipment they appreciated instead of a restrictive medical device (Fiorilli et al., 2013; Hutzler, Chacham-Guber, & Reiter, 2013). Furthermore, individuals identified their experiences simply as sport rather than adaptive sport and RI allowed for the participants of any ability level to experience positive self-image and athletic identity (Fortenbach, Huron, Locatelli, & Locherer, 2013; Medland & Ellis-Hill, 2008; Spencer-Cavaliere & Peers, 2011).

Bright (2012) also found that participation in an RI setting changed attitudes and perceptions about disability and adaptive sport, creating a respect for adaptive sport participants and establishing newfound commonalities among both groups. A control group who did not participate in the wheelchair basketball games showed no change in their perceptions of PWDs, indicating that participation in an RI sport setting can change the long-standing negative perceptions of PWDs (Bright, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivations and experiences of college students participating in a reverse integration wheelchair basketball program. Participants were invited when they registered for a wheelchair basketball educational session open to all students at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United States. Registered students were sent an e-mail inviting them to participate in an online survey two days prior to the wheelchair basketball event. Attendees were also invited to complete a paper survey if they did not participate online. The pre-event survey focused on motivations for participating in an RI wheelchair basketball event on campus. An e-mail was sent to attendees following the event with questions focused on experiences of participating in an RI wheelchair basketball event on campus, modified from Bright’s (2012) qualitative inquiry of reverse integration. Both surveys contained open-ended questions as well as demographic questions. Open coding was performed by highlighting and color-coding similar text and assigning the group a code that best defined the concepts and categories. Axial coding then confirmed open code accuracy and connected related code groups. From there, data were analyzed by the three researchers for themes, with any differences discussed until an agreement could be reached.
Preliminary data collection took place in the 2015-16 academic year with plans for further data collection during the 2016-17 academic year at RI wheelchair basketball events. From the preliminary phase of data collection, 19 students (11 men) participated with a mean age of 20.6 years and the majority with an academic classification of junior or senior. A majority of participants did not self-identified as not having a disability. Findings on motivation to participate showed that students had very little to no knowledge of wheelchair basketball prior to participating and anticipated it to be challenging and fun. Students were attracted to trying something different in a sport setting and anticipated a fun, exciting, and interesting experience. Post-event findings revealed that students were nervous, uncertain, and scared when they first sat in a sport wheelchair. They had fun playing in the chair, but it was more difficult than they anticipated, supporting prior research by Bright (2012). Students described playing wheelchair basketball as “rewarding” with an intention to play in the future (Medland & Ellis-Hill, 2008). Finally, students said playing the sport changed their views on disability, also supporting work by Bright (2012) that found participation changed attitudes toward adaptive sport and disability.

This study supports prior work that argues the positive outcomes of RI using wheelchair sport. However, it counters the literature that the environment may not necessarily support a positive athletic identity because participants were not immediately successful at the sport (Fortenbach et al., 2013; Medland & Ellis-Hill, 2008; Spencer-Cavaliere & Peers, 2011) and participants did not express a view of the sport wheelchair as equipment rather than a symbol of disability. This study revealed that able-bodied participants experienced discomfort when they first used the sport wheelchairs because it was new to them. Further exploration in this area could potentially shed light on how to overcome discomfort prior to playing and how campus programming could better reach college students through inclusive sport. Practical implications from this study show that college campus recreational staff face initial challenges in establishing a culture of inclusion through RI due to social stigma attached to disability and disability equipment, but may see greater results when students actually participate in wheelchair sport.