

Disability Coaching

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Hello, welcome. This is Scott McNamara what's new in adaptive physical education sitting here with Dr. Robert Townsend, who is my newly acquired friend from New Zealand at the University of Waikato. I just met him at I SAPA over the summer in New Zealand, which he also helped run. And it was a terrific conference that I was able to go to and meet all types of wonderful people and get all these different perspectives. And one of the great people that I was I was introduced to as Dr. Thompson, who his work has largely focused in disability, sport and coaching. And I believe this is one of his first big introductions to the field of adaptive physical activity. Is that right? Dr. Thompson?

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Yeah, absolutely. I feel like a bit of a stranger to this field, actually, certainly an outsider to APA, but come through through my role as the Oceania rep for the International Federation of adaptive productivity. And also, as you say, as the head of the academic program for the International Symposium of adaptive productivity, which was a Targo, just last month, two months ago.

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Yes, absolutely. And it was fantastic. And it does not seem like you are new to the field. And honestly, I'm really happy to have you here because this is a adaptive physical education podcast, as the title suggests, but as the year has been going on, I have been branching out to different areas of the adaptive physical activity world, such as disability sports and such. But I really have, you know, only, I would say, briefly dabbled in disability sports specifically, especially somebody such as yourself that kind of works in the higher ed and theoretical framework areas. I've had coaches Paralympians and such on, but I'm happy to have you on to kind of talk about

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disability sport and coaching from the perspective of ableism and disability critical studies, which we haven't really highlighted on this show yet. So thank you for coming on.

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Pleasure. Thanks for the call.

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The very first question I have for you kind of already briefly addressed, but I want to know, Dr. Townsend, I know I get your introduction, but I want you to quickly introduce yourself, how you introduce yourself and also where you fit in the area of adaptive physical activity in your own words. All right, thank you, Scott.

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What am I I'm a senior lecturer in the University of Waikato and Sport Coaching and pedagogy.

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I think there's actually quite a lot of connection and similarities between the field of APA and also in kind of a subfield of disability sport coaching, which is where I kind of the majority of my work sits.

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In terms of my background, I'm a former high performance parasport disability sport coach, I don't know what term you like to use over in your end of the world, but you can use parasport if you'd like.

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I've worked with loads of different athletes with a range of impairments from community level working with kids with quite severe impairments in high support needs through to elite or high performance athletes with intellectual physical, neurodevelopmental, and sensory disorders.

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I got my PhD in disability sport coaching at Loughborough University in the UK, which is home where I worked with Professor Chris cushion and Professor Brett Smith is my supervisors. And I guess I kind of sit across social sciences, Disability Studies, qualitative research. But my specific focus is on disability, Sport and Sport Coaching.

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I supervise a range of PhD programs in disability in new sport, athlete welfare, assistive technology, Coach education. And most importantly, one of the things that I do with my research program is we engage with the disability sports sector here in New Zealand and try and CO develop these programs to figure out where can we do research? And where's he going to have the most impact? So I guess Yeah, I guess that was that's me. Really. I'm just curious because can you frame yourself I think is a disability sports scholars, sociologists and such. And I I'm curious as to when you when you were introduced to the idea notion of adapted physical activity.

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Yeah, I was. I was just going about my, my merry way in, in New Zealand. And we had a the current or the former International Federation of adaptive productivity rep for Oceania, was working for the Ministry of Education. She was super busy. And so she was thinking about doing her PhD with me to make herself even busier. And then said, I'm stepping down from FATCA. Would you mind taking over the Oceania rep role? And I kind of said as we do in academia, yes, please because I need to do more of this stuff.

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And then realize that hang on

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didn't really have much insight into APA I have I have engaged with APA in terms of obviously when you're when you're reading around disability sport and all the intersections in between you have to go down those rabbit holes. So

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in terms of adaptive visibility, I'm familiar but I just never thought of myself as an adaptive because relativity researcher.

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I guess until recently, we really were we, some colleagues and I, from Victoria University of Wellington have started to dabble in, I guess in adaptive activity and published some work around inequities in physical activity participation for disabled children. And so I guess I'm getting that. But yeah, I'd firmly locate myself in the kind of sports sociology field with it, kind of sitting across things like coaching coach, education, disability sport, something that's come up here, you know, and again, right in the title, what is adapted physical activity? What is the depth physical education? Where does one start with one end, and it's not super clear. So and there's lots of, there's lots of similarities, like I say, because you know, a PE, you know, the title of your podcast, you know, is a subfield of the subfield of Physical Education, which is a subfield of a broader field of education. Like, where I sit in coaching, that's, that's similar. It's this sub of a sub of a sub. And a lot of the debates within physical education on adaptive physical education, are stuff that, you know, 10 years ago were being had in APA. But now, it's being had in Sport Coaching, for example, and we'll talk about it later. But how we educate coaches to work with disabled kids is something that was talked about in a PE, and in physical education 1520 30 years ago. So there's there's a lot of porousness between those boundaries. And I guess we talked about this at the conference, right? Like, what how do we define the field? Where does the field stop? Or is it just this porous fluid overlap between ideas, and I suspect I like to think of it more as this overlap between ideas.

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I agree. And I actually like that new versus having to be this this concrete thing we can kind of interweave and reflect and kind of work together towards these large goals and such. Okay, so and we are going to highlight one of your recent papers, infusing disability into Edge coach education, development, and critical review and agenda for change that you and your co authors, published about two years ago in the physical education and sport pedagogy journal, and we're gonna highlight it, we're gonna talk about some of the topics, we're gonna go off topic a little bit as well. But I found this to be a really great article where you talk about, you know, how do we combat ableism? In coach education? And how do we talk about disability in coach education? And yes, you're absolutely right. These are things that we are always talking about in physical education. And you know, whether even adapted physical education should exist, or if we should just be infused in every every aspect of education and such, which maybe you have similar thoughts on. So getting into this, what we mostly focused on is physical education, generally and, you know, Disability Studies and such. But can you talk a little bit

about the intersection of disability coaching and how that's evolved over time? Your paper provides a nice overview and review of the literature in that that time and maybe some key milestones that have shaped the current state of coaching practices for disabled athletes?

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Yeah, it's a great question, Scott.

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This is not a new area at all.

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The training and selection of coaches in disability sport parasport was identified by Professor Curran, DePaul back in 1986, as a priority area for researchers to look at.

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Specifically, she argued that we should be looking at the effectiveness of coach education,

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the impact of disability specific training and modules on coaches knowledge, and also how to develop training and developmental pathways for coaches into parasport. So what we often see is like this, this osmosis of coaches from able bodied sport has ended up in parasport, or coaches will find themselves at a club level potentially coaching an athlete who then has this accelerated trajectory towards the Paralympics, and they take that coach with them. It's not really a coherent or stable developmental pathway for a coach to go through. Imagine going from the community level coach to suddenly being at Paralympics and the demands that that would put on your, on your skill set.

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In terms of the development of research, there's been some insights since 1986, there has been like a smattering of stuff around coaching, particularly from sport psychologists. But then more recently, I'd say in the last 10 years, from some coaching researchers, but it's an area is largely untapped. The research that is out there and when I was doing this my my PhD, I found that a lot of the research was quite generalized and quite descriptive, just highlighting what it's like to coach in disability sport. At the same time whilst trying to reassure everyone that it's not as different as you might think.

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Probably

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Since 2012, there's been a more concerted focus and heightened interest in Paralympic sports. Certainly, I think that's been reflected in the research that we've seen.

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So there's certainly been more serious interest since 2012. From sports researcher researchers more generally. And that's then naturally spilled over into coaching. The majority of the research now is

focusing on elite populations, understandably, because that brings with it the most kudos. And then there's also a strong focus on understanding how parasport coaches develop their knowledge, how they learn, within that specific sub population of disability. And this is something that I've kind of had a bit of a gripe with, particularly in coaching, researchers tend to do all of these sideways studies about how to coaches learn in youth sport, how to coaches learning, youth, women's sport, how to coaches learn, and under 15 sport, how to coach it's only an adult sport, and then eventually that spills over into disability how to coaches learn, and disability sport? Well, the answer is they learned the same pretty much, but what they're learning is actually quite different. So that's where we're at in terms of the coaching research. And now we've got this more, there's a really strong focus on parasport research in Canada, they get a lot of funding for that. And they're doing some good stuff. And then we've seen a bit more of an interest now in things like ableism, and disablism, and how those things circulate within coaching contexts. And that's kind of where I sit, as well as a focus on coach education.

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Lots of big information in there. And I want to kind of unpack a few things that you said. So first off for our listeners, because we do have a big kind of array of people that listen, I'll briefly kind of say what I view ableism, as maybe you could provide some context to if I missed anything, or, and ableism is something that a lot of your work is combat in. And when we say ableism, we're talking about systematic oppression that happens consciously and subconsciously, to disabled folk, that basically marginalized and oppressed is that when we see in all kinds of forms, and at all levels, is that basically a good definition? Yeah, right. That's the that's the impact of ableism, I would say ableism itself, but it's just the default understanding that humans are able bodied. That's, that's ableism. And then judging, judging everyone by those able bodied standards. So

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yeah, I guess a more academic definition would be something like the imposition of able bodied ideals on disabled people, and then judging them in accordance with those and then providing services based on able bodied ideals that disabled people have to fit into. And that's where it impacts on their psychosocial Well, being psycho emotional well being the social barriers that they face every day. So that's where the oppression aspect comes in. But yeah, it's just the default, understanding that humans are able bodied. And so there's no consideration of differences, essentially, within an ableist paradigm. And there's also a push for them to be able bodied, and whatever that looks like. So everything that we do is often to push them to be that cool, able bodied. Okay, so just to give that context for our listeners, I do want to, I want to push back on something or just kind of think about it. So this actually came up at one of the keynotes during Asaka. So

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this context of, it's not that different than what other people are doing, and so on and so forth. And I completely understand that finding, Cheryl said years ago, and I think the 80s and her name came up quite a bit and I saw it but she she saw, she said, all good physical education is adapted physical education. But I basically that idea is that all good, you know, you could apply that to coaching all good coaching is whatever, we want a pair of coaching. And so often when you're thinking about considerations, I heard and I've heard critiques of that say, later on down the line, and I heard that Claudine leavin live to kind of critique it herself. In the idea that

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when we say, you know, it's very, very similar, and I do see that, but are we

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undermining our field in our area? As well as you know, our we position ourselves as something that

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isn't really a specialty when we are? And also, are we good meaning some of our skill sets and such?

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Yeah, it's a great question. And

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I think that part of that is a well meaning sentiment, right? It's a well intentioned and almost liberal or progressive view. It's almost like it's a liberal, a realistic view.

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So later on, I'll talk about various labels and that might be one of them. This you know, this idea of enlightened or liberal ableism

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I think it is a part of a response to the fact that disabilities is so ordered in society and in service provision and educational program.

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arms. So it's a push to say, look, it's not that different. In order to maintain credibility, potentially, you know, if we're in this, if we're researchers in disability sport, we want to be respected by the real world, quote unquote, of sports researchers. So we want to say things like, it's not that different. So I suspect part of it is a search for credibility, part of it is a reassuring reassurance of other practitioners and professionals that this isn't necessarily a specialized idea, you know, specialized area, you don't need to specialize in this. It's something that we should all be considering. But at the same time, yeah, there are, there are skill sets that are required to work in those specialized contexts. So it's the same but different, isn't it? It's a really good question. And it's a lot of my work in coaching. And again, I can talk about it in a bit. It's about kind of unpacking that discourse of coaching the athlete, not the disability, almost like in saying it's not that different. We're deep politicizing disability, and we're bringing it closer in line to able bodied ideals and able bodied norms and standards. And I guess that's where it's sticky. Because you're then overlooking a whole heap of stuff that does oppress and marginalize disabled people in that daily locks. Yeah, and I don't even I ask questions that don't have answers. So. So it's just reflective things for us all that kind of thing, God. So why do you think it's important for all coaches to have a comprehensive understanding of disability and how it impacts in athletes experiences in sport?

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Yeah, one of my fundamental starting points really, in when I started doing research in this area is that I think that and I remember sitting down opposite Brett Smith, and he said to me, you know, your first paper, you need to tell me to write a paper on why models of disability matter for coaches. And I remember thinking at the time, I've never heard of models of disability, I don't know what that is. And so I went into the research and, and basically, I've come come around to the fact that people don't actually understand what they mean, when they talk about disability. There's no There's never any consensus on what disability actually is. And that's confounded by different terminologies you say people with disabilities, I say disabled people, some people won't use those terms. Others say people with impairments.

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And so for me, understanding disability has implications for anyone who's interested in inclusive practice.

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Because these understandings, they influence your interactions with disabled people, they influence how you speak about disability, the way that we write programs and training, the way that we write policy and service provision, how we might structure a session or a lesson.

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And then also how we educate professionals like teachers, coaches, practitioners. So those understandings are implicitly embedded in all of those things.

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Now, when you say to me, why is it important for coaches have a comprehensive understanding of disability if by disability, your you mean impairment? Well, it goes without saying that if you're working with an athlete, you need to have a decent understanding of their function, their capabilities, their impairment effects.

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And there's no doubt that having a good understanding of those impairment effects is really important in terms of your planning, your communication, your practice, design, your recovery and training cycles, team dynamics, social cohesion, motivation, etc. All the fun stuff are associated with working with athletes. But the issue is when coaches and teachers rely on impairments specific information as

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to basically prescribe how you should work with those people,

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which is what we sometimes see in coach education and training programs that are related to disability. I also want to go back because I missed something you said earlier, you asked me about key milestones or developments in that have shaped the current state of coaching practice.

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I wanted to make a point because it's really hard to say we don't have much information on on

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much demographical contextual information on what it's like to actually coach in disability, sport, and disability. Disability sport is often branded as this one context that you move from the real world, quote, unquote, of able bodied sport, into disability sport. But actually, disability intersects with this whole range of participation opportunities, from physical education through to grassroots sport, community sport, developmental sport, and then even high performance. And so disability doesn't actually just refer to one group, it refers to a whole range of people who play at different levels. And so, when it comes to coaching, we actually have a really incomplete picture of what it's like to coach across the whole pathway. In the discipline in in disability sport. For example, we have very little information about coaching disabled children, or coaching athletes with high support needs, or coaching in segregated like Special Olympics contexts, or integrated contexts like unified contexts, or in disability. We actually we don't have very, very little information about what it's like to coach butcher or Bochy, for example, or wheelchair basketball or with

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Get rugby. So, yeah, so in terms of milestones that have shaped coaching, it's really hard to say because we're still really in the infancy of research, sort of a bit of a bit of attention. And just ask, and then we're going to talk a little bit more about your paper too, and some of the main concepts that your you discussed in that. I have a quick question about, you know, the coaching aspect. And I wonder, because, you know, I, and again, I Not, not in coaching, but I often conceive of, you know, like an X's and O's versus a player's coach. Right. And those are kind of like the two types of coaches. Right. And I wonder, just, I'm just wondering a lot like, when you encounter coaches that are talking to you about disability and such, are they often more interested in learning about developing relationships? Or are they more interested in learning specific skills or tactics related to,

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you know, X export, whatever it might be?

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Yeah.

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Yeah, it's a great question that that depends to change, depending on the level of experience that that coach has. So Paralympic coaches, for example, who are often looking for that kind of marginal gain or that winning edge, they might be more interested in the relational aspects of coaching. So how can we get the best out of our athlete? How can we develop an motivational climate that's going to be conducive to winning? Or they might be searching for that extra

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physiological edge that might enable their athletes to perform in heat, for example? Well, so Tokyo, a lot of the preparations for certainly the more developed Western Paralympic

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teams was how do we ensure our athletes, for example, spinal cord injured athletes who have might have an adverse reaction to training and competing in heat, a lot of the focus for researchers, physiologists, coaches was how can we ensure our athletes are well prepared for training and playing in heat. Whereas if you go all the way to the other end of the of the content of the participation pathway, you've got coaches who are they understand that being

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the understand that coaching is important in disability sport, they understand the importance of providing opportunities for disabled people, but they just completely lack confidence, competence, awareness, knowledge of how to do it, and they, what we what we tend to see is coaches have a fear of the unknown, they don't know what they don't know. And they think that disability is often too hard, and something that they don't want to get involved in. And that's certainly my experience as a as a unconfident newer coach, at the community at the community level where you tend to encounter athletes who are generally high support needs.

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And they don't often don't fit your pre existing model of what sport should look like. And so that whole model has to change. And you have to change your planning, your communication style, your practice design. So what we see from coaches in that particular domain is a real need for like, again, quote unquote, tips and tricks. What should I do with these athletes? Basically, expanding your toolbox of stuff to do with those athletes? What we might call I tend to call the Adaptive Practice repertoire, which is a bit of a policy term. But basically, yeah, there's the range of stuff that you should do with those athletes, games, activities, drills, to suit them. Whereas at the more specialized level, you're looking for more of those kind of, yeah, I guess, marginal gains, and what's going to truly impact on performance, rather than developing relationships with with the athletes?

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Yeah, it's quite interesting I,

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working with teachers in such, we often also get kind of, of the range of what they're asking us. And sometimes it is much more about,

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you know, understanding the civility, understanding how a developer meaningful relationship, and sometimes it's much more tips and tricks, which is pretty common, really, that they want, sometimes a quick solution,

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you know, to things that they're encountering. So, in your paper, you discuss kind of two umbrella approaches to

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teaching about disability coaching in the coaching education world. And those are the categorical approach and the infusion approach. And I'm gonna let you define those and discuss kind of the pros cons differences and maybe which one you would that you think you would advocate more for.

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Alright,

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so that infusion paper,

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I'm really proud of it actually came from some roundtable discussions at a conference in Tokyo a couple of years ago,

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where we were kind of sitting around going cool, we've been quite quite critical of how Disabilities Act is completely absent from general coach preparation pathways, similar

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Stories of teacher to teacher education are often it's a bolt on module or paper that teachers might take, or it's not there at all in tertiary programs. So, the infusion paper basically builds on this really long standing argument in kinesiology, physical education and sport management, that disability is often position separate from an external to the real focus of sport. And current current a poor game was a progenitor of that framework. And she was arguing for infusion MP and in tertiary sport programs in 1994. So that, again, there's nothing new under the sun.

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But in coaching, that that's the situation that's where we're at disability is often absent, or

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overlooked in general coach education certification programs.

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Many, many programs make little or no mention of disability. For coaches who do want to understand more about disability, they're often directed towards one of workshops, online modules, or maybe some resources like infographics or booklets to develop their understanding and do some some self directed research.

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So for my PhD, I kind of did two things. But one of the things I did in my PhD was I evaluated an autism specific coach education program over a period of two years. The course itself, it ranged from like half a day, to a full day, depending on how much money the organization who bought them in had.

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It was always broken up into it. And you'll be really familiar with this make it was always broken up into two, two sections. Section one in the morning was about theory, which talks about the etiology of autism, what it is, what it looks like, how it impacts on their their embodied functioning. And then the afternoon section was all around practical coaching scenarios, the practice, so theory and practice. So this is what I would call a form of the poor use the word additive, because it's added on to general preparation programs. But I kind of reconceptualized it as categorical because it's based on educating coaches based on categories of disability, or categories of impairments, sorry. And so these courses are, in terms of the pros, they're actually really good in terms of raising awareness of specific impairments, particularly in providing inexperienced coaches with some confidence boosting activities and practices and tips and tricks. And they might have a short term impact on awareness, confidence in attitudes towards working with disabled people. So that's a good thing. If you currently have nothing in your national sport organization related to coaching disabled people, a categorical program might be a decent first start.

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But there are some unintended consequences of using those kinds of

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models or approaches to educating coaches.

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So I guess the key thing for me, in the scenario, the practical coaching scenarios that I described, that often made a part of the course, I would say that over two years, and about 90% of the courses that I observed and was part of

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in those scenarios, so the scenarios would be something like you are coaching an autistic kid whose favorite activity is to count to 10, over and over again. How would you then coach this athlete.

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And so in around 90% of those courses, I witnessed able bodied coaches taking on the role of autistic people acting autistic in order to provide this kind of realistic, quote, unquote, experience for the other coach learners.

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And the thing was, it was accepted as unequivocally good and positive and providing realistic knowledge. And I, at the time, I remember, I was standing, I was standing in a sports hall and we're watching a group of football, soccer coaches going through some stuff. And one of the he's a professional football coach, fully Chuck suited up, right. And we're going through this scenario where one of the kids likes to count to 10. And this guy decides to take on the role of the autistic kid. And so he's running around there, sports are lapping the sports all while the rest of the coaches are engaged in kind of a false coaching session. And then the guy come that runs over to me stands next to me and starts punching me on the shoulder. And I'm just like, Dude, what are you doing? Stop punching me.

And then he just started saying my code, my account my account, because apparently, I was still too close to his comb.

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And I was just thinking, or what this is a parody of autism. This is not even a what what autism is actually like everyone with autism is different. There are some shared characteristics, but the way they manifest are different. So this is based on stereotypes, and a parody of autism. And in what other learning environment is able bodied people acting disabled, ethical or desire a desirable thing for us to do in terms of developing knowledge. So I think that for me is highly problematic. And I'm not saying that every categorical training program will do that. But as soon as you start basing knowledge

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Each teacher knowledge coaching knowledge, on prescribing information about impairments. That's the sort of thing that you can open yourself up to, you start to prescribe how to coach based on generalized or stereotypical notions of disability.

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And I don't think that's how we should be educating coaches. It's, it's, it reproduces them as other.

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And I think it's legitimate to question the relevance of some impairment categories to broader pedagogical skills like planning, instruction, communication, environment, design, etc.

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But those categorical approaches are probably the most common approaches that I've seen, because there's something that coaches often say I need to know more about. And

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a second approach that I've seen, and I've written about is following inclusion approach.

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Now, these approaches tend to be similar to the categorical approaches, they're one off workshops, but they might expose coaches to ideas, to help them adapt their activities, or their practices. And they use these practice models like step or tree, I don't know what the USA equivalent would be.

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But they're quite Eurocentric models, those two, but essentially, they're just acronyms to help coaches and teachers change, ask or adapt aspects of their sessions, like the space or the task, or the equipment, or the rules, or the,

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or the number of people in a group, for example. So they're called like differentiated practice models.

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And these are fine. And, again, they give coaches some confidence to be adaptive.

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But they promote, in my view, quite a superficial too superficial view of inclusion, one that's more closely aligned with IT integration, which is actually pre social model, not social model.

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And more critically, though, those models don't help you to reflect on the power relations that actually exclude disabled people in the first place. So that's the second form. And then the third one that I've called for is, is infusion. And that's again, echoing people like Professor Terry Rizzo, and Professor Karen DePaul, who argued that we need to actually infuse information about disability

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into

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the curriculum, and the textbooks and the resources around coaching and teaching. And so you're moving disability from from marginal to a normal part of coaching discourse and coaching knowledge. It basically weaves ideas about disability through general coach preparation, asking them to reflect on disability, understand disabling aspects of coaching, practice, reflect on their relational behaviors, and then use impairments specific knowledge as kind of sensitizing concepts.

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At the moment, I don't know of any examples of, of an infusion framework.

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I've recently received some funding from sport New Zealand to develop a framework for inclusion infusion, sorry.

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And infusion itself might not work. But essentially that the whole point is to just move

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disability from the margins of that discourse to the center and make it part of normal conversation. I suppose the harm of infusion is that a number of coaches could just be turned off by coaching simply because they don't see disability as relevant, or something that they're interested in or something that's

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maybe potentially too hard.

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So the challenge for Coach educators, teacher educators is to make it relevant. And that's why you need evidence based and effective pedagogy and coach education and the sound theoretical understanding of disability. Sorry, that was a really long winded

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answer the infusion aspect of it.

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I'm actually writing something right now that kind of pushes back on it. Because infusion model, what I've seen in the PE realm is advocating for infusing concepts of disability and, and such throughout everyone's coursework, and there's even been some like, maybe we don't need a specific disability class. It's infused in everything in my push that and I think that's great if it can happen. Well, I like textbooks. Absolutely. It should be included. But I do worry, because I've seen it. And it's almost to that point where you talked about that. That scenario for someone who's acting autistic and basically acting like

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ridiculous and just doing like just yeah.

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Just

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reinforcing stereotypes. And what I'm very worried about when I hear that and I heard it several times, and I've seen it written in some of the papers on infusion and disability is that concept and when I worry about is that I know that some of the people that you know, even work in my department, who I think are great people have no background in disability. They have no exposure.

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As with people with disabilities, and so my even though I think the infusion model is really great, and I think it's really idealistic, my pushback is that

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we need to have people that are trained, have experiences, and so and are critically reflecting on these practices that are infusing it into their classes and courses, just like if someone's doing a coaching, education, professional development, and it's on. And, you know, maybe there is degrees where it can be infused and touched upon, or maybe they're doing the work to infuse it in such in a Critically Reflective way. But I do you think that when we, when we advocate for infusion without education, and accountability of those that are infusing it, I think that that first scenario that you're discussing, is very likely to happen of us, you know, just, you know, and so that's my, and maybe that conflicts a little bit with what you're proposing and advocating for? No, I totally agree. It's a question of operational, right, how do we operate? Or how do we make it operational?

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And so that's what this research that we're doing is putting Zealand is about, I would say that

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why are we treated disability any differently to any other category of or axis of difference? So we see any good kinesiology program infuses, is already doing a fusion around gender is already doing a fusion around racial issues. But even with those, if you're untrained and not Critically Reflective, I think that we I think that that happens around those concepts. Okay, so yeah, I mean, maybe we just need to hold academics to highest standards, then. And, you know, in terms of, you know, when I teach about gender, I go down rabbit holes to actually understand the issues and understand those, those key debates and, and maybe it just involves, you know, changing the way we train doctoral researchers and the way that we train academic staff. So ensuring that people like yourself who are experts in disability can run into departmental seminars where you say, look, here's some key things you need to know about disability here, some models of disability. Now, when I when I talk to,

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when I talk to coaches and coach educators about what disability is, my first question is always imagine you're going to tweet, a definition of disability, what would you tweet? And so we and then we go through this whole rigmarole of while disabilities is disabilities. And then I say, Cool, well, here are two perspectives and medical and social models. And where did your definition land? And here's the pros of the social model. Here's the cons of the social model. Here's the pros of the medical model is cons of that. What does that tell you about how you understand disability. And then I talk about, like, for me a revelation in how I understand disability, I used to work in a talent development center, at Loughborough University where we used to work with a range of athletes with, as I say, physical, intellectual, sensory disorders. And these were, these were players from 14 to 40, real range of ages and a real range of abilities. And I used to play I used to coach and play cricket. I don't know if any of your listeners will even know what Cricket Cricket is. But it's a better form of baseball. There you go. And I was running a session and I had my players in a line because I was a really good coach at that time. And I love lining those up. We've got them in a we've got them in the line.

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I'm hitting the ball of these plays to catch and all they're doing is catching the ball throwing it back to me. And this lad came to the front of the line. And I realized, and I knew in my session, I spoke to him before, but he got no arms, you got nothing from the elbow down. And I'm hitting balls at these players faces for them to catch and to throw back. And immediately, I froze, because I was looking at this player going, if I hit this ball at this kid is 14 year old kid with no arms. If I hit the ball, his kid, I'm going to kill him. What do I do? And I probably froze for maybe maybe six seconds, but it felt like about five minutes. It was just this awful experience where my heart dropped. And I was like, What do I do? I eventually tapped the ball to him on the floor. And it's rolled over to him. He squatted down, picked it up in the crook of his arm and threw back to me with a look of disgust that I'll never forget.

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And what I didn't know, because I hadn't taken the time to get to know him was he was wearing a padded vest. And what he used to do was just take the ball on the chest, roll with it, and then throw it back. And often he would drop it sometimes he would catch it. But that was all part of his learning

experience. And so in that moment, and in that interaction in that practice, what was the only thing disabling him? It was me. It was really it was my expectations. It was my practice. It was my assumptions about him that were disabling him. That is a pretty powerful understanding of what disability is. It's something that we impose on people. And so I don't know how I've gone down this tangent, but I think that it's something that we need to make relevant and interesting for teacher educators we need to make it interesting Patricia

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We staff, academic staff, coaches, and just those little lightbulb moments where it's like, cool. If I changed a few things in that, in that situation, it would have gone so differently. Yeah. And that's, that's, for me the crux of infusion, like, what are the key arguments, key ideas here? And how can they spark those labels for kids and for athletes and for coaches? Absolutely, no. And I think, in your papers you make a really good argument to is the medical model, you know, not being permeating through all those other things. But, um, okay, I want to just ask one or two more questions. And so one of them is, what are some of the major challenges and misconceptions that you're seeing around coaches that they might encounter when working with disabled athletes or children? And then what can we do to kind of address these misconceptions?

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Yeah, yeah, good question. There's definitely stigma and stereotypes associated with disability.

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And they, those things can like in that in that example that I just gave, they can influence coaches knowledge that preconceptions or assumptions. We also know that many coaches shy away from working with disabled people because of the fear of the unknown. And that's a discourse that we keep seeing and research over and over again, this fear of the unknown.

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But we also know that knowledge and attitudes are linked. So more knowledge and exposure to coaching and disability sport will probably lead to more favorable attitudes towards inclusion. Okay, my last question for you is, what's next? Rob's you know, research big ideas, as well as where do you see the field of parasport? disability sport and education going?

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Yeah.

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I've been asking myself the same question for the last six months, what, where am I going with this? What's the argument? So particularly with,

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with the infusion stuff, there's a need now to action it. And as I say, Look, I'm not I'm not militant on, we have to do an infusion framework, I am pretty strong on the fact that we need to do something to move disability and to coach education properly.

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So as I say, we've got some funding from sport New Zealand, which is kind of the crown entity in New Zealand for for sport and active recreation. And so we're currently exploring the potential of CO production methods for building a shared framework of disability coach education.

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And so we're where we get one of that. So I'm hopeful that something useful will come out of that. I'm doing some really interesting funded research with some colleagues nationally in New Zealand that we're exploring the types and the variants of ableism that are evident in coaches attitudes towards disability.

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These might range from things like apologetic ableism, where coaches Express How regrettable it is that disabled people are absent from or excluded from

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sport, but don't do anything about it.

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Things through to benevolent ableism, which is where you hear, Charles Ville preys on disabled people for being active, but again, don't do anything to change the structures that exclude them.

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We drew on some ideas from critical race theory to develop something called this conscious ableism, which is where

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That's where coaches might have a distorted understanding of inequity. So while they might recognize that disabled people are absent from sport, they might put it down to things like choice rather than social barriers.

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And also think something called enlightened Abelson, which is where you recognize that there's a problem.

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But you continue to reproduce practices that actually might have realized disabled people. So we're currently writing that op publication. And we're trying to basically, basically trying to expand the definition of Weber's and to show that how it can actually manifest itself day to day, because ableism itself is quite an abstract concept, so that when we tried to define it at the start, it's super abstract. So we're trying to ground it in coaches attitudes.

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I think that focusing on para coaches learning and education is going to be a really fruitful area moving forward.

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It's also really important to keep building a picture of what it's like to coach in different disability contexts. And by that I mean, disabled children are woefully underrepresented in the research because researchers understandably want to do research on high profile areas like Paralympics and not at a local community working with disabled kids.

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We have a little bit of information about segregated contexts like Special Olympics, but often not focused on on coaching. And again, we need more more. We've got any more ethnographic stuff around what it's like to coach in specific disability sport contexts and build this real picture.

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But for me, that's those are some of the key areas that we're or I'm trying to develop moving forward.

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I think it's really important that

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We, as a field start to promote and this was talked about by Professor David Howard is sapper with promote the mobility and exposure of disabled academics in our field, there's often air. And he's right. And it's hard to say this as an able bodied academic. He's right in that it's, there's often an overexposure of able bodied people talking about disability, which I think we're allowed to do, and we should be doing if we do it in an informed way. But I think we should also be building pathways for the mobility and exposure of disabled academics to talk about these areas and to lead in these areas. And so that's something that we'll need to continue to, to think about. And really think about the politics of doing disability research and doing it properly. And that's why I think that it's great that you're, you're exploring participatory methods, CO production methods as well in your own work, because I think that those methods are really, really crucial in

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kind of collapsing the power relations between researcher and researched and ensuring that it's more of a partnership more, rather than doing two sets doing with rather than doing two. Does that make sense?

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I think a lot Yeah. And just capping this off for our listeners, and I think I'm going to edit the beginning to to say this because, you know, a lot of our listeners are a lot of law students that are in PE programs we have a lot of in service teachers, and we have a lot of academics that listen, and a lot of our teachers are also coaches. And I want to just like point out, like how much overlap there is in all the things that we're doing as well as application

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you know, in what they're doing. So I think that this is a tremendously helpful thing for them to listen to and reflect on. And when I listen to you, rather than you know, that's that's what I get is that we need to critically reflect on everything that we're doing and identify ways to kind of combat ableism and identify it in our day to day life. But with that, I really appreciate you coming on the podcast and talking about all the great stuff you're doing and I hope to see you soon in real life again.

47:08

2025

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Hello,