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Cassidy Feiler
feilerc@bgsu.edu

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Perceptions of Coaching Students with Disabilities

Cassidy L. Feiler

Bowling Green State University

Honors Project

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Dr. Brooks R. Vostal, School of Intervention Services, Advisor

Dr. Christy Galletta Horner, School of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Policy, Advisor

Abstract

This paper's purpose is to talk to future coaches about the idea of athletic inclusion, as well as their related questions, ideas, and issues surrounding the topic of students with disabilities being on school sponsored sports teams. To conduct this research, the interviewer set out a mass email through a university application to encourage interested participants to take part in face to face interviews. Based off these interviews, the interviewer, with the help of a Graduate Assistant, created transcriptions for future reference. Based off of prior research, conducting interviews, and creating transcriptions, the interviewer was able to come up with a list of five recurring themes that was found consistently through all three interviews. These five themes include: the nature of a disability, teammates' opinions, the student's ability level, responsibilities of a coach, and the nature of an individual sport. Overall, with the research conducted and the results analyzed, the interviewer was able to conclude with more participants, a more generalized statement could have been made regarding future coaches' opinions about the inclusion of students with disabilities on school sponsored sports leagues. Although a generalized statement could not be reached, five themes are identified consistently throughout the three interviews conducted.

Keywords: coaches, inclusion, students with disabilities

Introduction

Problem Explanation

In today's world, inclusion is an idea that is starting to be found in educational, as well as recreational situations. Although the definition of inclusion may vary, one variation can be used as an umbrella term for the whole idea. Ferris State states that "inclusion is involvement and empowerment, where the inherent worth, and dignity of all people are recognized" (Diversity and Inclusion). Although inclusion can be in a variety of settings, everyday life or academics, inclusion can mean with athletics as well. Productive inclusion of a student with a disability depends on a variety of factors, but a coach's attitude is critical for this inclusion to become successful (Rizzo, Bishop, & Tobar, 1997). Based on a coach's influence, as well as responsibilities, their opinions begin to hold more weight. These opinions may begin to influence the players on the team as well, which may affect a specific inclusion. Research has shown that simply including a student in a general education classroom may not lead to a successful inclusion, but opportunities for social interactions with peers have a greater influence (Bayer, Flores, Vargas-Tonsing, 2008). With this influence shown for a classroom, the same can be said for an athletic setting. If a child is not getting positive social interactions, an inclusion may not work the best it can.

Why This Study Matters

As a focus for this paper, the idea of the inclusion of students with disabilities in high school sponsored sports was used. As for coming up with a general theme for this research, sports were suggested as an idea based on my passion for them. In addition, I have spent years volunteering with adaptive sports leagues with students with disabilities, so these two ideas were combined to create a research question. This study's purpose was to learn more about future

coaches' opinion, comments, and concerns of the inclusion of students with disabilities on high school sponsored sports leagues. The goal was to interview current education majors who show a desire to coach in their future, and address the area of inclusion, as well as the challenges and rewards that come with it. Productive inclusion of these students depends on a variety of factors, but coaches' attitudes are critical for this inclusion to become successful (Rizzo, Bishop, &Tobar, 1997). Using this idea found in research, I believe this study truly matters in regard to giving students with disabilities a fair chance at being included in athletics. Looking at future coaches' opinions can allow for discussion on how to better handle inclusion based on possible concerns, as well as opportunities.

Methods

Participants

After finding a research question that was interesting to those involved, the process had to continue onto the research portion of the study. The first step of the process was identifying the target audience that would fit the criteria this research study needed. We identified that our target audience is education majors that are planning to teach in a high school setting. A mass email template was produced and sent out through a campus wide application to all those who qualified by our criteria. All those who saw the message and were interested, were asked to contact the interviewer to set up a time for an interview. Future coaches (N=3) worked with the interviewer to set up interviews in public locations on campus and met for an average of thirty minutes in order to complete all questions.

Interview Protocol

Interviews started with basic background questions that allowed the interviewer to gain information on the different participants. After background questions, questions were asked

about the requirements to be on a team, perception of athletic inclusion, personal experiences with students with disabilities, and possible accommodations. Participants were asked to then analyze case study examples about fictional students. The interview was concluded with questions related to alternate athletic programs for student with disabilities. Interviews were recorded with written permission from each of the future coaches before the interviews began. The list of exact questions can be found listed in Appendix A.

Transcription Process

After completion of the three interviews, the recordings were used to create a typed transcription of what was said. The interviewer, with the help of a Graduate Assistant, worked on creating the transcription. Transcriptions were separated by each person, interviewers and future coaches. These transcriptions were used to analyze the data, in order to look further into the research.

Results

Participant Background

Questions were used during the interviews to identify the background of all three participants. Participant One was a future teacher who will be certified in grades 7 to 12 Social Studies upon graduation and is currently a junior in his or her major. They have never been a coach, but played football, baseball, and wrestling in high school. Participant One identifies as a white male.

Participant Two is a sophomore Intervention Specialist Major. They were a competitive cheerleader, but not a coach, and plan to coach cheerleading. Participant Two identifies as a female white American.

Participant Three is a junior AYA life science and physics major. He or she plans on coaching football and basketball and played those sports in high school. They have also had past coaching experience. Participant Three identifies as a white Caucasian male.

Coding

Once the transcriptions were completed, they started to be evaluated by the interviewer to come up with common themes throughout each interview. Ideas that were brought up by multiple participants were marked for later analysis. By reading through the three transcriptions, I was able to come up with five themes that I believed were present throughout the interviews. Once these themes were created, they were given to the project advisor to evaluate and see if we were in agreement. Upon evaluation, the five themes were approved, and then used to analyze the interviews further.

Results Divided by Themes

Based on the transcriptions of three interviews with participants, a number of themes were present for at least two coaches at a time. Each theme can be defined as it is shown in the interviews.

Individual disability. The first theme relates to the idea that inclusion depends on the nature of the individual disability. All of the future coaches focused certain answers, at least once, around the idea that inclusion depends on the type or severity of a child's disability. If a disability is more severe or physical, they believed that this could make inclusion less likely. Students with less severe disabilities may be more likely to be included, according to each of the future coaches interviewed. As quoted from Participant One on pages two and three of the transcription, "and it really, I think it really just depends on the disability or what. Cause if some

kid is just—I'm not gonna use the correct term—but slow in school, they're behind. They can still play.”.

Teammates/opponents perceptions. The next theme that was found throughout the transcriptions was the idea that the teammates or opponents of that student may have opinions or negative thoughts on their inclusion. Some of the future coaches discussed the idea that other students may be mean to their teammates that have disabilities. In addition, one future coach addressed the idea that opponents may not be as accepting of playing against a student with a disability. This may not relate to a coaches' actions, but it affects the climate of the team. Each future coach discussed this concern at least once in his or her interview. Specifically, Participant Three addressed this theme on page two and three of the transcription by saying “...if it's at a high school level and people are looking to move onto a collegiate level, they're worried that if a student has a disability that may not allow them to perform at the same exact level as the other students, that they might have a little bit of resentment toward that...”. If a large number of teammates feel this way, a student with a disability may feel uncomfortable on the team, which could limit the inclusion.

Ability to meet needs of the team. The three future coaches also discussed the idea that inclusion of a student with a disability may depend on the ability level of that student on an individual basis. A common theme that occurred multiple times, throughout all of the interviews, is related to a child's ability level. Simply put, the future coaches believed that a child's inclusion may depend on their ability to complete what is asked of them by a team. “If they can play a sport, let them play. If some kid's got one arm and he throw a baseball, let him play”, was the related response by Participant One when asked about accommodations for inclusion. These requirements are set for all athletes, including those with disabilities. If a student trying out for a

team does not have the abilities to be on that team, these coaches believe that their inclusion will be limited, regardless of the presence of a disability or not.

Coach's responsibilities. The responsibilities of having the position of a coach were also called to attention in all three of the interviews. As a coach, some may believe that there will be certain tasks and jobs that they will be required to complete. They believe that coaches are hired to win games, and some schools will only keep jobs for those coaches who are winning. A concern throughout these interviews was that some coaches may just have skillful students play, to win games, to preserve their coaching jobs. "I wanna like have kids have fun and have experience you know, but when it comes down to it, like winning is also important to an extent, for a lot of coaches and schools" was a quote from Participant Three on page five of the transcription. Coaches with ideas of self-perseverance first, may avoid inclusion if it may hurt their position. The idea of one on one interaction was discussed, and whether this is required of a coach if needed by a student athlete. Not allowing time and resources for one on one interaction may limit the implementation of required modifications or accommodations for an athlete.

Nature of the sport. The last theme found throughout the interviews was that inclusion may vary depending on the nature of the individual sport that a student with a disability may be trying to play. With a multitude of sports available to play throughout high school, many of the coaches discussed the idea that some sports are easier to include students with disabilities than others. It was discussed that high school sponsored sports teams with more available spots or teams without tryouts, as well as sports that are less physically, could be more successful for inclusion. An example of this is if a team, like basketball, can only hold a roster of up to twelve students, they may be less likely to include a student with a disability than a track team of sixty students may be.

“I feel like a lot of track events are more individual than they are team based and I know obviously you compete as a team, but you still have your own individual scores. So, I feel he might be more accepted than the girl who wanted to be on the basketball team because everything is so quick moving and dynamic and you have to be fluid with your teammates in order for the plays to work.”

As part of the transcription of the interview, this is an exact quote from Participant Two. Because coaches have the option to coach a variety of sports, inclusion may vary based on a coach by coach basis, dependent on sport.

The results that were found revolve around to the research done prior to the interviews. Rizzo, Bishop, and Tobar discuss the idea of inclusion and that there are present factors that may influence its possible success (Rizzo et. al, 1997). Through my research, I was able to find five themes throughout my interviews, which directly relate to those said factors. These factors depend on the individual coach, the sports, or the district, but the ideas stands. In specifics, this work also talks on the idea that coaches’ attitudes are essential to finding out if an inclusion will be successful. This was a theme that I also found present throughout my interviews. All three future coaches discuss their concerns about coaches’ opinions on the inclusion, as well as teammate opinions. Finding written research that directly correlates to the research I conducted and found, shows how strong of a influence these factors may have.

Discussion

Future Research. After reaching out, I only had three people volunteer to take my survey. Although interesting information was found, the number of participants limited what could be done with the results. A study that had more than 3 participants would be beneficial, and the information would have the potential to be generalized. Recognizing participation as an

issue, reasons to fix this may be brainstormed. As seen by other emails I have received from other Honors Students, positive reinforcements can be used to try and promote participation. Based on the results of this study, I would like to look further into the idea of coaches' responsibilities and how that may relate to students with disabilities. This is a topic that was brought up a lot throughout the interviews as a major concern for the future coaches. Because a job description can vary between districts, there is no set of rules for all coaches. I would like to look into research related to these responsibilities. Dependent on what I find, I could use this data, and figure out how these responsibilities would look with a student with a disability on their sports team.

Implications for Coaches. First off, I believe that coaches need to be aware of their responsibilities, as I just discussed. By being aware of their exact responsibilities, coaches can be held more accountable. I believe after coaches know what is expected of them, they have to become more familiar with laws related to inclusion. By being familiar with the law, coaches can work to do what is right and avoid getting into trouble. Simply put, being aware of the law makes it a lot easier to follow the law. There are also programs that focus on how to become aware of diversity and improve in areas of inclusion through programs like the Coach Diversity Institute. These programs are an additional cost, so not all school districts may offer them, but coaches could benefit based on what they want to learn. I believe that looking at athletes as athletes, instead of students with or without disabilities is also important. These students with disabilities may need modifications or accommodations, but they should not be treated like some special person that they need to tread lightly around. Students with disabilities want to play sports and treating them like all of the other athletes could have a bigger influence that imaginable.

Resources

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Appendix A

Perceptions about Coaching Students with Disabilities

Interview Questions

Demographic Information

- A. What will your teaching licensure area(s)?
- B. what year in your program are you currently in?
- C. What sport(s) do you plan to coach?
- D. Have you ever been a coach?
- E. What sports did you play in high school?
- F. What is your gender identification?
- G. What is your ethnic/racial identification?

Coaching Questions

1) The following questions relate to your perceptions of requirements to be on a team:

- (a) If you have coaches, what sort of skills do you require of your athletes?
- (b) If you've never coaches, what sorts of skills do you believe should be required of all athletes?

(c) Can you think of a time when an athlete has/has not possessed a requirement that is essential and how that affect the team?

2) The following questions relate to your perceptions of athletic inclusion of students with disabilities:

(a) Which sports might be difficult for students with disabilities and why?

(b) Can you share a story of a teammate with disabilities on your sports teams? How did that student's disability affect him/her on the team?

(c) What would be a possible concern for the inclusion of a student with a disability in a high school sports league?

3) The following questions relate to your perceptions of accommodations for students with disabilities

(a) What kinds of accommodations should be provided to students with disabilities who want to play on a team?

(b) How much playing time should students with disabilities receive on a team?

- If no response, prompt with the following examples: Is providing a tryout and then cutting a student with a disability a fair chance at inclusion? Why/why not? Is playing and recognition on Senior Night once a year considered valid inclusion? Why/why not?

(c) Are there circumstances that a coach would be justified in cutting a student with a disability from their team?

4. The following questions relate to your perceptions of academic inclusion of students with disabilities.

(a) When you were a student in K-12, can you share a story of a student with a disability in your classes?

(b) How did that student's disability affect him/her in class?
5. The following questions ask you to evaluate case study examples.

(a) Sarah is a ninth-grade student with physical disabilities that limit the use of her hands and ankles. She has great behavior and can easily remember plays and rules. Sarah would like to compete on her school's track team. Samuel is also a ninth-grade student who has behavioral and emotional problems that limit his ability to follow directions and remember plays. Samuel would also like to join the track team.

- As the track coach, how would you feel about having these students on your team?
- What issues do you think would likely come up as each was being included?

(b) Daniel is a 10th grade student who has physical disabilities that limit the use of his wrists and ankles. He loves watching Olympic track events and wants to run track for his high school. Jena is an 11th grade student who loves basketball. She also has a physical disability that limits the use of her wrists and hands.

- Is either Danielle or Daniel more likely to be included in their desired sports team?
- What are some concerns that you can imagine needing to be addressed as each student tried to participate in their respective sport?

(c) Cody is a 6'3" 175-pound freshman and one of the fastest students in the school. The football coach is excited to make him a receiver on the varsity team. Ut Cody's learning disability and ADHD hinder his ability to learn plays so much so that he can't correctly run routes (e.g., mixes up right and left, forgets plays).

- What could you do as a coach to make it more likely that Cody would be able to participate and reach his potential?
- Are making these sorts of accommodations realistic for any student athlete?

6) The following question relates to your perceptions of existing programs for students with disabilities:

(a) Are programs like Rally Cap Sports and Camp Cheerful legitimate alternatives to being included on a school sponsored sports team? (If participant does not know about these programs, explain them).

(b) If you were the varsity coach of a sport at a school, what responsibility would you and/or your school district feel to provide alternative programs like those just mentioned for students with disabilities?