INCLUSION, GOVERNMENT POLICY AND THE EVERYDAY PRACTICES OF AUSTRALIAN SWIMMING COACHES

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Synopsis:
This paper seeks to examine how governmental hopes for disability sports coaching, enshrined in numerous policy statements, are played out, or not, according to the everyday practices of Australian swimming coaches. We found Coaches were willing and accepting of disabled people in their regular swimming programs, however what constituted 'disabled' was ambiguous and not well defined, mirroring many of the official policy statements.

Abstract:
The Commonwealth Government of Australia's 'official' position on disability sport suggests the inclusion of disabled people in both community and elite sport is important (e.g. Council of Australian Governments, 2011). Subsequently governments and national sports organisations have invested in initiatives and programmes that attempt to encourage Australian swimming coaches to include more disabled athletes in their regular swimming programs (e.g. Swimming Australia, 2014).   However, analysis of sport policy and coaching practice has highlighted continual slippage between policy hopes and the realities of inclusion (Spaiij et al., 2013).

This paper seeks to examine how governmental hopes for disability sports coaching, enshrined in numerous policy statements, are played out, or not, according to the everyday practices of Australian swimming coaches. The findings presented are drawn from the perspective of 12 Australian swimming coaches who have coached disabled athletes at various levels (community, state and national level competitions). During interviews coaches outlined their practices, what had shaped these and their awareness of policy and its influence on their approaches.   Coaches' also discussed how they understood disability and how this has influenced the way they approach working with disabled athletes. These findings were contrasted against a documentary analysis of disability sport policy (from 1980-2014) to provide a further understanding of how governmental hopes are (or are not) played out

according to the coaches themselves.

This paper utilises Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis of political power-governmentality (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1991), to identify the multiple sources and elements that have led to the emergence of a contemporary regime of practice that suggests all coaches must include all disabled people in regular swimming squads. Analysis of key Swimming Australia (e.g. Swimming Australia, 2014) policy documents reveals statements such as: "Coaches […] and other persons in positions of authority should […] make it known that Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination are not acceptable no matter what the excuse," (Swimming Australia, 2014, p. 8). Moreover, within the same document disability discrimination is justified by suggesting "not selecting a participant if the person's disability means he or she is not reasonably capable of performing the actions reasonably required for that particular activity,"(p.11) The key issue raised in this study suggests that coaches have an enormous amount of power awarded to them with regards to constituting what counts as 'reasonable' in terms of 'ability' and 'disability'. In the case of this study, interviews with coaches provided an insight into the differing interpretations of what constitutes as 'reasonable', 'ability', 'disability' and subsequently inclusive practice which further illustrated slippage in the translation of policy hopes to practice.

This broader doctoral project illustrates how a small number of coaches constitute disability and what is reasonable in relation to their practice. Coaches in this study were willing and accepting of disabled people in their regular swimming programs, however what constituted 'disabled' was ambiguous and not well defined, mirroring many of the official policy statements. Interestingly coaches were explicit about wanting to be 'inclusive' and how these practices were associated with notions of 'good coaching' and 'best practice'. However these hopes for inclusion were mitigated through a dominant discourse of elite sport performance that is well entrenched in all aspects of Victorian club swimming culture. This subsequently limited the conditions of possibility for inclusion to disabled athletes whose impairments were required to be normalised according to functional classification norms. This study also considers these findings against well reported broader tensions in Australian sport policy. Namely, between the élite performance and the mass participation governmental sporting agendas.

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