The complexities of implementing inclusion policies for disabled people in UK non-disabled voluntary community sports clubs

Matej Christiaens & Ian Brittain

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Matej Christiaens ⬤ and Ian Brittain ⬤

Faculty of Business and Law, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

ABSTRACT

Research question: Adopting a qualitative case study design, this article draws upon the concept of ableism to analyse the extent to which mainstreaming policy in the UK leads to inclusive sport practice at the community level.

Research methods: In-depth qualitative data were collected from 31 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the inclusion process in England including sports organisations, officials in community sports clubs and disabled people. Data were thematically analysed to explore how stakeholders understood inclusion and what the role of ableism might be in formulating this understanding.

Results and findings: The findings illustrate that ableism appears to play a key role in the understanding of inclusion and how it is operationalised in different clubs and sports organisations. This in turn impacts whether disabled people feel able to participate within that environment. The research identified three outcomes of inclusion (parallel inclusion, full inclusion and choice) and four approaches used or necessary to achieve the three outcomes by stakeholders (able-inclusion, barrier removal, creating opportunities and mutual identity).

Implications: This article identifies that, irrespective of policy intent, the way inclusion policy is understood by those that have to operationalise it is often underpinned by an ableist view of disability, meaning that the desired increases in participation may not materialise. Based on the findings, it is suggested that sport organisations should strategically embed disability provision and should actively rather than passively engage with disabled people.

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, the life chances and opportunities for many disabled people (DP) have dramatically changed, both in society and the sport sector (Blauwet & Willick, 2012). This has been noticeable in sport policy across Europe where a policy shift away from a disability centred model of sporting provision towards the incorporation of disability sport within the mainstream sport structures, termed mainstreaming, can

CONTACT Matej Christiaens ✉ Matej.Christiaens@Coventry.ac.uk ⊞ Faculty of Business and Law, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, UK

be observed (Thomas & Guett, 2014). In the UK, there is no separate disability sport policy and the process of mainstreaming started in 1989 (Minister for Sport Review Group, 1989) and was further formalised in 2001 with the publication of 'A Sporting Future for All: The Government's Plan for Sport' (DCMS, 2001) which made the development and promotion of equity and inclusion a prerequisite for state funding. As a result, National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and, consequently, voluntary community sport clubs (VSCs)[1] have been given the leading role in mainstreaming disability sport and delivering sporting opportunities for DP, the focal point of this study.

However, it has been argued that such policy commitment is largely rhetorical, based upon poorly developed and vague rationales (Thomas & Guett, 2014). Furthermore, studies have shown that the incorporation of disability sport into mainstream sport has not necessarily led to inclusive outcomes in the field (Jeanes et al., 2017, 2019; Kitchin & Howe, 2014; Thomas & Guett, 2014). Indeed, this is evidenced in the UK where DP remain the biggest underperforming group with 41% of DP not participating in sport, compared to only 20% of non-disabled people (NDP) (Sport England, 2019). This constitutes a big gap in sport participation and the disparity is even steeper when looking at sport club membership with data showing that 44.8% of NDP participate in a club setting, compared to 29.4% of DP[2] (Active Lives Online, 2020). This implies that it remains difficult for DP to engage in sport activities, especially within inclusive settings. It is thus important to better understand the approach VSCs are taking to inclusion as it provides important insights into the limiting factors preventing DP from engaging in inclusive settings. As such, the aim of this paper is to investigate how mainstreaming policy is being operationalised by VSCs and to what extent this leads to inclusive outcomes.

To the knowledge of the authors, there has only been one other attempt made to examine the inclusion practice of VSCs (see Jeanes et al., 2019). This study utilised DeLuca's (2013) interdisciplinary inclusion framework and the theoretical concept of policy enactment (Ball et al., 2011) and found that most VSCs in Australia are considered inclusive by those in charge of running them, yet their practices reflect an ableist discourse. This highlights a disconnect between the perception of what constitutes inclusion and inclusion practice in the field which was not fully addressed in the study. Therefore, this paper is one of the first to obtain empirical evidence regarding inclusion practices of VSCs in the UK through exploratory research, resulting in rich and informative insights into the experiences and attitudes to sport and physical activity for DP that influence inclusionary practice. This is supported by utilising ableism (Brittain et al., 2020; Campbell, 2011; Goodley, 2014) as a conceptual lens supported by the models of disability (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Swain & French, 2000).

Furthermore, to understand inclusion practices, it is vital to hear both sides (VSCs and DP). Previous studies have often examined either one or the other (Buffart et al., 2009; Ives et al., 2019; Kiuppis, 2018; Sørensen & Kahrs, 2006). The current study advances the understanding of the role of VSCs by capturing and confronting the views of these two parties. As such, this paper presents new evidence on the inclusion practices of VSCs and the role that ableism plays in those practices. However, the paper also presents new evidence indicating that there is a positive movement within the sector supporting the progressive idea of building a mutual identity based on the sport played rather than the disabled–non-disabled dichotomy. Therefore, this study not only creates a better understanding of inclusion practice in the field, but provides insights into alternative

approaches to the inclusion issue and formulates recommendations for good practice. In the following section, the concept of ableism is introduced, which is used to interpret and give meaning to the stories shared by the participants.

Ableism

According to Loja et al. (2013), ableism has been the subject of extensive research focused on the way DP are treated within the wider society. Ableism itself can be applied in multiple contexts including race, gender, sexuality, etc. allowing for an intersectional discussion of its impact on multiple identity markers, but in the context of DP, Wolbring (2012) states that 'ableism describes prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours toward persons with a disability' (p. 78), that are related to prevalent understandings of the ability, and the rights and benefits afforded to persons deemed 'normal'. The concepts of norms and normalcy are therefore used to maintain power for those who best fit the construed norms over those who diverge from them, through the imposition of normative values as a yardstick by which to measure a person's worth. Ableism therefore can potentially devalue DP and result in segregation, social isolation and social policies that can limit opportunities for full societal participation for some DP.

According to Brittain et al. (2020), there are two primary mechanisms through which this occurs in the context of disability – through the ableist attitudes that nearly everyone within society is socialised (to varying degrees) into (OHRC, n.d.) and secondly an inaccessible environment (Nourry, 2018) that is generally designed with only those who most closely embody normative values in mind. This then restricts the movement of DP and their access to numerous areas of society. Within disability research and policy circles, these two mechanisms are more commonly known as the social model of disability, which has been influential in public policy in Britain and resulted in the publication of the Equality Act (EQA) 2010. This is arguably the most influential piece of legislation in relation to the rights of DP in the UK and sets out the legal requirements for organisations to make reasonable adjustments, striving towards an accessible environment. These two mechanisms, combined with the strong links between ableism and capitalism, outlined by Oliver and Barnes (2012), underpin the economic, structural and psycho-emotional oppression encountered on an almost daily basis by many DP. This tragic perspective on disability has resulted in the idea that 'overcoming' disability is the only valued result (Hehir, 2002) and it could be argued that these views have resulted in ableist practices within society, some of which are highlighted in this research. These attitudes create an environment which promotes the devaluation of the worth and citizenship of DP in society (Scullion, 2010).

Problems with conceptualising inclusion in sport

Language around disability is constantly evolving as awareness and attitudes change over time. Conversely, disability remains a sharply contested term and concept with diverse interpretations and meanings within different cultures and countries (Hedlund, 2009). Adding to the confusion, terms such as integration, mainstreaming and inclusion are often used interchangeably to describe similar approaches to the provision of participation opportunities for DP in non-disabled settings (cf. Mitchell, 2004; Smith, 2000;

Taylor, 2006). Furthermore, inclusion is rarely defined in policies (Promis et al., 2001), often lacks a clear explanation and uses vague terminology that is broadly interpretable (see DCMS, 2001, 2008; Sport England, 2008, 2012, 2016). There also appears to be an implied assumption that when confronted with the term inclusion people automatically understand what is meant. This provides VSCs with a wide degree of freedom in interpreting what constitutes inclusion that may have major implications for the experiences of DP.

Similarly, there are no universally accepted definitions of such terms in the sport literature (cf. DePauw & Gavron, 1995; García et al., 2017; Hums et al., 2003; Misener & Darcy, 2014; Parnell et al., 2017; Sørensen & Kahrs, 2006; Thomas & Smith, 2009). What most authors seem to agree upon is that inclusion in sport is more oriented towards equal opportunity to participate (Kiuppis, 2018; Misener & Darcy, 2014; Valet, 2018). As such, an integral aspect of inclusion is that DP have the choice to participate with whom, how and where they want. Furthermore, inclusion requires accessibility (Parnell et al., 2017) which, in the UK, is often reduced to removing physical barriers (e.g. installing a ramp, induction loops and easy to read versions of texts), but should be understood more broadly to include knowledge, communication and quality of experience (Nind & Seale, 2009). In this sense, inclusion is conceptualized more as process than state. This, again, is problematic for VSCs as it does not explain how to operationalise inclusion in practice. What does become clear is that inclusion is 'a multifaceted and difficult process, which although it could be defined at a policy level rhetoric, [is] much less easy to define in reality' (Cole, 2005, p. 341).

This study uses the definitions as outlined by the United Nations in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD, 2006, 2016) as a starting point but takes into consideration the critical epistemological position and ableism as a lens to look at inclusion. As such, *integration* refers to the process of placing DP in an existing non-disabled environment while *inclusion* refers to providing an equitable and participatory experience that best corresponds to the individual requirements and preferences of DP. Therefore, we acknowledge that inclusion is a fluid concept that must be approached from the unique and individual perspective of DP. Furthermore, inclusion involves a process of change and modification in content, approaches, structures and strategies to overcome barriers. However, as inclusion is viewed through an ableist lens, the differential treatment of DP based on their ability in relation to normalised non-disabled standards would not constitute true inclusion.

While this notion of inclusion, in which anyone can be included, can be perceived as utopian (see Hammond et al., 2019), it provides some unique viewpoints from the perspective of DP and emphasises that inclusion is about negotiating a mutual space of participation. It further underlines that sport is organised around ideologies of ableism (Storr et al., 2020) and, perhaps, is inherently ableist in nature. Sport has the tendency to privilege those who rise above mainstream standards and puts the fully human, non-modified body on a pedestal while reducing the non-normative body to an object of pity (Duncan & Aycock, 2005) resulting in DP being resisted and marginalised in sports places (Fusco, 2006). Furthermore, the differential treatment based on ability is deeply embedded in sport, especially where there is a focus on competitive play. Indeed, it is common practice in sport to categorise and segregate athletes dependent on their ability, thus who can be included is often very narrow. This frequently leads

to the most abled DP being privileged within sport, as they are the most likely to meet standards of normalcy. This is problematic as it may reinforce ableist attitudes outside of sport as the segregation of DP within a sporting setting can normalise this process within wider society.

Study context

In the UK, the networks of VSCs are considered to have a leading role in the delivery of government sports policy (Kendall, 2000). The result is an expectation that VSCs play a leading role in the delivery of the inclusive sports agenda. This case study (Stake, 2005) utilises qualitative data captured from senior managers in the sport landscape and DP. The current study advances the understanding of the role of VSCs by capturing and confronting the views of these two parties. Adopting an interpretive/social constructivist approach, the study set out to gain an understanding of how managers of VSCs understand and operationalise inclusion in their club and how this compares to an inclusive understanding and expectation of DP.

Participants and procedure

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect the data and gain an in-depth understanding of how managers perceive and implement inclusion strategy in the grass-roots sport sector. Related studies have adopted similar methods (e.g. Brown & Pappous, 2018; Jeanes et al., 2017; Smith & Sparkes, 2016) as they offer an effective way for people to describe their experiences in rich and detailed ways, as well to give their perspectives and interpretations of those experiences. An interview guide provided a generic framework for discussion about inclusion of DP in the sport sector, whilst the semi-structured nature of the interviews offered flexibility, allowing the researchers to respond to key points or unclear information that arose by probing for further elaboration or clarification (Cargan, 2007). The interview guide captured key ideas such as questions surrounding what constitutes inclusion and questions about the sport participation of their disabled members and how they are 'included'.

The research team consisted of two members. One researcher performed all interviews for consistency of interview technique and specific lines of questioning that may have emerged from one interview to another (Walker & Hayton, 2017). The interviews lasted on average 60 min with 28 interviews taking place face-to-face and three interviews taking place over the phone due to geographic limitations.

Participants

A purposive critical case sampling method (Palinkas et al., 2015) was employed to select senior figures in the organisations responsible for inclusion policy creation and implementation. Participants ($n = 22$) were drawn from senior management of VSCs and strategic sport organisations responsible for community sport provision and policy. These managers were contacted directly via email and LinkedIn. In addition, DP ($n = 9$) were recruited through a purposive snowball approach (Becker et al., 2004) to contrast their views and perspectives with the views of those organisations that are

meant to serve them. Becker et al. (2004) suggest that DP are more likely to participate in a study when they have been approached by someone they know and trust. As such, DP were recruited through introductions made by sport clubs ($n = 3$) after which referral chains made up the rest of the sample ($n = 6$). Due to ethical and methodological considerations, participants with cognitive impairments had a care person available in the same room. In accordance with Hollomotz (2018), accounts of these care persons were only used to contextualise what participants themselves were saying while the focussed remained on aiming to understand the participant.

Although the sample size is a modest one, this phenomenon is explored through not 1, but rather 31 individual perspectives on inclusion practice in the grassroots sport sector. Baxter and Jack (2008) advocate that such a strategy 'allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and explored' (p. 554). Furthermore, theoretical saturation (Guest et al., 2006), the point at which no additional new information is detected in the data, was achieved. While the sample included participants across the sport policy network (see May et al., 2013), the study took focus within individual sports (athletics, swimming and triathlon). As such, the generalisability of the findings might prove challenging for team sports. However, this study has the potential for naturalistic generalisability (Smith, 2018) within individual sports and the disabled community. Naturalistic generalisability refers to the research being recognisable to the personal experiences of the readers. For an overview of organisations and participants, please see Table 1.

Data analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded, and the data were transcribed verbatim by the lead author and uploaded into NVivo 12 to support analysis (Bryman, 2016; Gibbs, 2002). This allowed all data to be easily retrievable and could be revisited as many times as necessary. For confidentiality, all participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms.

The interview data were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018), which emphasises the active role of the researcher in the knowledge production process. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the theoretical position and values of the researchers. In this instance, the research was conducted within a constructive ontological position (Furlong & Marsh, 2010), which acknowledges that disability is a social construct and recognises the influence individuals have on organisations; and

Table 1. Overview of the participants included in the study.

NDSO	NSO	NGB	Sport clubs	DP
Cerebral Palsy Sport (CP Sport) LimbPower	Activity Alliance (2) Sport England	England Athletics Swim England	Athletics (6) Swimming (6) Triathlon (3)	Complex Radio Pain Syndrome Amputee and brain injury Hearing impaired Cerebral Palsy (2) CP, epileptic and learning impaired Harlequin Ichthyosis Down-syndrome Visual impairment

Note: NDSO, National Disability Sport Organization; NSO, National Sporting Organization; NGB, National Governing Body; DP, disabled person/people.

within a critical epistemology (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Neuman, 2014), which places DP at the forefront, whilst striving towards a more just society.

The data were coded using first cycle processes suggested by Saldana (2016). Descriptive coding was used on some of the transcripts ($n = 4$) to develop a basic vocabulary of the data to form categories for further analysis and the generation of broad themes. Invivo coding was used on all transcripts, which was particularly useful for identifying the nuances characterising the approach VSCs take towards inclusion. Holistic coding was then carried out, which included highlighting the participants quotes that were relevant to the broad themes identified through descriptive coding. The lead author verified and discussed the initial findings with the co-author, and this facilitated further development of the data analysis. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study was guided by a list of traits developed by Smith et al. (2015) including the adoption of an audit trail (i.e. a colleague independently scrutinised data collection and theoretical matters).

Findings and discussion

The coding process resulted in three overarching themes: placement, opportunity and ableism. Further analysis allowed us to distinguish between outcomes of inclusion practices and approaches taken to achieve these outcomes. The outcomes identified were parallel inclusion, full inclusion and choice, while the approaches identified to achieve this were able-inclusion, barrier removal, creation of opportunity and creation of identity. These findings are summarised in Table 2 and discussed in more detail below.

Voluntary community sport clubs' approaches to inclusion

Data from the interviews highlighted a disparity in the inclusion practices of VSCs often differing from policy intention, e.g. Artemis from England Athletics indicated that they 'still have people saying we do not cater for disabled people' whilst in contrast, grassroots sport policy is very much about inclusion (see Sport England, 2016). This is perhaps not surprising given that there is no clear definition of what constitutes inclusion (Collins, 1997; Spaaij et al., 2018; Thomas, 2004), which is often explained using vague terminology that is broadly interpretable. This is well illustrated in sport strategy documents, which often refer to the need for diversity and mention inclusion in this regard. However, this is not specifically formulated in terms of disability, but includes ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality and other characteristics typical for under-represented groups. For example, this study is concerned with the latest

Table 2. Thematic findings: VSCs' approaches to inclusion.

Outcome	Placement		Opportunity Choice
	Parallel inclusion	Full inclusion	
Approaches Adopted	Barrier removal[1] Creation of opportunity[3]	Able inclusion[2] Barrier removal[1] Creation of opportunity[3] Creation of identity	Achieving both parallel and full inclusion. Valuing disability sport clubs as equal

[1]When focussed on physical barrier removal, this does not address structural ableism in the club.
[2]Ableist discourse in which only DP who are similar to NDP are accepted.
[3]Creation of opportunities can result in segregated participation which is considered to be ableist.

sport strategy from Sport England which aims: 'to get more people from every background regularly and meaningfully involved in sport' (Sport England, 2016). Whilst the idea of inclusion is incorporated in this statement, it is less clear what inclusion or 'meaningful participation' looks likes for DP in the sport sector. During the interviews, Athena, a representative from Sport England, was asked to elaborate on what inclusion means within their sport strategy:

> When we talk about inclusion that generally means where disabled people are going to take part in sport in a mainstream environment, in a non-disabled environment. (Athena, Sport England)

Here we see a clear similarity between the interpretation of Athena and the government's objective of mainstreaming, i.e. the incorporation of disability structures within the non-disabled sport structures. However, we argued earlier that inclusion in sport is more oriented towards equal opportunity to participate (see page 8). Indeed, this was supported by DP in this study as they indicated that for them inclusion is about having a choice as to where and how to participate, e.g. Lupin, who has Cerebral Palsy (CP), made this clear by saying 'I think it is beneficial to have the option of inclusion and special clubs … there should be a bit of overlap'. As such, there is a disconnect between Sport England's strategy, the interpretation by their representatives, and the way inclusion is understood by DP. Furthermore, this explanation/strategy of inclusion does not take into account the significant differences within disability, nor does it address what 'taking part' in a non-disabled environment actually looks like. This provides VSCs with great freedom in interpreting inclusion and has resulted in a variety of approaches. As such, what follows is an analysis of the approaches that the VSCs in England, who participated in this research, take towards inclusion.

Inclusion outcomes: parallel inclusion, full inclusion, and choice

This research highlighted three possible outcomes of inclusion in the sport landscape. Two of these outcomes are currently achieved, to varying degrees, by VSCs (parallel and full inclusion) while the third (inclusive choice) is often voiced by strategic sport organisations and DP as their desired outcome. These outcomes have different implications for the lives of DP and, depending on the strategy adopted to achieve this, are either positive, negative or a combination of both. What follows is a discussion of these outcomes linked to their impact on the lives of DP.

Full inclusion

Full inclusion occurs when DP are participating on equal footing alongside NDP in the same activity and in a non-disabled environment. This form of inclusion was prevalent amongst the VSCs in this study, but was often initiated by a DP who wished to join the club rather than a strategic approach by the club themselves. For example, Jacob who has CRPS, plays full inclusive squash 'I just play them [NDP] either on my callipers or on crutches', but as the only DP in the club all initiative came from him – 'I had to convince them to let me join'.

The interviews highlighted that lacking a strategic approach to inclusion often leads to issues such as coaches being poorly prepared to include DP in their sessions and often not knowing where to turn for support, e.g. Quinn, an athletics coach, explained how she struggled for almost a year trying to find a way to make a member with a learning disability (Tansy) run and train alongside her non-disabled athletes:

> When Tansy first started with us, he would not run … It was having to think how to get him running, because the minute he was left behind he just stopped. It took me the best part of a year to work that out. (Quinn, Athletics Club)

This lack of skills and knowledge in coaching DP has previously been highlighted by a number of authors (Dorogi et al., 2008; Robbins et al., 2010; Sports Coach UK, 2011) and it has been argued that disability is ignored in many mainstream coach education programmes (Cregan et al., 2007; Mcmaster et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). Despite this issue having been signposted since the early nineties, our interviews confirmed this lack of competence amongst numerous coaches within the VSCs in this research. Furthermore, the long duration of Quinn's struggle seems to indicate a more general lack of knowledge within the club to support their coaches in relation to disabled members.

Parallel inclusion

In *parallel inclusion*, DP still participate in a non-disabled setting. However, they are not engaged in the same activity session as their non-disabled peers. As such, the setting remains inclusive in that DP participate within a non-disabled club setting (i.e. mainstreaming), but the activity itself is not inclusive in that they do not participate in the same activity session. In essence, this is a segregating approach to inclusion within a non-disabled facility setting.

Interestingly, research by Misener and Darcy (2014) tends to indicate that segregated participation within a non-disabled sport club is a strategic decision by the club (e.g. the club offers specific sessions to DP). Indeed, this study confirmed that some sport clubs made a strategic decision to run parallel sessions to provide DP with the opportunity to engage in their activities. However, the interviews conducted for this study also show that segregated participation in parallel sessions can occur unintentionally. For example, Riven, a Head Coach and manager of a swim club explained how they achieved inclusion within their swim sessions:

> I have 3–6 other [NDP] swimmers but we only have two lanes … so I give them one lane and I give him [DP] the other lane. (Riven, Swim Club)

From this quote, it becomes clear that Riven's approach to inclusion was to segregate his non-disabled swimmers from his disabled swimmer. Despite his intention to achieve 'full inclusion' his practice has resulted in the segregation of the DP from the rest of the group. While we have to acknowledge that there are some practical reasons for this segregation (e.g. the DP might be slower thus hindering some non-disabled peers), this quote highlights two issues. First, in concurrence with research from Hammond et al. (2020), this illustrates that some coaches believe that inclusion should not disrupt the status quo or the training of NDP. This shows an (unintentional/unconscious) ableist approach towards inclusion where DP are measured against the performance of NDP and only

those who can achieve NDP standards can be fully included. It seems that Riven has internalised the dominant ableist discourse of competitive sport. Second, this study extends existent literature by illustrating a lack of awareness and understanding of what inclusion means amongst coaches and sport club managers, such that a lack of competences concerning inclusion leads to an inability to evaluate their practice as being correct or incorrect (Dunning et al., 2003).

Inclusive choice

The third outcome of inclusion identified was *inclusive choice* and is close to the dominant understanding of inclusion within the sport literature (see page 8). Choice abandons the idea that inclusion is solely about placement and focusses on opportunity. As such, it approaches inclusion from an equal opportunity perspective by emphasising sport participation as its priority and in doing so considers segregated participation (e.g. disability sport clubs) as equal to participation in a non-disabled environment (e.g. full and parallel inclusion). This concept was particularly articulated by strategic organisations in this study such as Sport England, Activity Alliance and NDSOs. Demeter from the Activity Alliance explained that for her and the Activity Alliance 'sport and physical activity should be available for everyone whenever and wherever they want it'. This implies DP should have both the opportunity and choice to participate in sport the way they want. Similarly, Hermes from Limb Power stated:

> For me, it is all about choice. If you decide to go and participate in sports with other DP, then that is fine, that should be an option. An opportunity for a DP should be the same as for an able-bodied person [*sic*]. It should not be any different. (Hermes, Limb Power)

This understanding describes inclusive choice in terms of activity, location, activity level and the people to participate with. The concept of choice can be explained by criticism of the social model of disability. Part of such criticism is that significance should be given to the personal experience of the individual with a disability (Lang, 2007). Indeed, the concept of choice finds roots in the affirmative model of disability, which argues that the subjective experience of DP should play a prominent role (Crow, 1996). Consequently, inclusion is about recognising the different needs and wants of DP.

From this discussion, it becomes clear that VSCs are mainly concerned about 'placement' of DP within their non-disabled sport club. This is perhaps not surprising as from a policy and strategic perspective they are asked to facilitate inclusion through the adoption of placement strategies. In contrast, organisations such as the Activity Alliance and NDSOs, who have a responsibility towards disability sport provision and DP, are striving towards inclusive choice. This finding highlights that the organisational role is an important factor in interpreting mainstreaming policy providing a contribution to policy implementation literature (O'Gorman, 2011; Skille, 2008; Skille & Stenling, 2017). Interestingly, Sport England finds itself caught between the government push towards placement strategies, in parallel to what has happened in the education sector, with a move away from segregated provision (Norwich, 2012) and the expectation of equal sporting opportunities as voiced by DP themselves.

Adopted approaches to inclusion: able-inclusion; barrier removal, creating opportunities; and mutual identity

As the above discussion has illustrated, VSCs approach inclusion from their own organisational perspective and focus on the inclusion of DP within their club. This has resulted in parallel and full inclusion outcomes for DP and it is worth noting that both can occur simultaneously within the same club. However, because of the vague and broadly interpretable language around inclusion, this has resulted in various approaches to include DP. The thematic analysis resulted in four distinct approaches that VSCs adopt or are necessary for the outcomes to be successfully achieved: able-inclusion, barrier removal, creation of opportunities and building a mutual identity, which are discussed next.

Able-inclusion: inclusion depending on ability

The first strategy to emerge from the interviews, termed 'able-inclusion', shows similarity with the concept of assimilation 'where athletes with a disability are forced to adopt the mainstream culture without any attempt at a reciprocal action' (Howe, 2007, p. 135) but places emphasis on the requirements and limits regarding who can be included in the non-disabled context dependent upon the ability of DP. In essence, only those who are deemed capable of meeting non-disabled norms, usually persons with mild disabilities, are considered for inclusion. From the data collected, this approach of able-inclusion seems to be prevalent within the sport sector as a strategy to achieve inclusion, whilst minimising the impact of inclusion on the club. For example, Caitlyn, a development manager of a swim club stated:

> Depending on the disability that comes in and 'how fast' they can go … it would be a challenge for us … at the end of the day, we are not a disability swimming club (Caitlyn, Swim Club)

First, this quote establishes the segregated nature of sport provision for DP. It emphasises the non-disabled nature of the sport club and uses this as a rationale to exclude DP. Most of the DP interviewed have experienced such attitudes whereby 'people might turn you away' (Violet) or 'do not want (many) disabled people around' (Daisy; Kino). Second, this quote makes it clear that inclusion is based upon DP achieving non-disabled standards, in this case, measured by the speed of swimming. This was further supported by Bard, Chair of a Triathlon club, who stated:

> Assuming that [disabled] people adopt the same attitude as an able-bodied person then I really don't think there is a problem [with integration]. If somebody came down here tonight and set themselves apart because of their disability, that would be difficult. (Bard, Triathlon Club)

In this sense, the club adopts an ableist strategy towards the inclusion of DP in which only those who are able to meet non-disabled norms and behave in a non-disabled way, can be included. Thus, in support of Sørensen and Kahrs (2006) who claimed that disabled athletes 'are included into able-bodied sport only if they can adjust to existing [able-bodied] values and practices' (p. 199), some sport clubs in this research are introducing limitations to inclusion based on (dis)ability. This was also experienced by DP in this study, who for example, were asked 'how fast they could swim' (Lupin) or Daisy who

wanted to do horse riding but was redirected to horse therapy because she is a DP. Such an ableist strategy towards inclusion presumes that DP have to do things (in this case sport) and behave in the same way as NDP. It judges DP on their physical capabilities relative to the non-disabled participants, i.e. applies normative values and has expectations that the only valued result is overcoming disability. It has been suggested that this practice can lead to DP losing their identity or being deprioritised compared to non-disabled athletes (Howe, 2007). However, this strategy does allow the club to claim that they are being 'inclusive', albeit in a very limited way.

Perhaps surprisingly, this ableist strategy to inclusion was also expressed as a viable approach by Taliyah, who is an NDP and secretary of a disability swim club, who explained that for her inclusion is:

> When someone has an ability to develop their (swimming) stroke significantly enough that they can hold their own alongside the normal targets and objectives of the mainstream club (Taliyah, Disability Swim Club)

With this, Taliyah appears to be implying that the disabled athlete must be 'good enough' to participate in the mainstream and 'overcome their disability'. Such a view on inclusion provides extra barriers to participation and is in itself disabling, reinforcing the ableist idea of the 'able-disabled' (Kearney et al., 2019) who are those DP who manage to achieve a level of sports participation that is deemed acceptable by non-disabled standards. This study extends the existing literature by providing further evidence of the structural ableism within the sport landscape and illustrates that this is not limited to non-disabled sport settings. This can partially be explained by the fact that staff members of disability sport clubs are often not disabled themselves and is further exacerbated through internalised ableism. For example, Lupin, who has CP, personally experienced this ableist approach to inclusion practice when he experienced himself being measured against non-disabled standards, which he found himself incapable of achieving. While Lupin was allowed into the club, it could be suggested that his inclusion was mismanaged, which led to him dropping out and internalising the idea that inclusion is only something for NDP:

> If you do not have any disability, learning, sight, hearing or whatever it is, then you can go to the mainstream, but if you have a disability then you cannot. (Lupin, DP-CP)

This finding highlights how ableist inclusion maintains structural ableism in the sport sector and wider society, whilst also showing how easy it can be for DP to internalise ableist perspectives based upon perceived negative experiences, thus resulting in a vicious circle sustaining the idea of segregated participation.

Barrier removal: an equality act approach

This strategy of inclusion focuses on the removal of (mainly) physical barriers that could prevent DP from accessing a non-disabled setting reducing inclusion to an issue of accessibility. During the interviews, it was often expressed that as a result of addressing physical barriers, the VSC was now inclusive, e.g. both Bard, an athletic club chair, and Caitlyn, a development manager of a swim club, expressed their strategy of inclusion as the removal of physical barriers. Caitlyn stated that inclusion is about making sure

there are 'no physical barriers to disabled swimmers coming in (to the non-disabled club)'. Bard expressed a similar understanding of inclusion explaining that it is about 'making it (the non-disabled club) easily accessible for any disabled [*sic*] to become involved … for clubs to make it more accessible for disabled people to utilise them'.

This focus on removing physical barriers has its roots within the social model of disability and is based on the legal requirements of the EQA 2010 that enforces 'reasonable adjustment' (Lockwood et al., 2012). Because of the EQA 2010, VSCs are legally required to make reasonable adjustments that should result in non-disabled clubs being able to provide services to DP. This mirrors the governmental approach to inclusion which, in practice, is often reduced to eliminating physical barriers (Nind & Seale, 2009). Thus it is perhaps unsurprising that throughout the interviews representatives of sport clubs expressed a strategy towards inclusion that is mainly underpinned by the EQA 2010, which focuses on the removal of physical barriers whilst overlooking other issues such as attitudinal barriers. However, while accessibility is accepted as an essential component of inclusivity (DePauw & Gavron, 1995; Nind & Seale, 2009), we extend this by illustrating the limited influence of accessibility and the EQA 2010 on the inclusion of DP within VSCs as strategies based on this approach often result in able-inclusion (see the previous section). As such, it is important for organisations such as the sport councils and NGBs to not overly rely on accessibility and the EQA 2010 for inclusion to happen in VSCs, but to endorse inclusion strategies that promote the participation and full inclusion of all DP.

Creating opportunities

While the previous strategy of inclusion was founded on a 'materialistic' understanding of barrier removal (Owens, 2015), this strategy of inclusion is founded on a broader understanding of the social model of disability, particularly in its aim to overcome social barriers and create social change. It is in this regard that this strategy of inclusion emphasises creating an offer for DP to participate in sport within a non-disabled club. As such, it moves beyond the idea that DP belong in a 'special' club that segregated provision reinforces.

This strategy for inclusion was mainly expressed by the NGBs interviewed. For example, Apollo from Swim England (2017) suggested that creating opportunities for DP, both at a competitive and recreational level, was of paramount importance. Concerning competitive sport, Apollo said there is a need to 'create more un-classified events' in which both DP and NDP can take part alongside each other in the same event. Additionally, at a recreational level, he emphasised the need to develop 'inclusive learn to swim programmes' that can then be offered through VSCs, thus increasing the offer for DP to take part in sport. It is hoped that by creating these competitive opportunities, more VSCs would engage in inclusionary practice within their clubs. Indeed, various community swim clubs indicated that they are offering inclusive learn to swim programmes highlighting the potential success this strategy can have when led by the NGBs.

Building a mutual identity

A more sophisticated strategy to emerge from the interviews is that of building a mutual identity to achieve inclusion. This understanding was most profound with Artemis from

England Athletics who explained that inclusion is a way for 'people to identify with the sport rather than their impairment' and was reiterated by Apollo from Swim England. For them, creating a mutual identity based on the sport or discipline that they are part of, rather than having segregation between DP and NDP is the best strategy towards inclusion, e.g. being a 'sprinter' or a 'freestyle competitor' rather than having a focus on segregation based on ability. This perspective embraces the fact that people want to be with others who do the same sport or event and builds on the mutual participation of DP and NDP.

Such understanding moves beyond the social model of disability and is rooted within the affirmative model (Swain & French, 2004), which embraces the positive identity of DP and allows them to be different, whilst being equal at the same time. As such, it provides the basis on which DP and NDP can create a mutual identity based on their sport. Like the representatives of the NGBs, some respondents from the sport clubs expressed a similar understanding, e.g. Sivir, headteacher of a swim club, considers building a mutual identity as an important strategy towards inclusion. She emphasised the need for further inclusion that not only allows DP to participate and compete alongside their non-disabled peers, but allows them to have a mutual identity, enabling them 'to be just the same, to build an identity based on swimming' (Sivir, Swim Club).

They can be viewed as policy-entrepreneurs (Houlihan, 2011) or diversity champions (Spaaij et al., 2016; Storr et al., 2020) who, often driven by personal interest, are leading a cultural shift and strive towards a more equitable sport landscape. Indeed, this strategy towards inclusion exceeds the expectations of current inclusion policy and provides a contribution in that some policy-entrepreneurs are working towards a more positive and idealistic form of inclusion which supersedes being a disabled or a non-disabled athlete and allows both to be equal within an identity based on their mutual sport participation (e.g. a sprinter or a freestyle competitor). This strategy to inclusion is the most positive approach to inclusion identified in this research and stands in stark contrast to the ableist approaches discussed earlier and found to dominate many VSCs approach to inclusion (Jeanes et al., 2017).

Valuing disability sport clubs as equal

For inclusive choice to occur, it is necessary to value segregated sport participation in disability sport clubs for DP as equal to sport participation in non-disabled clubs. Looking for explanations as to why some DP might prefer a disability-specific environment, the interviews highlighted one reason in particular. Disability sport clubs are perceived as a 'safe' sporting environment. Data from the interviews indicate that this is linked to the fact that most people participating in these clubs have a disability themselves which can lower the barrier to participation for others. Moreover, the disability sport club can be an important first step towards inclusive participation. Indeed, during the interviews, Kino who had her right leg amputated, explained that a non-disabled club would be too big of a gap to bridge after her accident as she did not feel confident enough to participate amongst NDP after the onset of her disability. Such a negative body image is caused by negative social attitudes towards physical difference and the idolisation of physical perfection (Hargreaves, 2000) and is common amongst DP in the initial period after the onset of disability (Taleporos & McCabe, 2002). Engaging in a disability-specific sport setting

allowed Kino to regain her self-confidence which later enabled her to engage in non-disabled sport opportunities such as the London 10 K.

Consequently, the end goal of inclusion in this context is not necessarily just the inclusive non-disabled club. However, the creation of inclusive non-disabled clubs is an important barrier to overcome to achieve the goal of providing inclusive choice to DP.

Concluding thoughts and recommendations

This research was concerned with analysing the extent to which mainstreaming policy in the UK leads to inclusive sport provision in the grassroots sport sector. In support of Thomas and Smith (2009), it was found that there remains a lack of an agreed vision on what constitutes mainstreaming and how to go about achieving it. This research contributes to this debate by showing that the freedom of interpreting what inclusion means leads to various approaches (both positive and negative) to the way this is operationalised. As such, this research contributes to the understanding of inclusion in the grassroots sector as it has allowed us to differentiate between three outcomes of inclusion and four approaches adopted or necessary to achieve these outcomes. To avoid assumptions that mainstreaming will always lead to more inclusive organisations, all stakeholders should be briefed on this array of possibilities.

The findings show that while most sport clubs have achieved integration, placing a DP in an existing non-disabled environment, this rarely leads to inclusive outcomes as it is often approached from an ableist practice amongst represented VSCs (e.g. segregation and able-inclusion). The normalisation of ableist views within the broader sport sector driven by competitive ideals has resulted in a dominant discourse of inclusion that seeks to include only the able-disabled while DP who cannot achieve these non-disabled standards are viewed as inferior and undesirable (Campbell, 2011) and remain marginalised or excluded. This inherent ableist nature on which sport has constructed itself often remains unchallenged and to achieve true inclusion we need to rethink what sport is about.

While these findings are in accordance with existing literature (Jeanes et al., 2019; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Kitchin & Howe, 2014), this study extends the existing knowledge by showing that such an ableist discourse extends to disability sport clubs and can lead to internalised ableism. This is problematic as this research indicated how important disability clubs can be to empower DP to participate in inclusive opportunities. This shows the persistent nature of ableism in the sports landscape and the negative impact this can have on who DP believe they can be. Furthermore, this study adds to the literature a positive side of having freedom of interpretation as there were some VSCs that have strategically embedded inclusion within their club and have made great progress in creating opportunities and a mutual identity for members. These practices go beyond current policy expectations and are embraced by DP. This research has shown that approaches coming from the affirmative model of disability, such as building a mutual identity, have a positive impact on inclusion and the lives of DP. However, not much is known about how such an approach works in practice. Therefore, further research could focus on the implementation of the affirmative model and how this could influence VSCs inclusion practices. Furthermore, case studies could be developed to illustrate good practice and show how a more 'utopian' form of inclusion can be realised in the sports landscape.

This research also identified a discrepancy between the strategy desired by strategic sport organisations such as the Sport Council, Activity Alliance, NDSOs and NGBs, who are striving towards creating opportunities for DP and a mutual identity, while VSCs are often still approaching inclusion from a barrier removal or ableist perspective. This reflects the gap between policy intent and practice in the field and further demonstrates the limited impact these organisations have on VSCs.

While an explanation can be found in the work of May et al. (2013) who argue that VSCs have a lack of awareness and interest in sport policy and Storr et al. (2020) who argue that VSCs are mainly motivated by the prospect of financial benefit attached to being considered inclusive, this paper adds to the literature by offering three further/ alternative explanations for this gap between policy and practice. First, it became clear during the interviews that many VSCs have a hands-off approach to inclusion of DP. Only when DP approach them do they start thinking about inclusion. This often results in an ableist and barrier removal approach to inclusion as the club attempts to fit a single DP into their existing programmes. These clubs often lack a strategic rationale for inclusion and have no idea what inclusive outcome they are striving towards. As such, strategies are often developed because of implementation practice rather than strategic decision making and planning. This contrasts with VSCs that have embedded inclusion strategically within their organisation and more often look at actively creating opportunities within their club.

Second, this research has found that there is a general lack of understanding as to what constitutes inclusion and disability more generally. Indeed, the majority of VSCs in this research believe that they are inclusive or have achieved inclusive practice. However, these practices are often ableist in nature and do not reflect true inclusive practice.

Lastly, there is a lack of clarity in terms of what constitutes inclusion and how this is best achieved. Indeed, this research has demonstrated how inclusion is often discussed in vague and broad terminology by the government and other strategic organisations with the implied assumption that the reader knows what is meant. This is often problematic as the outcomes of inclusion do not necessarily conform to their original intent.

We would like to conclude with managerial implications for stakeholders at the various levels as to how to better approach the issue of inclusion moving forward (see Table 3).

Table 3. Managerial implications to improve inclusion.

Policy Makers (e.g. Sport England)	• Recognise disability sport clubs as an integral part of the sport landscape • Explain more clearly what they mean by inclusion and the desired approach to achieve this. • Facilitate collaborations between disability (sport) organisations and non-disabled sport clubs
Intermediate organisations (e.g. Activity Alliance, NGBs)	• Work with disability sport providers to make inclusion an integral part of coach education • Continue developing inclusive competition and activities such as the inclusive learn to swim programmes • Continue to raise awareness around inclusion in the sport landscape and provide a voice for DP
VSCs	• Incorporate DP as part of their core target audience – be proactive, not reactive • Strategically embed inclusive sport participation in their organisation through both parallel and full inclusion while striving towards creating a mutual identity • Provide inclusion training to all members of staff • Create collaborations with disability organisations in their area, including disability sport clubs

Notes

1. After France, the UK has more small, single-sport clubs than any other country in Europe (Harris et al., 2009).
2. This number includes the participation of DP in disability-specific sport clubs.

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ORCID

Matej Christiaens 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0866-8884
Ian Brittain 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0590-4338

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