Strategies and Challenges in Governing an Integrated Sport Organization

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Context
The Canadian sport system is largely government-funded, and is comprised of distinct sport organizations at the national, provincial, and municipal levels. Due to this structure, sport in Canada is heavily influenced by political priorities which determine how much and where funding is distributed. As demonstrated by the Federal Policy on Sport for Persons with a Disability (2006), as well as various provincial-level accessibility legislations (e.g. Accessibility for Ontarians with a Disability Act), inclusion, equity, and accessibility are of top priority for all levels of the Canadian government. As such, sport organizations have been tasked with becoming more inclusive and integrated (able-bodied and parasport governed within one organization) in order to qualify for government funding. Swimming Canada claims to be the first integrated national sport organization in the country. The organization began integrating swimming for all abilities within one governing body in the late 1980s, and the process of integration has continued to evolve ever since. While the culture of the national organization seems to push access and inclusion for swimmers of all abilities, there are unique challenges that arise at each level of the sport delivery system impacting that goal. The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges encountered, and the strategies used to overcome these challenges, in governing an integrated sport organization.

Review of Literature
Research interrogating integration of disability cricket in the able-bodied sport organization found that while operations were aligned to deliver integrated sport (superficial change), little had been done in the way of attitudinal change towards persons with a disability (Kitchin & Howe, 2014). Howe (2007) further investigated integration in Athletics Canada using Sorensen and Kahrs’ (2006) ‘continuum of compliance’. It was determined that sport delivery within Athletics Canada did not reflect ‘true integration, but rather landed somewhere between assimilation and segregation. Misener and Darcy (2014) suggested conceptualizing disability sport management across the spectrum of inclusion. Using the inclusion spectrum, the authors demonstrate how research has explored five different ways that disability sport is managed; fully integrated, modified integrated, parallel, adapted, and discrete (Misener & Darcy, 2014). At the international level, Misener and Molloy (2017) discuss the tension between the ideas of distinction and integration in the context of Paralympic and Olympic organization. While this article focuses on mega-event organizing committees, the tension discussed by the authors demonstrates challenges and uncertainty that exist across all levels of sport delivery.

Methodology and Theoretical Perspective
A case study methodology was used to investigate how one Canadian sport (swimming) works towards integration. Nine individuals from national, provincial, and local sport organizations were interviewed. Annual reports and strategic plans from both the national and provincial organization were collected and analyzed. The analysis process first involved a round of open, iterative coding. The second round of analysis, guided by themes that emerged from the initial round of coding, involved thematic coding.

Neo-institutionalism allows the researcher to explore three types of ‘pressure’ when investigating organizational change and broader systemic pressures; normative, coercive, and memetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). This approach has previously been used to investigate change within the Canadian sport system, and how agents impact the system as a whole (e.g. Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards, Mason, & Washington, 2009). In the case of swimming, this perspective allows us to examine pressures experienced by the provincial and local sport organizations, challenges that arise due to those pressures, and the strategies each organization uses to overcome them.
Preliminary Results and Discussion

Since Swimming Canada’s initial point of integration in 1993, a culture of inclusivity has trickled down to the provincial and local levels of the sport as well. However, each level of delivery in the Canadian sport system experiences different challenges in working towards the national organization’s overarching goal of integration. These challenges, and the strategies each organization uses to overcome them, emerged throughout the interview and document analysis process. Our initial results suggest that while there is a sport-wide understanding that integration of all swimmers into the organization is the ultimate goal, there are challenges in how that goal actually plays out in the daily operations and governance of the sport. A widely-accepted definition of integration does not yet exist, nor do any evaluation protocols to measure success. Further, the tension between attempting to treat all athletes as ‘the same’ while still providing meaningful competition and development opportunities based on individual needs remains.

Given Swimming Canada’s position as the first organization in Canada to move towards integration, there is no model upon which to mimic their actions. While being a first adopter in this realm may provide some advantages, there is no distinct ‘best practice’ to governing an integrated sport organization. Should an integrated sport system be established as the best practice in Canadian sport, challenges in language use, distinct athlete needs, and evaluation protocols need to be addressed. Despite a vision of integration and inclusion from the national sport organization and its partner organizations, doubt remains as to whether this goal is being met, and even whether it should be part of overall sport governance goals.