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Experiencing the social environment of a canoe-kayak club: A case study of a Special Olympics program

Recreational sport provides a leisure, and community opportunity to many people. Specifically, recreational sport – where competition is not the goal and is not part of the educational system – can provide continuity during the transition from youth to adulthood when many life changes occur (e.g., career). For individuals with an intellectual disability (ID), this transitional period of emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25 years) may be extremely important as there is an abrupt ending to programming and services after adolescence. The purpose of this study was to critically explore the social environment and experiences of the individuals involved in a recreational sport program for athletes with an ID. Using a two-month instrumental case study design of a Special Olympics (SO) paddling program held at a canoe-kayak club, multiple qualitative methods were implemented to critically interpret the social environment: photography, videography, field observations, and formal and informal interviews. Participants were four athletes (one female; three with autism spectrum disorder and one with mild ID), three fathers, and one each of coach, program coordinator, and administrator. An adductive analysis was used to explore the social environment in its entirety. First, an inductive analysis was conducted followed by a deductive analysis using the quality parasport participation framework as a lens. Findings highlight the indirect disablism perceived in the program with limited training and preparation for the staff and the complexity of providing a service to athletes with a variety of social and communication impairments. Furthermore, parents engaged in hidden labour while playing a vital role in the involvement of their adult children in the SO paddling program. Meanwhile peers held an important but background role in the program. Implications for coaching practices and research are discussed, including the importance of variable communication, coaching, and data collection strategies when working with athletes with an ID.