

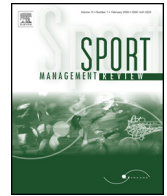


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‘Yes we are inclusive’: Examining provision for young people with disabilities in community sport clubs

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ABSTRACT

The last two decades within Australia have witnessed a range of policies and strategies seeking to promote the inclusion of young people with disabilities within mainstream community sport clubs. Whilst research at an institutional level has highlighted the problems with mainstreaming agendas, few studies have examined how grassroots clubs, as key components of the supply side of inclusive provision seek to respond to such policy imperatives. In this paper, therefore, the authors provide a critical analysis of the ways in which clubs engage with inclusion policies in practice. Theoretically, the authors draw on the concept of policy enactment and educational inclusivity. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with club volunteers, the findings illustrate three key areas. Firstly, the importance of individual volunteers in establishing and developing provision within clubs; secondly, the largely separatist nature of disability provision within clubs; and thirdly, that policies tend to encourage club to focus on narrow forms of participation that lead to competitive pathways and mirror the structure of mainstream sport. In the conclusion, the authors problematize the notion of inclusion presented in policy and practice, suggesting such imperatives do not encourage a holistic approach.

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1. Introduction

Inclusion has become a key priority of sports governing bodies in Australia and internationally (Fletcher, 2014; McDonald, 2005; Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2014). Within Australia, National and State Sporting Associations (NSAs and SSAs) continue to

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develop policies and strategies aimed at making sport more inclusive, welcoming, and accessible for all participants (e.g., [Basketball Victoria, 2011](#); [Cricket Australia, 2014](#); [Swimming Australia, 2016](#)). However, little is known about how sport clubs, as key organisations responsible for delivering inclusion agendas within local communities, respond to inclusion policy imperatives and the influence they have on club provision.

In this paper, we explore the means by which a sample of mainstream community sport clubs have approached and sustained provision for young people with disabilities. The overarching purpose of the paper is to contribute to knowledge examining how clubs implement or enact inclusion imperatives and agendas in practice. We consider two specific research questions. Firstly, we ask: what do approaches to inclusion look like within community sport clubs? Following on from this, we consider: how do clubs respond to and manage inclusion policies?¹ The two research questions are interwoven. It is through examining the second research question that we can begin to understand why clubs have adopted particular approaches to inclusion that are outlined in our discussion of the first research question. As we will demonstrate, there is a complex relationship between how clubs operationalise inclusion and how this has been influenced by broader structures and agendas. This process is not linear: whilst policy influences clubs' engagement with inclusion, the approaches they adopt are affected by other factors within the club environment. We therefore examine both processes of and approaches to inclusion. In examining the nuances of the relationships between policies and the approaches clubs utilise, we seek to contribute to the growing sport policy implementation literature, particularly the implementation of policies within voluntary community club settings ([Fahlén, Eliasson, & Wickman, 2015](#); [Skille, 2008, 2001](#); [Stenling & Fahlén, 2016](#)).

To critically frame our analysis of the inclusive approaches clubs use, we utilise [DeLuca's \(2013\)](#) interdisciplinary inclusion framework. For the second question, we draw on the theoretical concept of policy enactment ([Ball, 2003](#); [Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011](#)). The findings illustrate that key individuals and club contexts play a pivotal role in the enactment of inclusion policies; however, whilst clubs involved in this study are far ahead of many others, their approaches to inclusion tend to remain grounded in discourses of separation and exclusion. In the following section, we provide a literature review across two areas of focus: literature regarding mainstream sport and people with disabilities, to highlight the discourses that underpin organisational and institutional understandings of inclusion within sport; and policy implementation within community sport clubs.

2. People with disabilities and mainstream sport

Traditionally, disability groups have organised sport participation opportunities for people with disabilities in sport ([Fay & Wolff, 2009](#)). However, in the last three decades, sports governing bodies have increasingly sought to promote the integration and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in mainstream sport ([Sorensen & Kahrs, 2006](#)), encouraging sporting associations and governing bodies rather than disability-specific sports organisations to take responsibility for this ([Kitchin & Howe, 2014](#)). [Kitchin and Howe \(2014\)](#) term this the process of mainstreaming, or “integrating the delivery and organisation of all organised sporting opportunities to ensure a more coordinated and inclusive sporting system” (p. 66).

The organisation of disability sport in Australia has followed similar patterns to systems in the UK and Canada. Until the 1990s, few NSAs or SSAs supported the sport participation of people with disabilities. Consequently, numerous small agencies supporting participation for those with specific disabilities (e.g. Ausrapid representing individuals with intellectual disabilities, Blind Sports Australia) or in specific sports (e.g. Riding for the Disabled Association) existed at a national and state level, leading to a disjointed organisational structure ([Richards, 2015](#)). However, after the 2000 Sydney Olympics, supported by the Australian Sports Commission, the Australian Paralympic Committee initiated and guided a mainstreaming process whereby the NSAs assumed responsibility for integrating disability provision within their organisational structures ([Richards, 2015](#)). This process has been supported through a range of national level initiatives, such as the Project Connect scheme developed in 2003, which aimed to support NSAs, SSAs and sport clubs with the mainstreaming process. A range of policy documents have reinforced the ASCs commitment to supporting inclusion via mainstreaming with *Australian Sport: The Pathway to Success*, for example, emphasising the importance of an integrated, whole-of-sport approach to promoting inclusion ([Sotiriadou & Wicker, 2014](#)).

Although research examining mainstreaming of disability sport provision is not extensive, researchers conducted a series of studies in the UK ([Kitchin & Howe, 2014](#)), Canadian ([Howe, 2007](#)), and Norwegian contexts ([Sorensen & Kahrs, 2006](#)). These highlight how most governing bodies adopt an assimilation approach to the integration of disability provision and tend to attempt to absorb and promote it within their existing structures and practices. [Sorensen and Kahrs \(2006\)](#) and [Kitchin and Howe \(2014\)](#) argue this has led to an organisational focus on individuals with particular types of disabilities that can most easily be integrated into the current system. [Sorensen and Kahrs \(2006, p. 199\)](#) suggest that:

... the results of an assimilation process may be that the best athletes with a disability survive in mainstream sport. However, those with greater needs for support and resources will not be able to adopt the practices and values of able-bodied sport and therefore have fewer opportunities to participate.

¹ Whilst inclusion can refer to the engagement of young people of all backgrounds and abilities within community sport within this paper we are specifically using inclusion to refer to the involvement of young people with disabilities.

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