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### Doing things my way

Teaching physical education with a disability

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## Doing Things My Way: Teaching Physical Education With a Disability

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### Abstract

Having a disability and being a teacher can be a critical site for examining practices associated with ability, competence, and pedagogy. While there is a growing literature base that examines disabled students' experiences in physical education, there is virtually no research that examines the experiences of physical education teachers with disabilities. Using the Capability Approach (CA), this manuscript explores the experiences of a physical education teaching intern with a physical disability, significant school members, and the students he interacted with through interviews and documents.

The results yielded three primary themes. The first, *the fluid nature of the disability discourse* demonstrated the complexity of disability and explored the contrast between static tendencies that stereotype disability and the disability experience. The second theme, *doing things my way* reflected Ben's need to distinguish himself as a teacher by defining contexts for experiencing competence. The third and final theme, *agent of change* explored how Ben's experiences as a teacher with a disability informed his educational narrative.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research, teachers with disabilities, disability construction, disability sports

I pursue this research in hopes that other educators and schools take notice of the world around them. 'Normal' is a matter of perspective: every student, every person comes from a different background with different challenges. Some may have the challenge of finding something that interests them in the course of their education, but as we will see, others have mental or physical barriers they have overcome. It is true that the individual must figure out how to cross these barriers, even if it is with the help of others. However, I believe that if we work together these barriers would not exist in the first place.

These are the words of Ben, a physical education teaching intern with a physical disability. Rarely do we see such sentiments expressed in early field experiences on the nature of difference, disability, and overcoming challenges.

### **Introduction**

Having a disability and being a teacher can be a critical site for examining practices associated with ability, competence, and pedagogy (Anderson, 2006). While there is a growing literature base that examines the experience of students with disabilities in physical education (PE), there is virtually no research that examines the experiences of PE teachers with disabilities (Fitzgerald, Jobling, & Kirk, 2003).

The social construction of ability in PE, which inscribes bodies with meaning, may well create a hegemonic reinforcement of ability that works to exclude teachers with disabilities (Tishler & McCaughtry, 2011). Evans (2004) highlights that ability in PE is characterized and informed by white masculine notions of skill which privilege organized sport. Because PE has long been charged with producing a sporting and political field in terms of ordering of bodies in social space, health practices, and athletic performance,

disabled bodies may be stigmatized because they do not conform to normal conceptions of ability (Brown, 2005; Evans, Bright & Brown, 2013; Howson, 2004). In effect, the dominant discourse of a pedagogy that relies on a narrowly defined conception of ability may act to constrain the freedoms of those with disabilities to become teachers through the curriculum and evaluation processes (Evans, 2004; Hay & Lisahunter, 2006). More so, PE teachers may undermine inclusive practices because of training typically grounded in a medicalized deficit perspective (Brittain, 2004).

Using the Capability Approach (CA), this interpretive case-study explores the general experience of a physical education intern with a physical disability, significant school members including his cooperating teacher and building principal, and the students he interacted with (Wood & Deprez, 2012). Primary consideration will be given to the disability experience and the conditions that contributed to the teacher's professional direction. Our selection of terminology as it relates to disability hinges on how disability is expressed and represented between and across cultures. The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (PMASA) for example, states that "people first language to describe groups of people with disabilities" (2010, p. 76) should be used. However, disability rights activists denounce "person-first language as offensive, claiming that it was promoted by powerful non-disabled people, particularly advocates for persons with developmental disabilities" (Albrecht, Seelman & Bury, 2001, p. 3). Our preference of terminology usage will align with the non-medical situational arrangements as identified by the social model that focuses on the social structures rather than the impairment that disabled individuals (Barnes, 2012).

### **The Capability Approach**

The CA highlights individual achievement; what a person is able to do, and considers one's freedom to realize specific tasks central to well-being. Social and institutional arrangements optimize individual functioning by equalizing opportunity and participation (Mitra, 2006). Originally conceived by A. K. Sen, the CA was used primarily analyzing poverty, disability and gender discrimination in international development (Mitra, 2006). Only recently has it been applied to special education for conceptualizing complex issues related to disability, special needs and educational rights (Terzi, 2005).

Agency and functionality are central to the framework as “things a person may value doing or being” (Sen, 1999, p. 5). These arrangements are dependent on one's advantages or social conditions as “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements are to be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria” (p. 19).

Primary distinctions should be drawn between capabilities and functioning. Functioning, according to Sen (1999) is what is required for an individual's well-being such as good health and nutrition. Capabilities are the values of those functions with consideration given to the conditions under which people can “help themselves and influence the world” (Sen, 1999, p. 18). Ben's journal entry provides us with an entrée into opportunity, equality and fairness. What is fair? What constitutes advantage or disadvantage and how are his capabilities valued despite the challenges he faced, he was compelled to enlighten others revealing the ways that difference disrupts familiarity.

The relevance of the CA resides in its focus on functions that contribute to “positive flourishing and opportunities” (Norwich, 2014, p. 17). Interests lead to actions, choices, and the conditions that enhance or detract from one’s well-being (Nussbaum, 2011). Ben’s decision to become a physical education teacher was based on his positive experiences as a disabled athlete. His actions made those around him confront their own preconceptions of ability and performance. Silva and Howe (2012) expand on this:

The enormous challenge for APA [Adapted Physical Activity] as a professional and academic field is to find the right balance between operating with social credibility in a world where (some) difference is undesired, responding to people’s wishes of “being like everyone else” and daring to challenge normalized standards of physicality, helping to create the foundation for people to be appreciated as they are and do not feel the need to “be like everyone else.”(p. 29).

The debate within special education and disability stems from labeling practices that accommodate student needs at the expense of marginalization (Terzi, 2005). Because labels hinge on individual deficits within the individual, choice and opportunity are limited. This is the dis/ability conundrum. Evans’ (2004) problematizes the concept of ability and the privileged status ‘physical ability’ has in the relationship between the PE teacher and learners. The teacher is required to embody the curriculum. They have to perform the PE curriculum, and their ability to teach is enmeshed with the knowledge/content of the subject and the performative act of pedagogy.

As a teacher with a physical disability, Ben challenged the dominant perception of ‘ability’ and competence by his decisions on how and what to teach. As we will see, being disabled marginalized Ben in his PE class, but enabled him to excel as an athlete in

sled hockey. Freedom within the CA is not necessarily based on the availability of resources but rather the extent to which they enable optimal performance. Because ability in physical education is inscribed with meaning associated with gendered athleticism, the CA approach was adopted as a conceptual framework.

### **Literature on Teaching and Disability**

Although there is a paucity of research in PE focusing on teachers with disabilities, there is a rich body of literature on the impact of learning disabilities and identity formation in teacher education programs. Burns and Bell (2011) interviewed eight dyslexic teachers enrolled in post graduate teaching and found their disability was integral to who they were as teachers. All reported negative experiences of schooling because of their exclusion from mainstream programming during their elementary and secondary education. Their differences served as seeds for change in exhibiting personal characteristics of persistence, determination, and a strong self-image, which provided a framework for their own practices.

In Riddick's (2003) study on the experiences of 13 teachers including five teacher trainees with dyslexia, all reported on the effective use of coping strategies as a result of their disability. Negative school experiences contributed to their desire to teach and make a difference in students identified as dyslexic. Ferri's (2001) research on teachers with learning disabilities found feelings of isolation and inadequacy as a result of their removal from the classroom. Work by Ferri et al (2005) investigated the constructed identities of teachers with learning disabilities and the source of knowledge for their personal histories. When viewed through the lens of the CA, the research findings



provide evidence that when teachers with disabilities are afforded freedoms to explore their capabilities, they were able to see themselves as competent teachers.

The literature in PE is limited to students' perceptions of learning when taught by a PE teacher with a disability. Bryant and Curtner-Smith's (2008; 2009a; 2009b) research considers the influence that a teacher's disability had on student perceptions of the teacher's competence. Bryant & Curtner-Smith (2008) randomly assigned elementary school students to view one of two videotaped swimming lessons conducted by the same individual, once as a non-disabled person and once from a wheelchair to simulate having a disability. Students reported learning more about the content of the lesson from the teacher in a wheelchair.

In a follow up paper, Bryant & Curtner-Smith (2009a) examined seventh and eighth grade students' responses to a teacher with and a teacher without a disability conducting a similar swimming protocol. No significant differences were found in students' perception of teacher effectiveness or student learning. As part of the same series, students at the high school level scored significantly higher on the learning portion of the test and viewed the teacher without a disability more favorably (Bryant & Curtner-Smith, 2009b). The authors suggest that as students "progress through their schooling, their beliefs about PE teachers with disabilities gradually change for the worse because they are socialized into believing that sport, physical activity, and physical education are for what appear to be whole and fit bodies" (p. 319). This may be due to the limited opportunities offered in PE at the high school level due to a curriculum that focuses on athleticism and competitive, traditional sports.

The literature on teachers with a learning disability can be a useful starting point for examining cultural constructions of disability within the physical education teacher education (PETE). What research there is in PE, remains distanced from any sustained analysis that differentiates between disability and disablement (Grenier, 2007; Oliver, 1990). To that end, the purpose of this case-study was to capture the meaning of one PE intern's experience in an elementary school and the interactions he had with his students.

Specific research questions included:

- What meaning does teaching hold for a PE teaching intern and his supervisors in an elementary school program?
- How does having a physical education teacher with a physical disability shape students understanding of the meaning of disability?

### **Method**

The Internal Review Board at the university granted permission for the case study to be conducted at the school. Parental permission was secured for all of the interviewed students and assent was received from the students prior to the start of each interview. Informed consent was obtained from all of the adults interviewed and pseudonyms were used throughout this paper.

This paper explores Ben's experiences and values his contribution to the process, treating Ben as a participant who we researched with, as opposed to a subject to be researched. He designed and instructed the disability sport curriculum, he helped interview students, and he kept a personal journal that detailed his insights and experiences teaching PE with a disability. He acted in multiple roles as observer, participant, and researcher (van Enk, 2009). Observations operated within the school

setting, placing his voice at the center of the research in directing the curriculum and learning outcomes for students (Brooks, 2007; Howe, 2009). His involvement in the research informed a perspective that generated rich data in the form of reader-response (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

While an individual's agency is at the forefront of understanding their capabilities, the CA is a framework without a predetermined methodological approach. However, as a case study can preserve the context of the data gathered placing the whole person at the center of the research it is in alignment with the CA. The data provides an account of a particular case, enabling thematic analysis within each particular case to preserve the contextual relationships while providing insight into Ben's capacity for action and agency. Interpretive case study enabled this depth of exploration (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990).

## **Participants**

Located in a coastal region of southern New England, Monomoy School was a kindergarten through fourth grade public school that containing 325 enrolled students and 18 classroom teachers. The student population was 85% Caucasian with Asian, African American, and Hispanic represented in the remaining 15% of the school roll. Fifteen per cent of the students received special education services that included those on the autism spectrum, learning disabilities, cognitive delays, orthopedic disabilities, and behavioral disabilities.

Purposeful sampling was utilized in the selection of adult and student participants (Creswell, 2007). As the primary subject of the study, Ben was in his fifth year of

postsecondary schooling. Typically, students enrolled in the master's program do one semester of teaching at the elementary level followed by a semester of teaching at the middle or secondary levels. Before beginning their internship, prospective students observe and interview several teachers prior to making their site selection. Ben's decision to intern at Monomy School was based on teacher preferences, the instructional curricula offered at the school, and proximity to campus housing.

Ben came to the university as a recruited athlete for the sled hockey team. Born with spina bifida, he was small in stature and wore braces on his lower legs for stability. He had worked to develop his upper body strength which he used to his advantage whenever possible. During his undergraduate coursework, his professors made modifications in their classes when necessary. For example, during a cross-country skiing unit, Ben was able to use a sit ski. In his gymnastics class, he focused primarily on equipment such as the rings that highlighted his upper body strength. When participating in his team sport skill classes, he frequently used his chair to afford him increased speed and agility. Ben entered his internship with practicum teaching totaling 120 hours at the elementary and secondary levels.

Ben's mentoring teacher Karen, was a veteran teacher with 23 years of experience. This was her sixth year serving as a cooperating teacher to university students. Her curriculum consisted of a skill theme and movement-based approach to teaching (Graham, Holt-Hale & Parker, 2010). In addition, Karen included unique activities such as circus skills, cup-stacking, and cross-country skiing as a way to enhance her overall program.

A second supervisory participant in the study included the building principal of three years. Lastly, 23 third/fourth grade students taught by Ben were interviewed for the research. The class was one of Ben's teaching responsibilities and had PE twice a week. The decision to use a third/fourth grade class centered on their level of maturity and potential to articulate their thoughts on their gymnasium experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Multiple data sources were collected including interviews, journals and informal communications. Karen and Ben participated in two semi-structured interviews. The first interview took place at the beginning of the teaching internship and the second at the end of the semester. The building principal, Pam took part in a formal interview at the end of the semester. On-going, informal interviews/discussions and email communications between Karen, Ben, and the primary researcher occurred throughout the semester due to the primary researcher's role as an academic advisor and supervisor of student teaching. In addition, Karen and Ben each kept journals reflecting on their experiences during the internship. The journals, particularly Ben's, were instrumental in elucidating the meaning underlying his actions and served as a basis for generating focus group questions.

Twenty-three students enrolled in a combination third/fourth grade class were interviewed once at the completion of Ben's internship. Audiotaped, focus group interviews consisting of three to four students lasting approximately twenty minutes were conducted by the primary researcher, Ben, and Karen. Consistent with the CA framework, the interviewers used a guide developed by the lead researcher targeting specific contextual questions. Prior to interviewing the students, questions were rehearsed and potential prompts reviewed. While it can be acknowledged that students responded to

each of the interviewers differently, these differences offered unique perspectives on the questions depending on who was prompting. The guide established consistency between the team during the focus group interviews (Creswell, 2007). Questions addressed students' perceptions of disability, the nature of their learning experiences in PE, and any noted differences between the teaching approaches of Karen and Ben. All of the interviewers rehearsed questions prior to the start of interviews. Lastly, detailed lesson plans were collected that detailed Ben's planned activities for his classes.

### **Data Analysis**

An inductive, thematic analysis was conducted by the primary researcher and Ben (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Line-by-line analysis of data that highlighted key phrases and portions of the text identified three categories initially labeled: teaching experiences, student learning and teacher practices. From there, the phrases were compared and examined to determine whether they should be classified separately or collapsed into the categories (Boyzaitis, 1998). The primary investigator and Ben initially conducted the analysis separately and then worked together to determine categories. Differences were analyzed and results compared and re-examined to come to a mutual consensus. For this, Ben and the primary researcher returned to the research questions and revisited emerging themes. Periodically they compared notes to insure consistency of findings, checking for theory development throughout the course of the research (Ezzy, 2002). Data from the themes and sub-themes were identified that answered the research questions.

Trustworthiness of the findings was established through credibility, voice, and critical reflexivity. Credibility demands the research reflects the experience of the participants (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001). This was done through triangulation

of data collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group findings, and document analysis of the journals and reviewed by the primary author and Ben (Creswell, 2007). Voice was captured through Ben's actions that revealed his experiences within the context of the school setting (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Journal entries of Karen and Ben disclosed parts of themselves that were both situational and telling. Each adult participant reviewed his or her interviews, which ensured trustworthiness of the data and confirmed an accurate representation (May, 2001). Face-to-face meetings with Karen and Ben clarified any questions on the themes and affirmed that the results reflected their experiences. Strategies to reduce researcher bias included reflexive bracketing through field notes and memos.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results discussed below delineated into three themes capturing the essence of Ben's capabilities and functioning within the context of Monomy School. The first theme, *the fluid nature of the disability discourse* demonstrated the complexity of disability and explored the contrast between static tendencies that stereotype disability and the disability experience (Biklen, 2000). The second theme, *doing things my way* reflected Ben's need to distinguish himself and his skills as a teacher by defining contexts for experiencing competence. The third and final theme, *agent of change* explored Ben's experiences as a teacher with a disability and how these differences informed his educational narrative.

### **The Fluid Nature of the Disability Discourse**

**Teacher discourses.** The medicalized view of the body has a strong influence in shaping thoughts regarding individuals with disabilities (Lee & Rodda, 1994). Negative connotations often lead to the belief that individuals with disabilities will be unable to function in the same manner as their non-disabled counterparts (Davis, 1997). This perspective informed Karen's initial concerns when first introduced to Ben:

I must admit I was taken by surprise the more I talked to Ben wondering about the motivation for him to teach? Why, out of all the teaching disciplines did he select physical education? Physical education is probably the most physically taxing of any job in education. As he walked out of school [after the initial interview for teacher placement], I stood in the doorway thinking to myself "Am I going to be able to provide a good experience if Ben does get a placement at Monomoy? Did I bite off more than I could chew? Only time will tell" (journal). Ben too, had reservations about his ability to be successful because he was both a young teacher and one with a disability:

As someone with a physical limitation, just how well will I fit into teaching physical education? There will be obstacles to teaching such as mobility, demonstration, and even set up. Beyond these personal issues, how will others view me? Will students or colleagues see me in a different light? Is it possible there will be something that I will end up teaching them? (journal)

Journal entries revealed Karen's concerns regarding Ben's ability to withstand the physical work required for teaching. Given the physical barriers within the gymnasium and the need to manage equipment, having an intern with a disability meant Karen had to re-think her role in Ben's development.



Who helps set up and break down equipment if you are physically unable to do it yourself (i.e....gymnastics mats and climbing equipment)? Does the word QUALITY (cap reinforced) refer to the teacher or the curriculum or a combination? Willing and able, willing and unable, and finally unwilling and able. So many things to think about and reflect.

Karen's on-going relationship with Ben encouraged a reflective practice on fairness and equality and what Ben could offer (Howe, 2009). As she explains:

Initially when I met Ben last May I really did not realize the impact he would have on me, my teaching or our learning community here at Monomy. I even questioned my ability to take him on as an intern. However, after giving this thought a minute I asked myself, "If not me then who"? I have always felt strongly that one of my responsibilities, as a PE teacher is to help promote this profession. Signing Ben's placement form would commit me to my biggest undertaking yet as a cooperating teacher. When all was said and done Ben was the teacher and I was the student (interview).

Terzi (2010) broadly defines this as an equality of opportunity whereby individuals feel a moral responsibility for their choices. Karen's decision to take Ben as an intern was one decision that she knew, in the long run, would influence her professional and personal development.

**Students' discourses.** Ben's impact did not go unnoticed in focus group interviews which revealed the complexity of negotiating disability and the ability/disability dichotomy. Ben's implementation of a disability sport curriculum coupled with his own brand of teaching encouraged a multi-dimensional view of

disability. When asked what the word disability meant, students referenced Ben in their responses:

“It means to me, honestly, that it means there are some special sports with special people who have disabilities. But like someone has it, and most people don’t.”

“They really can’t do things that normal people can do, but they can still do a lot of stuff.”

“Pretty much, they can play special sports and stuff.”

“They’re different in like a good way. It’s like they can do some stuff that we maybe can’t do.”

“They’re like us, but they can be different in some ways.”

At the same time, other students revealed the difficulty negotiating this broader view.

During his final interview, Ben discussed this:

There are a few students who when I was in a chair they would say are you hurt today Mr. G [Ben]? And I just corrected them and told them no, I’m not hurt; I am tired and everyone uses a chair when they are tired.

The association between illness and disability maintained a stronghold in students’ interviews and what the term disability meant to them:

“It means you can’t like do everything everyone else can, you have to, you can only do certain things.”

“Well, disability to me is like if you lose your arm. You can’t do something like tie your shoe if you don’t have two hands. He [Ben] lost his whole leg.”

Some students were able to straddle the divide between being similar to, rather than different from. Their broadened understanding of disability comprised an ethos of

inclusivity (Beckett, 2009).

Well, I never really had thought about the word before, but ever since Mr. G [Ben] was here, he's helped us all understand what the real meaning of it is, really, and it doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with them. It just means that they have a problem doing something, but they are also just like us.

Ben's actions displaced the objectification of disability through a reenactment of sport skills (Campbell, 2009). He summarized the changes he witnessed in the students:

I think they learned that I do have my differences. We pretty much settled that the first time I met them at our intro[ductory] conversation. They learned that even though I do have those drawbacks I have ways to modify it [the activity] so my legs are very good. But I use the chair and I can get around even better like that since I'm not very good with my [leg] speed. I can just hop in my chair and use the front of the chair to control the ball so they know that I have other ways that I could get around (interview).

Schools can address diversity by their potential to rise above societal inequalities (Beckett, 2009). Ben's actions enabled his students to experience a level of diversity that moved beyond the deficiencies associated with having a disability through a culturally relevant pedagogy. He exercised his agency with a requisite set of capabilities to bring about change (Walker, 2005).

### **Doing Things My Way**

In the beginning of the school year, Karen and Ben co-taught most of their classes together. During his initial introductions to his PE classes, Ben described his disability and how that impacted his mobility. He showed students his braces and demonstrated his

use of the chair (document). These conversations enabled the students to comprehend the usefulness of the wheelchair as a tool for improving his ability to move around the gymnasium. As one student noted: “So it’s easier to ride if his legs hurt, and he’s wobbly. He might want to use his wheelchair to be faster too, than just walking” (interview).

Seeing their PE teacher use a wheelchair may have influenced positive associations between the wheelchair, finesse and speed (Sapey, Stuart & Donaldson, 2005). While Ben was able to stand and walk during his teaching, he preferred to use the chair. As Ben noted:

Students understood the fact that I used the wheelchair to improve my own mobility in order to travel around faster to see students or get equipment. I remember one of my first lessons, when I forgot a ball at the other end of the gym. I just thought, “Whoops, gotta get that!” and got in my wheelchair to race across the gym. On my way back students were cheering at how fast I was going and two of them were standing with their mouth open. This is the first time they had seen me ‘running’. I think I had showed them how I do things my way! (interview)

Karen was also impressed with his wheelchair skills. Like her students, she was able to cross the disability/ability binary (Terzi, 2005). One could have a disability and still be competent and skillful.

The kids were totally intrigued by his ability to move around the gym at high rates of speed... He used the chair instructionally, even challenging the kids in the pacer run. It was unbelievable how quickly he could get himself traveling in such

a small space (interview).

Students were able to witness the functionality of the chair across a range of sports. In one interview, Ben recounted his experience playing a game with the students:

They were all excited that I was going to join in on their game [of whiffle ball]. A few of them were a little skeptical on how I was going to play. They have never seen me move very fast, and they certainly have never seen me hit the ball. Some of them asked me if I should stand. I told them I would do all right [sitting in the chair], and the gym went almost quiet, as I got ready for the pitch. I didn't like the first pitch, but the second was right on! I creamed the ball and hit the back of the gym, everyone went wild! They went even crazier when they saw me going around the bases at full speed. I went by the bench on the way in and they all stretched out their hands for a high-five.

Students' engagement with Ben during these moments expanded their understanding of what the physically disabled body was able to accomplish challenging the static body by exploring "the contrast between representations of disability in popular culture and the lived experiences of people with disabilities" (Biklen, 2000, p. 338).

**The value of a disability sport curriculum.** PE curriculum as it is delivered typically emphasizes mastery of sport through skill development consisting primarily of team sports including soccer, basketball and football (Haerens, Kirk, Cardo & DeBourdeaudhui, 2011). This preference for sports designed for ambulatory individuals fails to address essential skills for mitigating disability stereotypes. Flaugh (2011, p. 86.) states that "constructions of ability (and specifically disability) remain unexamined or unquestioned" in many contexts but Ben's presence and actions at Monomy School

allowed the students to obtain a perspective on the abnormal/normal distinctions. Over the course of the semester, Ben modified the sporting activities of the classroom and when he implemented a wheelchair basketball and goalball unit (document) disability became his legacy and his signature of ability. Using a local disability sport organization, Ben secured two dozen chairs for students to learn wheelchair and basketball skills. As one student recalled: “We learned how to like use a wheelchair, and you helped demonstrate us with stuff.” During the interviews, students associated the disability sports to Ben:

“Well yeah, you bring in a lot of different sports, like we probably would have never played goalball.”

“We never would have played with the wheelchairs, which was so fun. And you use the wheelchair unlike Ms. Brown [Karen]”.

Ben’s journal entry reinforced this phenomenon:

It was evident for me that they were excited by the new skills they were to learn. Not only did they love experiencing the wheelchairs, but the rest of the school did too. It was a learning experience that evidently taught them that there are different ways to participate in sports besides using your legs or even your sight.

Because individuals with disabilities are often viewed in a negative light, they are “assumed to be inferior and are subject to a decrease in inclusion in society” (Devine, 1997, p. 4). It was Ben’s decision to introduce the sports to the students because of his knowledge and skill base. The combination of explicit information, in tandem with participation in the sports, increased the value of the sports’ utility (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009). As Sen (1987) notes, the capacity to do something is freedom. However, the

choices one makes given those freedoms, creates the truest of opportunities. Ben optimized his position as a teacher by unveiling a sports program that was instrumental in influencing social change. It was a decision grounded in his marginalized experiences reconciled against his strong performative skills as a disabled athlete.

**The challenge of being disabled.** There were many instances when Ben's disability made teaching difficult. Some content areas were more challenging than others, depending on the physical skills required to play. "I realized my leg strength and mobility are issues back when we did soccer, it's just something I need to work on figuring out" (journal). While his physical limitations posed challenge, the bigger hurdle for Ben was his lack of participation in high school PE. Despite being a high caliber athlete, he was separated from his peers and placed in an adapted PE program.

The trouble started when I got into middle school. I was going to class as usual, but then someone came to pay me a visit. She was either an administrator for the school or may have been in the special education department. This person took me out of the class and told me that I was on record to be in an adaptive class. I followed them to sort the issue out and assured them that I was perfectly happy. This continued basically every year up until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, where they switched me into it and for some reason and I just stayed. Being judged solely because I was handicapped was a little unsettling, and it is part of what helped me truly understand what it means to not judge a book by its cover (Ben, interview).

This lack of formal experience with sport made modeling difficult:

I am finding that as the days go by, I do a little better with soccer skills I have not had much practice with, so part of it may just be a matter of time and my own

lack of physical education when it comes to soccer experiences. Particularly in high school, where I was put into an adaptive class and missed out of a majority of sports (interview).

Prior to each class, Ben needed to consider which activities he could easily manage when using the chair. At times, Ben's difficulty keeping up with the pace of the activities forced Karen to negotiate the limitations of his disability

I must admit that I never have accepted sitting down on the job with previous interns. Days go by when I stand up for the entire day. At times during a lesson I might see Ben sitting in the grass if we are outside or resting on mats if we happen to be in the gym. He uses these breaks as energy boosters. These breaks usually happen when the kids are in large group activities at the end of a lesson. I find this hard to accept with the younger kids because no matter what the lesson entails they always need you in some capacity. I feel that he should rest in his wheelchair but often he did not use it outside. What message is he sending the students if he is sitting down on the job? (Karen, interview).

The design of the PE environment played a role in distinguishing Ben's impairment from his disability. At times, managing equipment and space highlighted his disability. At other times, it showcased his skills. His functionality and potential well-being were in constant flux, depending on the day, the event, and the physical manifestations of his body.

### **Agent of Change**



Ben's experience as a Division I athlete allowed him to compensate for some of his performance weaknesses in the more traditional, non-disabled sports. The gymnasium became the centerpiece for embracing difference:

What was really cool in the last two days [of the unit] is that teachers started coming by to watch everything that I was doing. The wheelchairs were a big hit with the students and teachers. A few of them came in during their breaks to take pictures or videos, and if they were hanging out I let them get some chair time too. If I had the wheelchairs longer I may have set up something where the teachers could play a game of some sort. That would be good for a faculty-building experience in the future! (Ben, interview)

However, being a change agent meant that students were able to witness a multi-dimensional view of what it meant to have a disability that impaired functioning. Ben's vulnerability served as an instructive tool for expanding the students' construction of disability. As described in an interview:

Students are seeing a different portrayal of a teacher; one who needs to adapt to different demands. Students get to see how someone with a disability may struggle with certain tasks, but also how that person can do things differently (Ben, journal).

Pam, the school principal concurred:

It's about the indirect lesson. Getting in and out of the wheelchair, watching him struggle with that, watching him sit down on the mats. This is very different in contrast to Karen, who can't sit still (interview).

It was the long, rather than short term learning that Pam concerned herself with, feeling

that students would draw on this experience later in life.

We have so many kids that you know have gross motor issues and just to see someone with a physical disability I think it's very inspiring. But I also think the message, the unspoken message, that they can take away is that one can do whatever they want if they believe in it.

Thomas' (1999) describes the consequences of having a disability as “the accumulated consequences of coming up against social barriers which restrict what one can do, of having to deal with emotional and psychological consequences of other people’s reaction to the way we look or behave” (p. 81). The freedom and access to resources enabled Ben to explore the range of his capabilities (Dreze & Sen, 1995). In the end, he was able to transform himself from a student with a disability, to a disabled athlete enrolled in a PETE program, to a PE teacher.

Being an agent of change will certainly be a big task to take on. However, in such a small time I have apparently made a measureable impact. This proves to me that I certainly have the ability to carry on and do a lot of good in the school community. My only hope is that other schools in which I am involved with are as open and awesome as the staff at Monomy elementary was! (journal)

### **Conclusion**

Sen’s (1992) capability approach explicitly references the heterogeneity of human diversity as a central component of equality and offers a narrative that disputes ability as a measureable and observable construct (Evans, 2004). Because the school provided a social context that allowed Ben to reveal his complex, highly specialized set of skills as a disabled athlete, students were able to create their own interpretation of Ben’s functional

capacity. This was enhanced by images of him zooming across the gymnasium floor to retrieve a ball or climbing the ropes with minimal effort. Bird's (1994) description of the developmental process and the impact of experience in shaping constructions of disability speak to the contextually bound nature of these constructions.

Ben's experiences as a teacher provided him with the opportunity to critically reflect on the ways in which assumptions, namely those associated with disability, impacted his learning experiences. At times, Ben's credibility was challenged due to the performative nature of PE; more specifically, the use of the body as a teaching tool. He questioned his ability to teach content areas that highlighted his physical impairment. He faced the double bind of lacking both experience and the physical prowess needed to manage the gymnasium as he navigated the challenges of equipment set-up, portability and mobility.

The results also suggest that students' construction of disability were shaped by a teacher who was able to express both his achievements and challenges (Beckett, 2009). These acts invited the students to critically examine cultural assumptions about disability, which in the end, broadened their horizon to effectively and respectfully engage a more diverse perspective.

Ben's sense of agency contributed to his overall well-being (Biklen, 2000; Walker, 2005). In recounting his high school PE class, he was seen as "not able," because of his disability. His competencies were not the result of any physical changes he experienced but rather the environmental conditions and support mechanisms that fostered a climate of inclusivity (Beckett, 2009). Being excluded from his high school PE class simply because of his disability without concern for his ability required

reconciliation between missed and created opportunities. However, when given the right opportunity he was able to become the kind of teacher he believed could make a difference (Walker, 2005). He did it on his own terms by merging his disability within the pedagogy of PE. He purposely selected a teacher he felt could support him on this journey as a beginning teacher in a new school environment. In the end, both he and Karen discovered many things they did *not* know previously about what it takes to teach PE. What they did come to know is the role each would play in challenging disablism.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note that this interpretive case study was limited in of number of ways. The research was conducted in a small community setting in the Northeast region of the United States. Only a small sample size of students and adults were interviewed. As both researcher and participant, Ben was in a position where it may have been difficult to bracket his thoughts, feelings and emotions regarding his views on disability and the meaning it held for his students. Ben had a physical disability and was known as a talented athlete. It would be worth investigating the experiences of physical education teachers with other disabilities in regions with varying cultural value systems.

### **Recommendations**

What we fail to understand in our PETE programming is that students work within a curriculum that connects to their own concerns and interests. Discussions on disability, curriculum and disability sport have, for the most part, been relegated to the

area of adapted PE (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009). If and when PETE programs give serious consideration and attention to what disabled individuals can provide within educational domains, the most notable achievement is that they may challenge myths and the stereotypes associated with having a physical disability. This will require flexibility, creativity, and patience in identifying the required accommodations.

Perhaps the starting point for changing the perception of all teachers would be to think of a person being a teacher of PE. Placing primary emphasis on PE to define the teacher ties the ability of the teacher to the explicit and hidden performativity associated with the PE curriculum (Evans, 2004). A CA to impairment would focus on what a teacher can do to create learning experiences for students. Whilst there is no intention to bracket out or erase the significance of the embodied nature of the disabled teacher, in a learner-focused view of educational experience perhaps this more appropriately shifts the balance in a direction that serves, but more importantly values, the capabilities of teachers and learners.

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