Making Play a Positive Inclusive Experience for Differently Abled Students, Athletes, and Patients with Disabilities

Aubrey Shaw and Sharon Kay Stoll

Center for ETHICS*, Department of Movement Sciences, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83843, USA

Abstract: The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life. Agencies work diligently to meet the law’s demands with inclusionary practices, including public accommodations, engaging students in regular classes, offering regular activities through state and local government services. However, the practices though well-meaning often actually exclude impaired people from play. Thus, the purpose of this philosophical research paper is to educate physical activity professionals on the importance of play for people with impairments and provide skills and strategies for inclusive behavior. These skills and strategies will help professionals foster an inclusive environment that the laws expect them to uphold. The skills include but are not limited to: perspective change, assessing students’ physical capabilities, modifying activities to include all participants’ capabilities, engaging all students in inclusivity and fostering play enjoyment with participants of varying abilities, teaching confidence building skills, and educating students who do not want to be inclusive on the importance of play for everyone. Every professional should be successful at implementing an inclusive environment.

Key words: Play, disability, participation, physical education, recreation, adaptive sports.

1. Introduction

I am the director of the center for ETHICS* at the University of Idaho, located on the Moscow Campus. I have mentored approximately 40 students in their quest for a terminal degree. In all of these students’ programs, the underlying research of their dissertations has been directed toward sport and the importance of ethics. In general, our work at the center is about assessment of moral reasoning and moral development in competitive environments (sport, athletics and business). However, a more important part of our work is how education can affect moral reasoning and hopefully moral education and then moral conduct. Some of our assessment instruments have become gold standards of measurement, including the Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory [1] and the Rudd Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory [2]. At present, we have a reservoir of over 90,000 data sets in moral reasoning. Our curriculums have been used in various sporting venues globally, nationally, and regionally [3-8].

In order to accomplish the above research, our doctoral students study a broad range of psychological and philosophical literature in moral reasoning and ethics, but also delve into philosophical and ethical nature of play, games, and sport.

Two years ago, one of our current doctoral students, after reading a series of articles on play [9-11] and ethics [12] wrote a reflective paper on the possibility of play for the child with disabilities; she made an argument that I found to be implausible. She stated that children with disabilities seldom get the chance to play in their school experience. I challenged her that this could not be possible since US law about disability is quite clear, accommodations must exist. She made an argument that I found to be implausible. She stated that this could not be possible since US law about disability is quite clear, accommodations must exist. She argued that the existence of a law does not equal application of ethical practice. That is, just because a law exists, does not mean that the right thing is done. I had to pause and
Making Play a Positive Inclusive Experience for Differently Abled Students, Athletes, and Patients with Disabilities

reflect on this comment since we often use this argument in relation to historical law and ethics. A case in point is the classical Plessey versus Ferguson [13] (1896), where law was decidedly unethical. Also, Aubrey has great validity of experience both as a participant and researcher. She has an acquired physical disability and spent 12 years in public education in which the Americans with Disabilities Act [14] was in effect. She also participated in adaptive sport programs for six years with Minnesota Adaptive Athletics [15]. In the past two years, she completed seventeen graduate level credits in special education through the College of Education, University of Idaho, studying with professors who direct the State of Idaho’s center on Disabilities and Human Development [16]. Considering these parameters, experiences and education, perhaps she knew something that on the surface did not seem possible.

Obviously, sport and play opportunities for children with physical disabilities exist, she played in them. However, she argued that children with disabilities do not have a positive inclusive play experience. Yes, laws are in place to include differently abled students and athletes but the experience is highly limited and far from being positive and inclusive. Instead, she argued, children with disabilities are usually excluded, or given mundane activities during play for the abled bodied children. The able-bodied play, and the child with a physical disability serves as a line judge, keeps score, retrieves balls, manages equipment, takes attendance, or acts as a helper to the coach or instructor. The child with the disability may be included but not in a positive inclusive way. We argued over this topic for some time, in which I continued to cite the law—the programs must exist.

I doubted her until after giving two presentations at state and local professional meetings in which we interacted with clinicians who wanted information on how one actually positively includes the child with a physical disability [17, 18]. For example, a young teacher described a not so inclusive experience in a large school district where children with physical disabilities were in the gymnasium but “just standing around”. She wanted to know how to include them—obviously she was seeking advice on how to manage inclusion.

Interestingly in a national level webinar that we presented for Society of Health and Physical Education [19], the majority of our questions from the 60 people in the webinar were, “how can we include children with disabilities into the inclusive play environment?” “how do we motivate children with disabilities” and “please give us ideas and examples of how to do this and create a positive inclusive environment?”

In early November of the present year, we were contacted by the editor of this journal to write a paper on the present topic. Apparently, our presentation in 2016 [20], sparked an interest. We decided to take the initiative and submit a paper in an area in which the law does exist, but the ethics of practice appears not to exist.

Considering the above, the purpose of this article is to inform professionals in sport and physical education on the importance of actual play for people with disabilities and provide strategies and instructional methods for the teaching of inclusive physical education and sport opportunities for children with physical disabilities.

Even though, laws exist that protect the play experience for students with physical disabilities sometimes those laws are not interpreted equally or equitably. In this article, we will review the different laws that exist, discuss the current theories of disabilities, the importance of play for the child with disabilities, and offer tools and teaching strategies that can be integrated into a physical education classroom.

2. Laws

Three specific federal laws supposedly ensure children of all capabilities inclusion in the educational experience, including physical education and sport: The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 [14], The
Individuals with Disabilities Act 2004 [21] and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 [21]. The original goal of the US congress was not only to ensure children of all capabilities be included in education, and the laws also set the precedence for inclusion in our society.

The Americans with Disabilities Act, a civil rights law, states no discrimination in public life including schools, jobs, private places that are open to the public, and transportation of an individual with disabilities. The main purpose of the law is to allow equal opportunity [14]. All of which is good, however, each state has the option to interpret the law by its own parameters to suit what state’s population needs. At this point, the existence of a law does not mean ethical practice. For example, one state might provide many different fulfilling opportunities such as adaptive sports to the population whereas another state does not provide the same opportunities or perhaps any opportunities. Thus, the federal law may as well not exist in some interpretations.

Because of loop holes in the original law, the Individual with Disabilities Act was passed in 2004, which states, that students with disabilities have a right to a good education. The services that the students receive in school will be held accountable and have standards that the services must meet [21]. This act is specifically for schools to insure students with disabilities must attend and receive services to receive an equal education. Unfortunately, this law is also interpreted differently from state to state since state administrators can interpret the laws as they see fit for their state population.

A third law that applies to this discussion is section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which is much like the Americans with Disabilities Act in that it protects individuals from discrimination because of their disability. The individual cannot be excluded just because they have a disability. This law affects federally funded organizations because they are supported with federal assistance and it clearly states that those institutions who are getting federally funded may not exclude a sector of the population [21]. Section 504 explains that students should not be excluded from their physical education classes—they must be included if the classes exist.

However, data exist that even though the laws are clear, interpretation is not clear and dependent on interpretation. Perhaps the logic behind these diverse interpretations has to do with how educators review the law in relation to what they and the medical field decide what is “disabled”.

3. Models and Theories of Disability

Two types of theories exist concerning the definition and application of disability: medical and social. The medical model of disability stems from the power medical professionals have in labeling an individual as disabled. “The medical model of disability measures outcome in terms of mortality rates as well as the extent and severity of pathology of a disease” [22]. Therefore, an individual has no voice in describing the self as disabled, because the medical field makes that decision. The model makes sense because it is the medical field that does diagnose the disability. However, the medical model has great power in affecting how an individual perceives his or her condition and that perception can jeopardize his or her ability from participating in physical education, sport, or play.

However, the medical model is not the only model and is probably not the most powerful model of disability theory as applied to physical education, sport, and play.

A second theory, the social model of disability, gives the individual the power to say and choose if she or he is disabled. Tate and Pledger [23] have a unique perspective on the social model of disability. The person’s health behaviors and outcomes may be directly affected by the person’s coping ability and adaptation to the disability through the environment. That is, the environment and people in the environment have great power in affecting the person and the experience. Educators and teachers have to be willing
Making Play a Positive Inclusive Experience for Differently Abled Students, Athletes, and Patients with Disabilities

The power of the self to decide cannot be stressed greatly enough. According to Nordenfelt’s theory of disability, “... persons are disabled by virtue of their inability to do things that are important to them” [24]. Therefore, if a person can do activities he or she deems important then according to the theory he or she is not disabled. They only become disabled when they cannot accomplish what is important to them. The theory allows one to see disability in a different light because even if the medical field has diagnosed the person with a disability but she or he can still accomplish the task, she or he becomes abled-bodied, and not disabled. If the person is meeting his or her goal for that day, week, month, and year then should we not see him or her as a functional human being and not someone who is impaired?

Thomas Jefferson once said that the law is socialized ethics [25] meaning that the decision of rightness and wrongness is accepted by the greater norm of the public. Hence what is considered to be “ethical” practice becomes legalized. In the present discussion the law was passed, however, the application appears to be less than ethical. How we view the individual under the law, is highly affected by what we “see” when we work with the individual. If we place labels on the individual, whether by a medical model or our own social norms, we limit that individual’s ability to be successful.

4. Opportunities

What happens if students, athletes, or children with disabilities are permitted to play? What we mean is to actually play not being a ball getter, line judge, or a referee. What happens when we allow them to feel what it is like to swing the bat, hit the ball off of a tee, run and kick the soccer ball, or hear the swoosh of the basketball going through the hoop? What happens to them when they are allowed to do this? Allowing one to play affects the persons’ self-esteem, identity, motivation, peer relations, self-efficacy, self-concept, and overall the quality of life [26]. Allowing them the opportunity to play permits them to be immersed in the activity. They experience what others who do not have disabilities get to experience.

Identity is imperative when examining opportunities that are granted through play. The individual gets to shape his or her identity. In contrast to being labeled disabled by societal norms or medical models the person is permitted the opportunity to play and or they begin to form their identity around that activity [27] Children who are given the opportunity to be an athlete, i.e., through adaptive sport experience, see themselves as athletes not as a socially decided labeled: disabled.

5. Adaptive Sports

Adaptive sports offer opportunities through play that may not be understood by adults who are abled bodied. Their sport experience probably mimics what Meier describes in his seminal 1988 work, there is a “...[t]readmill image of sport, centering on the attainment and development of the physical strength of motor skills and technical efficiency” [27]. In regular sport the athlete progresses from a young kid to a teenager attaining and developing his or her physical strength, endurance, and motor ability. The goal is intentional and directive—and the athlete knows what is being sought. However, in adaptive sports the treadmill image of sport may exist, but the purpose was hidden because of play. No one on the team realizes that they are attaining and developing their skills. They are just playing and because they are just playing the sport is more enjoyable for them. Through playing adaptive sports the athlete is given the opportunity to develop motor skills. Whereas if the adaptive sports were not available, the athlete would have to find another way to develop the skills.

In Aubrey’s experience, the image was so deeply imbedded in play few realized that motor skills were
developing. No one on the team was saying, “Today I am going to go and develop my skills.” Instead, we would yell, “Okay, let’s go play!” The way we reacted was important to our image of ourselves, which then affected how we viewed our capacity. We were developing the motor skills naturally through play; it was not forced.

Aubrey played softball for several years. She later said that on reflection when reading Eugene Fink [10] that adaptive sport provides for any child, and especially these children, an undisturbed center of existence where these teenagers were not teenagers with disabilities, but were teenagers being kids who were enjoying the act of play. Playing softball was their “center of existence” because without softball they would not have the opportunity to participate. It was everything to them. For they had a chance to experience what athletes without disabilities experience: to be on a team.

6. Play

Why is it such a big deal to give these athletes and students an opportunity to play and be inclusive about it? Play is magical. Through adaptive sports children with disabilities feel what it is like to experience the tingle and power when they hit the ball or hear the swoosh as the ball went through the hoop. They have an opportunity to experience what athletes with no disability get to experience daily and who many take for granted. Playing promotes love for self because the child with a disability learns self-acceptance through the experience of play. Playing also promotes love for others because their teammates have also had a rough go at life just like them. Playing promotes transcending to a different world because in that world they are not students with disabilities they are whomever they want to be [27, 28].

Huizinga speaks of the play world as “... play casts a spell over us; it is ‘enchanting’, ‘captivating’. It is investing with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony” [12]. Students, athletes with disabilities live in a harsh world. In their world, many barriers exist that they have to overcome and it often becomes overwhelming. Playing takes them out of that harsh overwhelming world and allows them to be in a safe environment where they do not have to face reality for a brief moment. They get to be who they want to be and with no impairments if they choose.

Yes, we were on the adaptive sports team, which was through the school. Yes, we were expected to win but those pressures were not felt on the team because as team members we were just playing. Playing gave us not only the experience of movement but also the experience of enjoyment, for some playing were the escape that they needed from the world of medical appointments and physical therapy. Play truly gives the students with disabilities rhythm and harmony just like a normal population [27, 28]. Play has meaning and importance, how can we help to include these students into our physical education classrooms or develop adaptive teams?

7. Steps towards Change

Numerous steps exist that we as a society and community can take that will include this population. Only a few will be offered here and many sources are available to help accomplish this task [29].

7.1 Awareness

The first step is being aware of the language we use. We need to remember that language and words are powerful. Throughout the years some changes have already occurred to be less offensive and more inclusive. For example, the word “Children” was replaced in the Americans Disabilities Act with the term “individuals” and “handicapped” became “disabilities” [14]. Interpretation is application of language. What one-person finds acceptable another will not.

We have to remember to use first person language in application. That is, we should always put the
Making Play a Positive Inclusive Experience for Differently Abled Students, Athletes, and Patients with Disabilities

individual first and the word disability second. An example of first person language is: veterans with disabilities. The veteran, the person, always comes first and the disability second. Interestingly, some advocates argue against the word “disability”. In a TED talk by Aimee Mullins [30], a double amputee former collegiate athlete, and Olympian, she argues that the term disabled is limiting, discriminatory, brutish, and just flat wrong. The synonyms for disabled are: weak, limited, crippled, lame, paralyzed, immobilized. We personally prefer–if we have to do a label at all is–differently abled. As differently abled, one is acknowledging that they are in fact able however they play and move differently.

The point here is that language has power–and our first step is to realize that words have meaning and how we use them affects how we appreciate and see the differently abled–perhaps it would also be wise to talk with the individual and ask them what language they prefer.

7.2 Communication

Along with language comes communication with the student who is differently abled and the class in general. The teacher should communicate with the student who has a disability before class and discuss what the class will be doing. This allows the student to choose that which they will or will not participate. The student now has power. Ultimately, these tools are showing compassion towards the students with disabilities. When the teacher communicates and treats the student with respect it is teaching others how to be compassionate and how to be around the student with impairments. If the teacher excludes them other students are taught that it is acceptable to exclude them as well. At the same time, communication is a powerful tool to educate the students with no disabilities–that as a community we will work together to have the best experience.

8. Tools for Inclusion

8.1 Question of How to Include

The next question is how we really and truly get this population playing. What are some tools that can be used for inclusion? First, we have to remember that students and athletes with physical disabilities are just like regular students in that they want to have the same experiences. We know this is hard as teachers and educators are worried that the student is going to get hurt if they actually play. We cannot be worried about this because if we do then the student loses the opportunity to play. The goal is to get them involved. We mean truly involved; do not have them be a ball girl/boy, line judge, or referee. Remember if you choose to include the differently abled through being a ball girl/boy, then all the students should experience what it is like to be a ball girl/boy, line judge, or referee. Why not rotate all the students throughout the position? Make all the different playing experiences possible for everyone.

8.2 Modifying the Activity

The next tool that you can use is modifying the activity. Modifying the activity for students with impairments should not have an effect on the intensity of the game. For example, consider baseball. Modifications include but are not limited to a whiffle ball instead of a hard ball, a plastic bat instead of a hard mental or wood bat, using a tee instead of a pitcher. Those tools for baseball should be readily available with the other equipment so the game does not slow down when the student with the disability takes his or her turn at bat. Another example is to modify the experience for everyone when the student who is differently abled is at bat. Change up the rules that all abled bodied students must catch with their non-dominant hand, or they must run–on one leg alone (hopping) and throw with the non-dominant arm. The possibilities are limitless as long as the goal is to mix the game up so that all players are stressed to play with limitations.
8.3 Change of Surfaces

Another modification to all games could be playing inside instead of outside so the students who have wheelchairs could be involved. If the students really want to play outside then the teacher should consider surface changes for the students in wheelchairs or who have walkers. The students get to still play outside but now the students who are usually excluded get to be included because they get to participate. The goal for the teacher and students should be to treat the individuals with disabilities like they have no limitations. Another possibility is that every student who has a limitation is paired with a student with no limitations. Called the model student experience where the student with no disability is paired with a student with a disability. Make this consistent and use it often.

8.4 Unit on Disability Sport

The physical education teacher could also create a unit on play for disability sport. Bring in wheelchairs, blindfolds, and strings then have four different rotations for the students. One rotation and gymnasium section would be designated for wheelchair basketball. Every student, no matter the ability, plays wheelchair basketball. Students who are not impaired now get to know what it feels like to be impaired. Another rotation and gymnasium section would be designated for goal ball, which is a game that is played for people who have lost their vision. The sighted students wear blindfolds. The third rotation and gymnasium section could be designated for one-handed floor hockey. All students play with their non-dominant arm, abled bodied students tie their dominate arm to their body so they cannot use it while engaging in a floor hockey match. The forth rotation and gymnasium section could be set up for sitting volleyball. Now the students can enhance their senses while engaging in the physical activity that is truly challenging to everyone. The benefit of the physical activity unit on disability sport is that everyone gets to be involved. The students who do not have disabilities will now have more empathy for the students who do as it will be challenging for them to have to do something new.

Picture what your gym should look like with so many different opportunities.

9. Kids Who Do Not Want to Play

We have discussed the importance of play and inclusion assuming all children want to participate, but what happens if the student with the impairment says no? There will always be that one student who is going to say, “No I do not want to play” as much as you try to include them. In Aubrey’s experience, there have been more students saying no than they say yes. In adaptive sports she said, we had a two-week try out period but it was not for the coaches it was for the students. Most of the time the students who were trying out did not come back after one practice. The question is how do you get them involved if they do not want to do it? As a teacher if the student has an Individual Education Plan the physical educators should be a part of that person’s team and should know the limits. Aubrey heard in her assistive technology class which is a special education course that physical educators are sometimes not included in a student’s Individual Education Plan planning and their meeting or Individual Education Plan team [31] which should be created by all of the student’s teachers. If the physical educators were involved in the planning, meeting, and educative team then they would know their student’s limitations... So if a student says no to play in PE then the teacher actually and truly knows that the student can or cannot do the activity. If the teacher knows that the student can do the activity then he or she can foster the can-do attitude or push the child to participate. If the activity is beyond that person’s limits then assign a movement activity, such as walking around the gymnasium, running around the gymnasium... moving in some way.

Do not give the child the option to say no. Do not ask him or her if he or she wants to do the activity if you know it is within their limits. If he or she still says no then you need to explain that it is a physical education
class and everyone must and will be moving the whole time. He or she must do some type of activity and not moving is not an option. If the student is in a wheelchair and says no, then tell him or her that he or she must walk around the parameters of the gymnasium. There will be no standing around watching the other students move while he or she is not moving. Treat the students as though they have no limitations. The students will be shocked that you the teacher will not accept that they do not want to do the activity. They say no for many reasons, which might include but is not limited to: embarrassment of their body and impatience with themselves. We must remember that they have been told that they cannot do it by someone else and often they believe it and do not want to play. It is ultimately a belief that they cannot do the activity so if a physical educator can turn that belief into a “yes you can” then the student will stop saying no and start saying yes. He or she needs to know that it is non-judgmental and that everyone in the class has the same goal of learning physical education. Whatever you do, do not let the student have the option to say no, and if they say no make them move anyway. You can explain to them that students who do not have a disability do not get the choice, so why should they?

10. Conclusions

Getting students with disabilities to play and be fully immersed into play is not a task that will happen overnight. It will be filled with struggles and highlights. One cannot identify as an athlete and not know the experience of movement. The students who do not know what it is like to play are the students who we are targeting. We offer here ideas to help physical educators get the students involved. Throughout the article we discussed the limitations of the different laws, the effects of the models and theories of disability on opportunity, the kinds of opportunities that play allows, the importance of play, and we offered a few tools and skills that physical educators can integrate into their classrooms.

Resources are plentiful and the only limitation to not offering positive inclusion is our own bias and skepticism.

References


Making Play a Positive Inclusive Experience for Differently Abled Students, Athletes, and Patients with Disabilities


