



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Disability and Health Journal

journal homepage: www.disabilityandhealthjnl.com

Instructing children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Examining swim instructors' knowledge building experiences

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 May 2017

Received in revised form

14 November 2017

Accepted 19 November 2017

Keywords:

Autism

ASD

Swim instructing

Inclusion

Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

Background: Although there has been a notable increase in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses over the past twenty years, children with ASD continue to be underrepresented in physical activity opportunities. Swimming lessons have been suggested as an ideal form of physical activity for this population, but studies exploring instructors' experiences gaining knowledge specific for instructing these swimmers remains limited. Research in this area is warranted, as drowning is a leading injury cause of death for persons with ASD.

Objective: The purpose of this brief report was to examine swim instructors' preferred knowledge sources for building their individual swimming lessons, catered to swimmers with ASD. Moreover, this study aimed to provide context specific insights for instructors and instructor educators to increase new and future instructors' preparedness for meeting the needs of this population.

Methods: Three recreational swim instructors were recruited for this qualitative study. Data were collected using a demographic questionnaire, observations, and semi-structured interviews. Analysis was completed using Braun & Clarke's guide for thematic analysis.

Results: The results indicated that swim instructors' sources for building knowledge included: learning from peers/mentors, receiving support from parents/caregivers, and participating in additional certification programs or training.

Conclusion: With a more extensive understanding of instructors' knowledge building experiences, instructor educators may integrate this knowledge into future development programs to prepare a greater number of trained individuals to facilitate physical activities for children with ASD.

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, there has been a considerable increase in the number of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD),¹ but a lack of physical activity (PA) opportunities to support their needs.² This trend is problematic as this growing population spends less time participating in physical activities than their peers,^{3,4} despite evidence showing that sport and PA may enhance youth development.⁵ It has been shown that aquatic activities are among the preferred forms of PA for persons with a disability,⁶ including children with ASD.⁷ Some reasons for this

preference may be attributed to the enhanced development of motor skills achieved through participation in aquatic activities,⁸ as well as the notable increase of social interactions.⁹ In addition to these benefits, learning to swim is a crucial competency, as drowning is a leading injury cause of death for children with this diagnosis. This risk has resulted in literature calling for assistance in providing swimming lessons for children with ASD as a prevention measure.¹⁰ Unfortunately, in practice, it seems that swim instructors receive limited training to plan lessons for children with disabilities, which in turn has been shown to impact their attitudes towards including children with severe disabilities into their lessons.¹¹ There is a need for a more refined understanding of how instructors are building knowledge to instruct children with ASD, so that this knowledge may be translated to others and increase instructor preparedness to meet the needs of this population.

Recently, empirical research on coaches' knowledge building experiences for coaching athletes with physical disabilities has

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2017.11.002>

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received increased interest.^{12–14} Additionally, contributions to literature have introduced activities and assessments for instructing children with disabilities in aquatics¹⁵ and an educational model of adapted aquatic instruction has been developed.¹⁶ Notwithstanding these advances, exploring instructors' educational experiences and knowledge building sources for instructing swimmers with ASD is still lacking. In one of the few studies conducted in this area, Jull and Mirenda¹⁷ developed and assessed an aquatic-based instructor training program for teaching children with ASD. Results indicated that five out of six instructors showed instructional skill acquisition, however, this program was specific to community pools. To our knowledge this training program is not readily accessible to instructors.

The following brief report aims to build on literature by exploring instructors' knowledge building experiences for instructing swimmers with ASD. Our quest is to propose a more refined picture of how instructors develop their lessons, and inform future instructor education programs. Moreover, our hope is that these findings will guide instructors to sources that will enhance their knowledge for implementing aquatic activities for children with ASD. The main research question guiding this brief report is: How do swim instructors acquire knowledge to effectively instruct swimmers with ASD?

Methods

A qualitative case study approach¹⁸ was an appropriate methodological fit, as the small sample size and specific bounded unit (swim instructors with a basic certification and at least a year of experience swim instructing) enabled rich insights into the participants' experiences.¹⁹ This paired well with the intended aims of the study, to provide a greater understanding of instructors' knowledge building experiences.

Participants

Upon receiving ethical approval from the researchers' University ethics board, several aquatic facilities in the Ottawa and Toronto areas (private and public) were contacted by the primary researcher. Four swim instructors contacted the primary researcher and expressed interest in participating. One of the instructors had been instructing for six months, which fell short of the bounded scope of the research. Ultimately, three swim instructors were recruited by criterion-based sampling.²⁰ These instructors had participated in Canadian Red Cross swim instructor training or Life Saving Society instructor training and taught at least one child with an ASD diagnosis during the time of data collection. A table of swim instructors' demographic information is provided in (Table 1).

Data collection

Data collection methods included: a demographic questionnaire, observations and interviews. The demographic questionnaire

served as an initial data source to ascertain the swim instructors' experiences and education. As suggested in previous research, both closed²¹ and descriptive questions²² were utilized to create a holistic account of the instructors' biographies. An observation period followed where the primary researcher observed the swim instructors in action and compiled field notes. The observations took place on two occasions during swimming lessons with the purpose of identifying strategies used by the instructors, so that during the follow-up interviews the researcher could inquire into how they learned these specific strategies. Each lesson was approximately 45 min and consisted of either an individual or small group lesson (approximately 3 swimmers). Following the two observational periods, interviews were conducted (a sample of interview questions can be found in Appendix A) which consisted of primarily open-ended questions,²³ along with probes for in-depth accounts²⁴ of the instructors' experiences. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Upon referencing studies on coaching practices,^{12,25,26} Braun and Clark's²⁷ six step guide to thematic analysis was utilized. The six phases include: 1) familiarising yourself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. The primary researcher read and re-read transcripts to familiarize herself with the data and developed initial codes. These codes were representative of the instructors' knowledge building experiences and were refined into themes to answer the guiding research question. The researcher participated in a reflective exercise to limit biases and develop final themes representative of the swim instructors' experiences. Considering the primary researcher was a novice researcher at the point of analysis, the secondary, more seasoned researcher acted as a critical colleague and promoted further insights into the development of themes.

Trustworthiness

In coaching, Sparkes²⁸ suggested that the trustworthiness of data reflect time and place characteristics. Collecting data from each instructor over a consecutive two week period enhanced the continuity of the observed lessons. The deliberate decision to include instructors from two aquatic facilities, with differing instructor certifications, also reinforced the trustworthiness as various instructor experiences could be captured. In addition, the primary researcher is a first year PhD candidate with a research focus on disability coach development. She is also a former swim instructor with ten years of experience and has instructed numerous swimmers with ASD. Finally, data were triangulated to account for consistencies and inconsistencies between the multiple sources of data. This was an appropriate strategy, as Culver, Gilbert, and Sparkes,²⁹ have suggested that there are often discrepancies between coaches' dialogue in interviews and what they actually do

Table 1
Instructor demographic information.

Instructors ^a	Adam	Jennifer	Jason
Instructor Certification	Canadian Red Cross	Lifesaving Society	Lifesaving Society
Number of Years Instructing	5 Years	1.5 years	2 years
Number of Years Instructing Children with ASD	5 Years	6 months	8 months
Ethnicity	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Age	20 Years	16 Years	16 Years
Sex	Male	Female	Male

^a Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity.

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