

Experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities concerning factors influencing participation in recreational sports at a University in the Western Cape Province, South Africa

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Abstract

South African universities share a common purpose to make sport and recreation accessible to students at higher education institutions, including students with disabilities. Therefore, integrating students with disabilities into the daily activities of any university institution is important as it may be beneficial for them to participate in recreational activities on campus. This study focuses on the experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities regarding recreational sport whilst at university. A qualitative methodological framework was employed. A sample of five students with disabilities was purposefully selected and face-to-face interviews as well as follow-up telephonic interviews were arranged. A list of cue questions guided the interview to ensure it flowed logically. Interviews were tape recorded (with written consent from participants) and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews were analysed using thematic data analysis. Physical, social and managerial constraints are not the only forms of inaccessibility, experience and perceptions, also play a role towards recreational sport participation for students with disabilities. The findings of this study indicated that the benefits of active participation lead to increased cognitive awareness and expression of internal motivation to pursue recreational sport on campus. The findings also denote that being coerced into sports and skill level leading to intimidation are factors that inhibit the pursuit for active leisure participation. This study lends itself to a fresh understanding of how to better cater for recreational sporting needs of university students with disabilities.

Keywords: Recreational sport, perceptions and experiences, students with disabilities, university.

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Introduction

Recreation plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion, improving health and wellness and creating functional communities (RSA, 2011). The recreational

environment enhances the psychosocial development in the life of a person with a disability and adds great value to the transition phase from secondary school to tertiary level for students with disabilities (Adams & McCubbin, 1991; Da Gama, 2000). However, research shows that physical activity decreases considerably from secondary to tertiary levels of education (Bray & Born, 2004; Tumusiime & Frantz, 2006).

Walker (1999) recommends that recreational skills be developed, as this aids in facilitating integration into mainstream society. To this end, Sport and Recreation South Africa (SRSA) and many universities across South Africa share a common purpose, which is to make sport and recreation accessible to students at tertiary education institutions (USSA, 2011). The White Paper on Sport and Recreation for the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 2011) clearly stipulates that transformation policies and programmes must address the issue of sport and recreation for people with disabilities. To facilitate this process, a recreation ministerial advisory committee was setup in 2012, by the Minister of Sport and Recreation, Fekile Mbalula to address recreation opportunities in the country adequately. It is in fact an objective of the White Paper on Integrated National Disability Strategy (RSA, 1997) to “develop and extend sporting activities for people with disabilities in both mainstream and special facilities, so that they can participate in sport for both recreational and competitive purposes.”

Da Gama (2000) explains that participating in recreational sport provides a relaxed and less inhibiting environment to acquire social and recreational skills to be able to engage optimally in society at large. This is further echoed in the White Paper, which states:

“The value of sport and recreation as a social connector is one of its most powerful development attributes. Community sport and recreation networks are an important source of social networking, helping to combat exclusion and fostering communities’ capacity to work collectively to realise opportunities and address challenges” (RSA, 2011).

This movement by national government provides a powerful space and opportunity for students’ with disabilities to be adequately integrated across various social spheres whilst developing the necessary attributes required outside of the tertiary setting.

In their developing years, people with disabilities, would have dealt with many psychological issues, but on entering a tertiary level of education, they face a new set of social challenges. Although it is a legal requirement for students with disabilities to be integrated into the daily activities of educational institutions, the transition phase from a secondary to tertiary level remains a tremendous struggle

for them (Promis, Erevelles & Matthews, 2001). Students have to re-establish themselves in terms of academic status, social connectedness and personal identity after leaving a once familiar and safe school environment (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006).

In the transitional phase, participation by students with disabilities in recreational activity helps them to acquire recreational skills and to enhance their psychosocial development (Adams & McCubbin, 1991; Nolte, Wessels & Prinsloo, 2009). Recreational activities have been noted as vital components in quality of life; in this case, individuals with a disability are given the chance to express their individual gifts and share interests with a diversity of other people (Walker, 1999).

University Sports South Africa (USSA) has made it a part of their constitution to organise, regulate and coordinate sport and physical recreation activities at all levels across tertiary institutions in the country (USSA, 2011). This includes integrating students with disabilities into the daily activities of any university. Although recreation adds value to the transition phase of students with disabilities, further research needs to investigate the decrease in recreational sport participation among them. Therefore, in order to facilitate mainstream integration via recreational sports, infrastructures need to be set in place for them to access and enjoy the benefits of recreational sports.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions concerning factors influencing recreational sport participation by students with physical, auditory and/or visual disabilities at a University in the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodological framework using in-depth interviews. This method was useful as it allowed the participants to express their perceptions and experiences in their own words within a setting of their choice. A sample of five students with disabilities was purposively selected. The participants in this study included three full-time male students and two female students studying at a University in the Western Cape. The target group was made up of one hearing impaired male student, one visually impaired female student, two physically impaired male students and one physically impaired female student. Purposive sampling entailed selecting participants according to criteria that the researcher had established (De Vos, 2001). The criteria for this study were set on the basis that the students with disabilities have only visual, auditory and physical impairments. The reason for selecting these disabilities as the inclusive criterion was to gain perspectives about recreational sport accessibility from students with different types of disabilities under the umbrella

of disability simultaneously, diverting from accessibility relating just to wheelchair users.

A list of open-ended cue questions was prepared so that issues concerning the past and current experiences as well as the interpretation of recreational sports were addressed and that the interview flowed logically (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). With written consent from the participants, interviews were tape recorded, and each interview was transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Data were coded and analysed using thematic data analysis that entailed a thorough reading of transcripts. After coding and analysing the data into chunks of meaning, thematic categories were developed into narrative summaries. With regard to ethical considerations, permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Senate Higher Degrees Committee at the University of the Western Cape. With regard to ethical considerations of the participants, all information was treated with the strictest confidentiality and the identity of participants was protected in so far as their names or personal information were not included in the reporting of the findings. Pseudonyms were therefore used.

Results

The participants drew from their own experiences as these shaped their understanding of what recreational sport ought to be, hence their interpretations were subjective. Each participant interpreted recreational sports differently yet came to the same conclusion. For example, the participants referred to recreational sport as delighting in the sport without the enticement for winning.

...Recreational sport is something that has to do with just playing sport for fun beyond that I can't explain anything, but it is just you playing your sport for fun, perhaps you can also participate in competitions, but as long as it's the sport you enjoy... Kay

...Recreation is that which makes people recreate and to entertain themselves. Those who play sports compete among each other...recreational sport are a combination of the two... Bheki

...Recreational sport could be something that you do umm on a full-time basis that you participate in competitively without any sort of incentives or allowance that you brought by participating in. Sport, which is competitive which is also being done for fun... Josh

In answering the question, "What is your understanding of recreational sport?" each participant interpreted the activity as that of enjoyment before that of competition.

The participants further elaborated by giving accounts of their experiences and mentioned various sports including basketball, swimming, netball and athletics.

...Yes, but at the end of the day, it was also possible that you might not go to the place where you had to run or you had to throw your javelin you know your shot-put... I would like to play cricket...Kay

...I was a sportsman...in athletics, long jump and basketball...I would like to do something in sports, but I don't see anything happening...Bheki

...As I said it was swimming, volleyball, chess um, ja, I was quite active... Well it is something I wish I could do just for fun, its swimming cause I don't think at this level of competing and also, I was interested in basketball, wheelchair basketball...Josh

...Ja, used to like participating in sport, I don't know why. I went to two primary schools and the one I got caught in athletics and the other one was, soccer...and also netball...Nosizwe

As can be seen above, the participants were involved in either sports or recreational sports before attending university yet none of them continued in this fashion after registering for their tertiary level studies.

The excerpts below indicate the benefits of participating in recreational sports, which were the motivating factors as well.

...Besides knowing your class mates and the people that stay in res...through interacting and participating...free your mind in it and once you play recreational sports at varsity it also gives you a chance to compete nationally and internationally...Josh

...The two sports that I like are volleyball and swimming. And I also know how to work in a work- team, especially in the work-team at school, how to motivate one another and how to support one another...Riaan

*...coz I've got legs but what has happened, they are getting big because I am not playing any sports, you see?...Bheki
...So I ended up not doing the sports...most of the things that they are offering are mainstream sports... You don't really get motivated; you are not catered for anywhere...Nosizwe*

All except one of the participants were motivated to play recreational sports with other students. The perception of the student with a physical disability regarding her skill level is a deciding factor to engage in recreational sports or not. This is echoed by a participant:

...In the beginning it does matter. It just cannot be a mixed group. When they are introducing it (recreational sport) to me they can't bring me people who can jump and people who can run. I'll feel intimidated already. So I am not going to do anything...Nosizwe

The excerpts below indicate that both participants were forced to be involved in sports at a young age however the manner, in which it was conducted, created opposing perceptions of recreational sport.

...Jees, it was like I was forced. It's like that teacher who was very known of being able to beat people and if he wants you to do something, you will do it! That teacher that gave me that bad attitude about sport...Kay

...Because it was a boarding school some of these things weren't voluntary, you had to do it...when I participate in activity in sport it's a chance for a person to grow and get exposure...Josh

The attitudes of significant others, in this case teachers, had had both a positive and negative influence on the students' perceptions of sport.

The statement by one participant suggest that finances pose as a limitation, but the underlying tones in the participants' statements, suggest that they desired a sense of independence:

...If it's affordable for us to pay then we can. And it's really the duty of the campus to market that this is disadvantaged. We must just pay affordable fees if we do pay because like other people also pay, we cannot be like "we cannot pay, we are disable." If it's affordable, let's pay...Kay

...Although petrol can go up and down, if I had a full time job it (transport) wouldn't be a problem...Riaan

Kay and Riaan adopted an attitude of "if I could, I would" that exhibited the need to be financially independent.

Discussion

The participants' understanding of recreational sport was shaped according to their own unique experiences. During the one-on-one interviews, however, their definitions coincided closely, in that each participant described recreational sport as a "sport you play", either for "fun" or "sport" played on a "less competitive level". The participants' understanding of recreational sport was revealed as being in line with the National Intramural-Recreational Sport Association (NIRSA, 2004), whose mission is to provide education and development and quality recreational services within higher education to students and professionals alike. NISRA states that recreational sports are forms of recreation involving physical activity. This is consistent with Jones (1998) who reports that recreation specifically in the South African context "even if we narrow it to recreational sport and dance, is a great deal more accommodating than competitive sport". The participants' perceptions hold true to the South African perspective of recreational sport that it is more accommodating to people with disabilities than competitive sport.

All the participants were involved in athletics or sports during their primary and secondary levels of education. Therefore they understood and interpreted recreational sport according to the basis of sport. As in Josh and Kay's case, they interpreted recreational sports as playing sport for the fun of it and Bheki believed it to be a source of entertainment primary to competition. Thus previous sport participation has an influence on the participants' current perceptions (Tumusiime & Frantz, 2006). Josh mentioned that he was involved in swimming, volleyball and chess with the belief that it creates a platform for socialising with peers and fellow resident students. Riaan's participation in swimming and volleyball taught him how to work in a team and support them as well. Although the participants no longer participated in any form of sport or recreational sport, they maintained a positive attitude towards the value of recreational sports.

Despite the trend of non-participation among the participants, they understood that involvement in recreational sport yielded benefits. Josh mentioned terms like "knowing other people" and "free your mind", and Riaan communicated terms like "team-work and support one another", which indicated their appreciation of the benefits of recreational sport. Taub (1999) believes that it is important for students with disabilities to be encouraged and for opportunities to be created to allow them to participate fully in all physical recreational activities so that they can develop qualities and skills to empower themselves. Bheki understands that recreational sports improves his physical health by acknowledging that he needs to be active as his legs "are getting big". It is a fact that participation could enhance physical and mental wellbeing as portrayed by Bheki, facilitate integration into the broader community by breaking down social barriers, and assist with socialising and developing a more healthy society (Lindsay, 2012;

RSA, 2011; Jones, 1995). Benefits like, liberating the mind, enhancing teamwork and being physically fit, were cited in this study as motivating factors to engage in recreational sports. However, Nosizwe explained as a de-motivating factor the fact that the types of recreational sports on offer were only mainstream sports, indicating, as Wegner and Struthers (2011) point out, that the type of sports available also influenced the motivation to engage in it. In the case of Nosizwe, she felt de-motivated and excluded by the range of sports on offer at the university.

According to Jones (2004) lack of skill proves to be a deterrent that impacts negatively on recreational sport participation. In this study, for example, Nosizwe said that she felt uncomfortable with “people who can jump and run” as she has mobility impairment and her level of participation would be limited. She also expressed feelings of being intimidated. Her case shows that it is important to note the type of disability that recreational participants possess in order to know what type of recreational sport would most likely suit their ability and needs. Nosizwe was unlikely to participate in recreational sports that required her to run or jump. Her strength was in her arms so it would be more appropriate for her to play wheelchair table-tennis where the focus, in terms of reverse integration, would thus be on her ability rather than on her disability (Manfredo, 1992). At the same time, such a choice would place her in a more comfortable and less intimidating environment.

Sports or recreation participation correlates with the support of significant others, who could be parents, peers, teachers and coaches (Busby, 1997). Two participants in this study indicated that they were “forced” into playing sports at school. Kay has had a coach to act as her significant other but his hard and insensitive manner in which he coached her, negatively affected her perception and participation in recreational sport. Only upon entry into university, did Kay attempt to play cricket for the blind, and through that experience, she had changed her attitude towards sport in general. Josh had attended a boarding school where it was compulsory for each scholar to participate in at least two sporting codes. This mandate however, had instilled in him the understanding that interacting in sports was beneficial to an individual’s wellbeing. In Josh’s instance, the teachers were the significant others and although he was obliged to play sport, it affected him positively and he continued to engage in active leisure pursuits after leaving school. Although both respondents were forced to be involved in sport at a young age, the manner in which it was conducted determined the subsequent reactions and perceptions of these participants when they reached early adulthood. Kay was coerced into sports, which manifested a negative perception yet Josh reverently played sports and developed a more positive view of recreational sport participation. Therefore, attitude of significant others can influence the decision to be involved in active recreation.

In answering the question regarding the affordability to engage in recreational sport, both Kay and Riaan seemed to strive toward financial self-sufficiency. The following section reviews independence as a factor for active recreational involvement.

People with disabilities tend to strive for a certain level of independence so that they can control their environment to some extent (Kennedy, Austin & Smith, 1987). Hagedorn (2001) further emphasizes that applying learning opportunities to achieve personal goals can influence one's environment. According to Meyer (2005) both Kay and Riaan exhibited the need to be independent and achieve personal goals to positively influence their environment. Kay expressed her willingness to pay for recreational sport equipment should it be affordable and Riaan communicated that should he be employed on a full-time basis he could transport himself to participate in his recreational sport of choice. Although two different aspects viz. equipment and transport are discussed, financial independence seemed to be the shared desire amid Kay and Riaan.

Meyer (2005) is of the view that people should be concerned with creating liveable environments that are conducive to achieving the highest degree of self-fulfilment. He further suggests that recreation offers the opportunity for satisfying experiences and personal fulfilment. In this study, Kay's choice of not adopting the attitude "I cannot pay, we are disabled" and Riaan envisioning his full-time employment, cognitively placed each of them in an environment to personally develop. In turn they realise their sense of independence and take steps towards personal fulfilment.

Limitations

This study added a valuable contribution to understanding the perceptions of students with disabilities regarding limiting and facilitating factors toward recreational sport participation. This study could be seen as a pilot study in a venture to investigate the zero-low levels of recreational sport participation. This study could have added more value by using focus groups and have more students with an array of disabilities to gain a broader perspective of their recreational sport perceptions and experiences.

Despite the limitation of this study, the main objectives were met as it revealed that there were numerous unanswered questions concerning the zero-low levels of recreational sport participation among students with disabilities. This makes it imperative for further research to be conducted concerning the accessibility of recreational sport for students with disabilities.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings regarding students with disabilities and recreational sport the following recommendations are made:

- Activities that are offered on campus should mirror those that are offered prior to students with disabilities entering universities. This type of programme planning could allow for more active participation and retention in campus recreation programmes.
- Students who participate in campus recreation programmes should do so at their own leisure and not be pressured into doing so. Therefore it would be advisable to publish campus recreation programmes timeously to ensure that students participate when they deem fit to do so.
- Skilled personnel should be appointed to organise, promote and perform recreational programmes suited for students with various disabilities.
- Sports administrative and campus departments dealing with students with disabilities at university should be encouraged to work together. In this way the collaborative effort would make students aware of recreational sports and potentially cultivate an active lifestyle, and facilitate their transition from high school to university.
- Recreational sports should be promoted and serve as a common denominator together with academic studies to create an environment for socialising and participatory emphasis on ability rather than on lack of skill and inability.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show that all the participants have sport or recreational sport experience prior to entering university and none of them participated in any form of active recreation after registering for their study. They express their awareness of the benefits it yields yet they are inactive. It can be concluded that prior experience in participating in sport and recreation activities is by no means an indication of future participation or retention within recreation and leisure programmes at a tertiary level.

The findings of this study also indicate that being active in sports has bearing on how recreational sport is viewed, in this case, it is perceived in a positive light. Facilitating factors encouraging this perception are intrinsic motivation with the desire to interact and socialise with others. It can therefore be concluded that the benefits of active participation leads to increased cognitive awareness and expression of internal motivation to pursue recreational sport on campus.

The findings also denote that being coerced into sports and skill level leading to intimidation are factors that inhibit the pursuit of active leisure participation. Therefore, students should not be forced into active leisure participation as this could lead to poor retention or lower levels of participation in sport and recreation.

Although skill level does play a role in the decision making to play a specific recreational sport, however there is no conclusive evidence to show that skill level is an inhibiting factor to involvement in recreational sport.

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