



## Coach Education and Development in Parasport: A Critical Review and Agenda for Change

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**Coach Education and Development in Parasport: A Critical Review and Agenda for Change**

For Peer Review Only

## Abstract

### *Background*

The training of coaches is considered central to sustaining and improving the quality of sports provision. In Paraspport, coaches are recognised at the highest level of international sport policy as performing a central role in achieving important sporting and social outcomes related to disabled people. An emerging body of evidence suggests that formal Para coach education plays only a minor role in coach development. To ensure equitable access and quality experiences and opportunities for disabled people in sport there is an ongoing challenge to theorise and implement the optimal structure for educating coaches.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this paper is to address the central theme of coach education reform in Paraspport. The aim is to review critically the emerging literature on coach development in Paraspport to provide some clarity and consensus on existing pathways and models for coach development, before outlining some potential ways forward.

### *Discussion and Conclusions*

This paper offers a critical appraisal of the current state of coach education in Paraspport. Starting with an assessment of existing research on coaches' learning and development in Paraspport, we then examine potential approaches to Para coach education, providing examples from existing research in coaching and the wider field of education. This is followed by some modest suggestions for coach education reform in Paraspport.

**Key words:** Paraspport; coaching; coach education; disability.

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**Introduction**

Recent academic and policy interest in Parasport<sup>1</sup> is firmly embedded in, and reflective of, wider discourses related to inclusion and human rights for disabled people. In the United Nations, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly outlines how organisations responsible for the provision of disability sport must take appropriate measures to encourage and promote the participation of disabled people. As a result of this policy-driven focus toward Parasport, government interest and academic scrutiny has turned to coaching as a means of expanding opportunities for participation and performance. For example, sport coaching is positioned in European Union policy as crucial for achieving wider social policy agendas such as inclusion, equality and respect (e.g. European Union, The Work Plan for Sport 2017-2020).

Such developments in sport and social policy worldwide reflects a growing recognition of the importance of coaching to the delivery of contemporary disability sport programmes (Townsend, Smith and Cushion, 2016; Huntley *et al.*, 2019). A crucial aspect of this includes a focus on coach education to support the development of a “skilled and confident” workforce (e.g. Sport New Zealand, Disability Plan, 2019, p. 9; Sport Canada, Policy on Sport for Persons with a Disability, 2006) with the knowledge and understanding of how to include disabled people in sport (Misener and Darcy, 2014; Jeanes *et al.*, 2019; Patatas, De Bosscher and Legg, 2018; Townsend *et al.*, 2016; Townsend, Cushion and Smith 2017). However, a recent EU Expert Group paper on the minimum guidelines for sport coaching competencies acknowledged working with disabled people to be the number one area of concern for coaches’ skill development (Expert Group on Skills and Human Resources Development in Sport,

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this paper the term ‘Parasport’ will be used. Given the developmental goals of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), Parasport is often used as an umbrella term referring to both Paralympic and disability sports.

2020). Such a finding reinforces that Para coach education provision remains ‘ad hoc’ at best (Huntley *et al.* 2019), and there remains little consensus or evidence on which to build shared frameworks or interpretive tools that could guide the development of Para coach education.

Developing Para coach education, therefore, is crucial for a number of reasons. For example, coaches are a necessary and regular point of contact for disabled people, providing individualised, personal support to help enhance their access to, and participation in, sport. Parasport itself provides a distinctive platform for the visibility and representation of people with impairment(s), providing a context in which cultural understandings of ‘disability’ can be challenged and reshaped (DePauw, 1997; Howe and Silva, 2016). As such, Parasport is often assumed a ‘non-disabling’ site where coaches are associated with disability ‘empowerment’ and identity work, that is, providing the conditions for disabled people to resist and reconstruct negative disability-specific associations (Ashton-Schaeffer, Gibson and Autry, 2001; Howe and Silva, 2016) through the construction and reproduction of ‘athlete-first’ discourses (Townsend *et al.*, 2018). Often these claims are made against a backdrop of coaches’ changing attitudes towards the inclusion of disabled athletes (e.g. Hammond, Young and Konjarski, 2014), but limited training means that coaches are well-placed yet under-supported to deliver such outcomes.

With this in mind it is necessary to examine the effectiveness of coach education generally, considering that coaches are learning to perform a role based on what Townsend *et al.*, (2018) have highlighted as uncritical and culturally-mediated understandings of disability framed by notions of ableism. Combined with these uncritical perceptions, the demands of Parasport in terms of planning for, and working with, a wide range of individuals with impairment raises issues about the effectiveness of the levels of education and training support available for coaches. Despite this, shifting perspectives on disability by coaching researchers

120 has led to a range of useful explorations *of*, and recommendations *for* effective coaching  
121 practice that focus on the relationships and practices that constitute the delivery of Parasport  
122 (e.g. Culver and Werthner, 2018). For instance, Martin and Whalen, (2013) suggested that  
123 high-quality Para coaching involves close collaboration between coaches and athletes creating  
124 a level of independence and control for athletes. Furthermore, effective Parasport coaching  
125 involves establishing appropriate levels of challenge, adapting practices and providing  
126 opportunities for success, self-confidence and competence (Allan *et al.*, 2018). Importantly,  
127 the absence of discrimination and prejudice is commonly associated with effective coaching in  
128 Parasport (Alexander, Bloom and Taylor, 2019), and that coaches demonstrate a level of  
129 disability-specific knowledge and awareness (Culver and Werthner, 2018).

130         Despite these positive examples, and an increased recognition of coaching across  
131 Parasport, as well as an evolving body of academic literature exploring coaching in this unique  
132 context, this research has not generated change or influence in the structure or content of coach  
133 education programmes. A gap remains between research and coach education development  
134 with coach education interventions disconnected from research and practice. Sport coaching  
135 frameworks, such as the International Sport Coaching Framework (ICCE), go some way to  
136 bridge this conceptual-applied gap by providing those tasked with developing coach education  
137 useful guidelines for improving consistency across developmental opportunities for the  
138 coaching workforce. Though well intentioned, generic sport coaching frameworks suffer from  
139 the invisibility of disability (cf. DePauw, 1997), that is, the relevance of these to Parasport  
140 coaching is questionable. A consequence of this is that coach education and coaching  
141 frameworks leave the coaching workforce underdeveloped, providing few if any opportunities  
142 for disability exposure, resulting in coaches feeling unprepared to coach disabled athletes (e.g.  
143 DePauw and Gavron, 2005).

Importantly, the enactment of inclusive policies will be compromised, where coach education either does not meet the contextual requirements of coaches (Townsend *et al.*, 2017), is not an accessible (McMaster, Culver and Werthner, 2012) or a worthwhile endeavour for coaches. This situation is concerning as it actively places limits on the participation of disabled people in Parasport. Given the identifiable patterns of support required for effective coaching practice already highlighted, it is necessary to question the extent to which coaches are adequately equipped with the skills, knowledge and resources to meet the needs of disabled athletes, and how it might be possible to build a framework for coach education that is informed by the policy shifts, coaching practices and research evident in Parasport.

### **Aims and Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to address the central theme of coach education reform in Parasport. The aim is to review critically the emerging literature on coach development in Parasport to provide some clarity and consensus on existing pathways and models for coach development, before outlining some potential ways forward. This cannot be separated from crucial questions regarding the position of disability in sport coaching. Therefore, in order to identify a framework or lens to reconsider coach education it is important to consider not only the existing literature but also how disability is situated within the professional practices and structures of coaching and the resultant learning for coaches.

### **The Parasport Coaching Context**

Parasport coaching, like the wider field of sport coaching, is complex, culturally-laden with a history of providing opportunities for disabled people to participate in sport. There is a small but established body of empirical research outlining the clear distinctions between coaching in 'mainstream' and Parasport contexts (e.g. Cregan, Bloom & Reid, 2007; DePauw & Gavron,

1991; Douglas, Vidic, Smith and Stran, 2016; Douglas & Hardin, 2014; Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston & Reid, 2012). This distinction is reinforced by the fact that Parasport is often a distinct 'site', operating in relative isolation from mainstream governing bodies and sports organisations (e.g. Kitchin and Howe, 2014), necessitating greater investment in developing the Parasport coaching workforce.

For example, research that has predominantly focused on coaches working across disability performance pathways has been valuable in highlighting the limited financial support in Parasport, resulting in fewer coaching and support staff, a lack of coaching and training resources and equipment, and a smaller talent pool of athletes (e.g. Tawse *et al.*, 2012; Taylor, Werthner & Culver, 2014). Furthermore, issues of inclusion and access are central to the coaching role in Parasport as coaches may need to communicate with athletes' families, support workers and caregivers, and reflect upon the accessibility of facilities and transportation (Cregan *et al.*, 2007; McMaster *et al.*, 2012). This research reinforces the ways in which coaching is organised according to impairment. An understanding of potential impairment effects is important because some impairments are static, others episodic, some degenerative and others terminal (cf. Shakespeare, 2006) and as such have implications for day-to-day training, performance, classification and planning cycles. For coaches, the demands of working with athletes with higher support needs are coupled with generally lower levels of resource, training and support, meaning that, as Darcy, Lock and Taylor (2017) argue, as the level of support needs increase, greater demands are placed on the knowledge and skills of the coach. Similar to research with trainee physical education teachers, if coaches enter the role without specific training and support, "it is understandable that exposure to an increasingly, wide range of abilities and needs can lead some to feel uncertain and inadequately prepared" (Morley *et al.*, 2005, 102). It is unsurprising, therefore, that research has continued to illustrate difficulties recruiting coaches due to a commonly cited 'fear of the unknown' (Wareham, Burkett, Innes



192 and Lovell, 2017, 2019). The research considering coaching in Parasport contexts provides  
193 compelling evidence of the unique demands this domain places on coaches. It also provides a  
194 backdrop against which coach learning should be considered as well as anchors for establishing  
195 consensus on ways forward for Para coach education.

### 196 ***Factors Impacting Coach Learning***

197 Understanding how best to support coach education in Parasport necessitates a clear and critical  
198 focus on coaches' learning in context. Research on Parasport coaches' learning and  
199 development is an emerging area (e.g. McMaster *et al.*, 2012; Duarte and Culver, 2014;  
200 Fairhurst, Bloom and Harvey, 2017). While the picture remains incomplete, we can infer a  
201 number of key features of coach learning across Parasport. The lack of formal coach education  
202 structures for Parasport places a focus on the social aspect of learning, i.e. learning has a  
203 'social' character where interaction, language and context provide input for the process of  
204 internalisation of knowledge (Lyle and Cushion, 2017). However, unlike able-bodied  
205 coaching, Parasport has a dearth of programmes and competitions which means a much smaller  
206 'coaching community' resulting in a lack of peers with whom coaches might interact  
207 (McMaster *et al.*, 2012). As a result, Parasport coaching experiences can be characterised by  
208 coaches often being 'dropped in at the deep end' of Parasport (Townsend *et al.*, 2017), without  
209 much support. Consequently, coaches' learning processes become anchored entirely in their  
210 experiences – a social practice characterised by 'trial and error', with a self-referential practice  
211 of reflection (Taylor, Werthner, Culver and Callary, 2015). This results in the recognisable  
212 situation where coaches are forced to consolidate, adapt, or 'cherry-pick' coaching approaches  
213 to apply to Parasport according to their perceptions of 'what works' in mainstream (able-  
214 bodied) sporting contexts (cf. Stodter and Cushion, 2017). Such a situation can reproduce

215 ableist assumptions which can become difficult to displace (Hammond, Jeanes, Penney and  
216 Leahy, 2019) and contribute to the exclusion of disabled people from Parasport.

217       Importantly, disability does not denote a homogenous group, neither in terms of  
218 disability classifications nor coaching domains or contexts (Lyle and Cushion, 2017). In  
219 addressing coaching knowledge in Parasport it is necessary to differentiate according to  
220 coaching domains. For example, for coaches working in the participation domain – where  
221 impairment can play a more defining role in sporting participation and performance – a  
222 conceptual understanding of inclusion and integration is required (cf. Corbett and Slee, 2000;  
223 Cronin, Ryrie, Huntley and Hayton, 2018) to enable the participation of athletes with multiple  
224 and severe impairments. This may require coaches to reconsider traditional approaches centred  
225 on improvement and competition, to giving athletes a choice of activities (Cronin *et al.*, 2018).  
226 In contrast, in the performance domain, where rather than a focus on inclusion, performance  
227 agendas and medal-winning ideologies (Townsend *et al.*, 2018) place emphasis on an outcome-  
228 driven curriculum for Parasport coaching practice. In this context, the emphasis is on enhancing  
229 performance through coaching interventions designed according to disability-specific  
230 principles (cf. Rose, 2001).

231       An assessment of the current literature on coach learning in Parasport suggests that  
232 there is a great deal of complexity which, in turn, provides an uncertain terrain for the  
233 development of coaching knowledge. Another factor for Parasport coach learning is a lack of  
234 funding, combined with a workforce which is often predominantly volunteer-based. While  
235 there is a clear need to provide appropriate training and education for coaches, these factors  
236 mean that coach developers and their sponsor organisations must seek alternatives to  
237 ‘standard’, formalised coach education programmes as sources of professional development  
238 for coaches. A commonly-cited message is that Parasport coaches value formal coach

education opportunities to share knowledge, and to discuss practice and experiences (e.g. Cregan *et al.*, 2007; Tawse *et al.*, 2012). However, the availability of such opportunities is rare, which is exacerbated by a lack of access to mentors and peers (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2017), and fewer resources (i.e., research, books, workshops) for coaches to access in Parasport (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; McMaster *et al.*, 2012). This means that, as both Hammond *et al.* (2019) and Townsend *et al.* (2018) have shown, coaches risk reproducing oppressive ableist attitudes, values and practices creating, at best, radically uneven experiences for disabled people. Hence there is a need to reflect critically on Para coach education as a starting point for initiating change. With these issues in mind, in the next section we provide an overview of current approaches to educating coaches in Parasport.

### **Para Coach Education**

Taking a broader view of the Parasport context illustrates a coaching process situated within a complex and fragmented organisational landscape, “characterised by a wide variety of specialist and non-specialist bodies all competing for attention and funds” (Thomas and Guett, 2014, p. 390). Despite calls for integration and mainstreaming of Parasport structures, the organisation and delivery of many coach development programmes are left to charitable bodies, voluntary organisations, or independent coaching agencies (Townsend *et al.*, 2017). This is an important point, as it means that disability-related content is notably absent from formal sport-specific coach education pathways (Huntley *et al.*, 2019). Or, at best, it is loosely integrated into the coach development activities of national governing bodies of sport and national sports organisations via ‘add-on’ inclusion training for coaches provided by mainstream governing body qualifications. As Bush and Silk (2012) argued, this reflects a ‘compartmentalised’ approach to educating coaches, and while the intention to upskill and educate coaches is progressive and indicative of a desire to place high-quality coaches in the

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Parasport pathway, the training that accompanies such initiatives is often based on a series of assumptions that are open to critical scrutiny. These assumptions are embedded in existing conceptions of formal coach education specific to the Parasport context. To draw these out for critical consideration we need to consider literature from coaching as well as the wider fields of education and disability studies. This analysis presents two overarching categories: ‘Categorical’ approaches to training and ‘Inclusion and Infusion’ models. These categories are now considered in turn.

***Categorical approaches***

Research has shown that the dominant model of disability informing coaching provision and the few resources and opportunities comprising Para coach education is the medical model (Townsend *et al.*, 2016, 2017). The medical model emphasises a technical language and specialised body of knowledge specific to impairment, reflecting a strong behavioural and positivist orientation to professional practice. As such, the most common mode or approach to educating coaches to work with disabled people is through the dissemination of impairment-specific information to coaches (through resources and training workshops) in order to develop an initial awareness and exposure to knowledge about different impairments (Townsend *et al.*, 2017). These approaches to coach education might be usefully described as *categorical* approaches (cf. Brownell *et al.*, 2010), where exposure to disability content is assumed to upskill coaches to work with disabled people based on a categorical designation. The logic underpinning this approach holds that if coaches can be exposed to the processes and features of impairment, they are better equipped to remediate with interventions specifically designed to identify deficits (Townsend *et al.*, 2017). Categorical approaches tend to perpetuate an understanding of disability within a functional and medical paradigmatic framework creating prescriptions for ‘best practice’ based on impairment-specific classifications (Townsend *et al.*,

2017). Such an understanding has been shown to be counter-intuitive to inclusion under stratified social conditions, as coaches report ideological difficulties enacting inclusive policy directives in coaching practice (e.g. Hammond *et al.*, 2019).

In ‘mainstream’ sport, coach education has historically relied on the integration of bio-scientific discourses as the principal means of informing coaching practice (Bowes and Jones, 2006). It might be reasonably argued that such ‘techno-rational’ approaches to coach education are replicated in Parasport where categorical approaches necessitate ‘knowledge-for-action’ and instrumental approaches (Jones and Wallace, 2005) with a greater emphasis on self-sourced disciplinary insights from medicine, physiology, social care, health, biomechanics, and nutrition informing coaching practice (Huntley *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, evidence has shown that in such pedagogic environments, the construction of knowledge is often dialogical, where coaches share experiences and ‘best practice’ solutions (Townsend *et al.* 2017). Generating practice theories within a categorical framework emphasises the development of a coaching ‘toolbox’; batteries of skills and strategies for managing difference and enabling differentiated practice based often upon hypothetical practical ‘scenarios’ or generalised understandings of impairment. The issue here is that when coaches encounter difference in their practice it bears little to no resemblance to idealised scenarios, resulting in a ‘reality shock’ and thus reinforcing coaches’ reliance on ‘trial and error’ (Townsend *et al.*, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2015). These experiences, if viewed negatively, as Hammond *et al.* (2014) argue, can lead to the active exclusion of athletes with more severe impairments. This form of training, while having the appearance of a sound theoretical base and coach educators present as ‘authoritative purveyors of technical knowledge’ (cf. Brantlinger 2006, p. 67), only superficial understandings of inclusion are identified (Symeonidou, 2017) thus reproducing the very structures that limit disabled people in the first place.

311 We have already argued that Para coaches' learning is framed by a powerful socialising  
312 process and 'trial and error' practices. This is important as it allows us to question the extent  
313 to which these isolated and passive training programmes can be effective with the provision of  
314 more and 'better' impairment-specific training. While a focus on single impairment groups can  
315 be useful for disseminating specific information to coaches, for sports organisations and  
316 coaches serving multiple impairment groups there is a need to shift the emphasis away from  
317 the disabled individual and onto the knowledge and practices of the coaches. The analysis adds  
318 to empirical research in physical education (e.g. Coates, 2012) suggesting that the impact of  
319 categorical training models is minimal for coaches working in Parasport (e.g. Townsend *et al.*,  
320 2017), because it is an individualising approach that operates in isolation from other disability  
321 discourses. It can be plausibly argued that isolating disability knowledge creates further  
322 barriers to acceptance and integration (cf. Northway, 1997) as the provision of categorical  
323 training courses as the preferred method of coach education "in many ways reinforces the  
324 notion that segregation (of knowledge and of individuals with disabilities) is needed, if not  
325 preferred" (DePauw and Goc Karp, 1994, p. 6). The situation thus becomes self-perpetuating  
326 in that coach education reinforces the belief that categorical training models are necessary and  
327 disabled people are further minoritized as the 'absent' other through coach education discourse.

328 Understandably, for policy makers, governing bodies, national sports organisations and  
329 coach developers there remains a question of 'what can be done' within the current restrictions  
330 of the existing coach development system to sufficiently prepare coaches for the complexity of  
331 Parasport. Therefore, the level of prescriptiveness underpinning this form of training is  
332 mitigated to some extent by the reasonable concern from coaches to understand the specific  
333 features of certain impairments as a means of avoiding harm, and NSOs wishing to demonstrate  
334 adherence to policy. However, the logical progression of this form of coach education is the  
335 increase in the number of discrete categorical training programs 'flooding the market',

designed to help coaches individualise their practice based on impairment profiles, creating what Thomas (2004) describes as a political economy of disability based “on the generation and distribution of impairment” (p. 46). Simply, it can be argued that the need to educate coaches across Parasport necessitates moving beyond the delivery of impairment-specific information as ‘bolt-on’ courses (cf. Coates, 2012).

Given coaches’ preferences for impairment-specific information, it is clear that these courses can contribute to a Para coach education agenda. If implemented as part of a broader, balanced coach development structure, such courses can indeed be valuable in enabling coaches to focus on the complex applications of pedagogical knowledge to design coaching interventions that encourage agency rather than adjustment (cf. Oliver, 1996). Furthermore, reflecting on personal experiences of impairment and disability through narratives from disabled people, coaches can reflect on the social restrictions that influence their coaching practice, enhance coaches’ communication skills, and learn about specialized intervention strategies for those with severe or multiple impairments (Townsend *et al.*, 2017). While these suggestions are by no means prescriptive, they represent a ‘shift’ from an epistemology of disability based on only “a partial or limited view” (Oliver, 1996, p. 128). Furthermore, categorical models that connect with health and social care discourses to inform multidisciplinary assessments of athlete development, and alternative pedagogical models for practice delivery (cf. DePauw and Goc Karp, 1994) can be valuable. Implementing impairment-specific courses as part of a wider coherent Para coach education model therefore holds potential for a broader epistemological shift in how we understand disability and conceptualise Para coaching, providing a wider network of resources that might usefully inform coaches’ practice.

### ***Inclusion and Infusion approaches***



360 In the previous section we argued that while pedagogic design for Para coach education should  
361 attempt to expose coaches to the complexities involved in responding to impairment, a medical  
362 model perspective on coaching remains problematic. In contrast, taking a social model  
363 perspective focuses on the knowledge, practices, and skills of the coach in the first instance  
364 (i.e. social practice; DePauw and Gavron, 1991). This requires a change in how coach  
365 education is structured. One approach advocated for in physical education teacher education  
366 (PETE) is an *inclusion* approach (DePauw and Goc Karp, 1994). An inclusion approach  
367 reflects a social model perspective, that is, encouraging a clear focus on coaches making  
368 adaptations to existing practice structures (Townsend *et al.* 2016) often through hypothetical  
369 scenarios, making multiple reference to disability topics all within general (i.e., ‘mainstream’  
370 governing body) certification programmes. While an inclusion model offers a realistic  
371 alternative for coach education, however well-intentioned it promotes a level of  
372 instrumentalism framing coaching practice that overlooks the situated realities of impairment.  
373 Indeed, as Slee (2010) argued in the context of teacher education:

374 “Preparing teachers for inclusive education is not achieved by grafting courses of  
375 special education onto the teacher education program” (p. 14).

376 An alternative in teacher training is known as an *infusion* approach (cf. DePauw and  
377 Goc Karp, 1994; Rizzo, Broadhead and Kowalski, 1997; Coates, 2012), whereby disability  
378 content, topics, and issues are threaded throughout. Similarly, an infusion approach can be  
379 facilitated in coach education through the examination of coaches’ beliefs about disability as a  
380 social issue and the assumptions that underpin coaching practices in context. Coates (2012)  
381 argues that the use of authentic and carefully-structured field-based pedagogies where  
382 impairment-specific information can be applied in practice is highly-valued by trainee physical  
383 education teachers. While evidence suggests in coaching that quality professional coach  
384 development involves participatory, contextualised opportunities linked to practice, and active



knowledge construction through social interaction (Stodter and Cushion, 2017; 2019). Indeed, such experiences are reported as particularly valuable for enhancing coaches' knowledge, shedding critical light on the pedagogical strategies that coaches adopt when working with disabled people (cf. Vickerman, 2007).

Indeed, research has consistently highlighted the importance of practical coaching experience in Parasport where coaches are active agents in their knowledge development (Taylor *et al.* 2014). Thus, while we advocate for carefully-structured practical experiences for coaches as an awareness-raising practice, we urge coach educators also to reflect critically on the use of practical coaching activities in coach education, particularly scenario-based learning or simulation exercises. This is partly due to the difficulties in replicating the conditions for coaching disabled athletes, and partly due to concerns about ideological and generalised assumptions that these sorts of pedagogical endeavours can produce (see Townsend *et al.*, 2017; French, 1992). Nonetheless, alongside the relevance of critical theorising and reflective work, *in situ* coach development can be influential in the practice of deconstructing entrenched discourses and examining belief systems about disability. Such a perspective on coach learning shifts disability away from the individual and instead positions Para coaching as an active collection of bodies, knowledges, contexts, spaces, routines, activities, and judgements (cf. Latour, 2005).

Foregrounding the knowledge and skills of the coach as the unit of analysis, rather than the disabled individual is a progressive perspective, which, as Slee (2010) argues, positions technical issues as a secondary concern, with primacy given to the cultural and relational dimensions of coaching practice. This includes the critical deconstruction of individual attitudes, motivations, beliefs and practices (Slee, 2010) whereby coaches can be educated to debate and challenge existing conditions, rather than simply implement and reproduce the

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status quo. However, to redevelop coach education requires an understanding of disability that moves beyond categorical approaches (DePauw & Goc Karp, 1994; DePauw, 2000) toward an understanding of disability in the context of social relationships (Townsend *et al.*, 2016).

**A theoretical agenda for Para coach education reform**

Shifts in the orientation of Para coach education programmes requires deep structural change. Over twenty years ago within the field of teacher education, DePauw and Goc Karp (1994) called for research to challenge the existing education system, and to reconstruct a new one. The issue of whether disability should be addressed in discrete blocks or integrated into mainstream coach education structures remains an issue of considerable debate. While discussions of a similar nature were initiated some time ago within the field of physical education (see, for instance, DePauw & Doll-Tepper, 2000; DePauw & Goc Karp, 1994), this is a debate that coaching is yet to have.

Inevitably, these discussions reflect deeper questions related to the ways in which disability is understood and positioned within organisational policy, sports programmes, and in social practice. It can reasonably be argued that, currently, coach education is characterised by separatist thinking and practices where the response to socially-assigned categories of identity is to create separate educational structures. This categorical approach currently dominates coach education in Parasport, similar to special education teacher education in the 1970s (Brownell *et al.*, 2010). Unlike the field of Parasport, however, this was abandoned in the early 1980s when the relevance of disability categories to broader pedagogical skills such as effective planning, instruction, and behaviour management were seriously questioned (Brownell *et al.* 2010).

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3 431 In considering an overhaul of existing coach education structures it is necessary to  
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5 432 question critically to what extent current approaches, in isolation, are relevant and progressive  
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7 433 for developing coaches. While such prescriptive models of coach education can provide useful  
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9 434 ideas for coaches to use in their practice, the evidence suggests that coaches reproduce a  
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11 435 medicalised gaze that focuses on intervention, perpetuating generalised or superficial  
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13 436 understandings of impairment (e.g. Townsend *et al.*, 2017). More research is needed to  
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15 437 illustrate how various forms of inclusion and disability-specific training programmes impact  
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17 438 on the learning and development of coaches as well as how best to optimise the powerful role  
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19 439 of ‘trial and error’ experience alongside self-sourced disciplinary applications in Para coaching  
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21 440 (Huntley *et al.*, 2019).

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27 441 In contrast, the social-relational model of disability provides a unique epistemological  
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29 442 framework to provide direction and support for coach education (cf. Thomas, 1999). The  
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31 443 social-relational model of disability encompasses four interrelated concepts to explain the  
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33 444 experience of disability, each of which has relevance for coaches (cf. Allan *et al.*, 2019). First,  
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35 445 *impairment effects*—the direct physical (e.g., pain, fatigue) and social impacts that impairment  
36  
37 446 has on an individual’s social functioning. Second, *relational practices* that constitute disability,  
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39 447 such as the social behaviours that are enacted between coaches and athletes in sport (cf.  
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41 448 Thomas, 2004). This concept focuses specifically on power and its effects, for instance, in  
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43 449 coaches embodying disabling attitudes, perpetuating stereotypes, making exclusionary  
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45 450 decisions or using inappropriate language. These practices can and do reduce opportunities for  
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47 451 disabled people, “placing limits on what they can do and what they can become” (Haslett,  
48  
49 452 Fitzpatrick and Breslin, 2017, p. 63). Third, recognition of *structural barriers* such as  
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51 453 inaccessible facilities or lack of available coaching opportunities. Finally, the model has a  
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53 454 *psycho-emotional* dimension, recognising that these social factors and behaviours can and do  
54  
55 455 have a direct impact on an individual’s psycho-social wellbeing, where oppression is

456 internalised constituting, for example, negative feelings of self-worth or a lack of confidence  
457 to participate.

458 The central purpose of the social-relational model is in illustrating the effects of  
459 *disablism*, that is, the “the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with  
460 impairments *and* the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being”  
461 (Thomas, 2007, p. 73). The social-relational model builds on the transformational and  
462 emancipatory purpose of the social model, encouraging critical reflection on disability as an  
463 orienting concept in which there is a conceptual split between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’.  
464 Doing so provides a heuristic that encourages critically reflective questions on different aspects  
465 of the coaching process, shifting the emphasis away from disabled people to the roles that  
466 coaches can play in facilitating high-quality experiences across coaching domains. However,  
467 its point of departure with the social model is the recognition that impairment can and does  
468 play a (highly individual and shifting) role in disabled peoples’ lives (Culver and Werthner,  
469 2018), and this without viewing the impaired body in isolation from the contexts in which it is  
470 situated.

471 The social-relational model focuses the reflective process on the pedagogical skills of  
472 the coach, encouraging considered and individualised approaches to differentiating practice,  
473 rather than expecting athletes to have to adapt or fit into a pre-existing coaching intervention  
474 or environment. Furthermore, this model promotes the importance of a dialogical relationship  
475 between coach and athlete (Allan *et al.*, 2019; Culver and Werthner, 2018), while recognising  
476 the potential for coaches to integrate information from parents and professionals from health  
477 and social care (Vickerman, 2007) into their planning and practice. Finally, the social-relational  
478 model emphasises the impacts of impairment on both social function and also individual  
479 psychology. For coaches, this means drawing on disciplinary expertise and social support in

480 collaboration with athletes to understand in what ways impairment can and does impact on  
481 sporting participation.

482 While the social-relational model provides focused questions and content for inclusion  
483 in Para coach education, more evidence as to its application and impact is required. Most  
484 importantly, coach development and training resources must be developed in partnership with  
485 disabled athletes and communities. The notion of developing ‘collaborative’ approaches and  
486 solutions with disabled people has been a central debate within wider disability studies (e.g.  
487 Stone and Priestley, 1996) and Parasport (e.g. Macbeth, 2010) research, yet is silent in coaching  
488 research. The absence of research that provides space and agency for disabled people – with  
489 the key exceptions of Culver and Werthner (2018), Alexander *et al.* (2019), and Allan *et al.*  
490 (2019) – positioning them as active and central in informing and shaping learning opportunities  
491 for coaches is a glaring omission in the Para coaching literature. Insights from people with  
492 impairments are much needed to provide direction into the development of progressive coach  
493 education opportunities, with insights not into techniques or ‘what works’ but into what makes  
494 a material difference to them and how. Encouraging people with impairments and Para athletes  
495 into coach development roles can provide insight into, and awareness of, different conditions  
496 while highlighting the importance of equal relationships with coaches, where each can learn  
497 from the other (cf. Shakespeare, Iezzoni and Groce, 2009). After all, if coach education does  
498 not facilitate the development of progressive coaching practice aimed at improving the lives of  
499 disabled people, by involving those very same groups, then it becomes redundant and removed  
500 from its purpose.

## 501 **Concluding Thoughts**

502 Critical to the success of Parasport in realising wider social inclusion objectives are the  
503 practices adopted by organisations responsible for coach development (DePauw and Doll-

504 Tepper, 2000; Townsend *et al.*, 2017). Despite this, coaches face huge variation in the  
505 accessibility and levels of support and training available across the disability sport sector.  
506 Compounding this issue is the limited empirical evidence of coaches' experiences of disability-  
507 specific educational structures, and given the relatively narrow evidence base, it is clear that  
508 there is a significant and ongoing challenge to theorise and implement the optimal structures  
509 for developing the Parasport coaching workforce. What is clear, however, is that the lack of  
510 coherent training and education (Bush and Silk, 2012; McMaster *et al.*, 2012) has serious  
511 repercussions for the quality of coaching available, as research over several decades routinely  
512 highlights the lack of knowledgeable, competent and confident coaches across Parasport (e.g.  
513 DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Townsend *et al.*, 2017; Wareham *et al.*, 2019). More concerning,  
514 neglecting the coaching workforce may negatively impact the inclusion of disabled people in  
515 sport, restricting opportunities for social participation in both competitive sporting structures  
516 and limiting their ability to meet physical activity goals. These patterns of exclusion for  
517 disabled people are an indirect form of disablism impacting the full inclusion of disabled people  
518 in social life, as well as going directly against Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of  
519 Persons with Disabilities.

520 It should be noted that the ideas suggested for Para coach education reform are far from  
521 radical. As the field reshapes itself to both meet the challenges of contemporary coaching  
522 contexts and to establish the professional status of coaches, (see North *et al.*, 2019) it is not  
523 always clear how these changes account for coaching in Parasport contexts. Nevertheless, there  
524 are barriers that will need to be overcome. By badging coach development and coach education  
525 as 'disability' there comes an assumption that this provides a common ground and language  
526 across Parasport for coaches to share and provides the illusion of an overarching and distinct  
527 coaching context. But, as we have argued thus far, Parasport exacerbates domain differences  
528 and even within domains, Parasport and therefore coaching, is not homogenous. Consider this

alongside the relatively enduring and conservative tradition evident in coach education, it is difficult to build a shared framework for Para coach education that accounts for the complexity and variation in Parasport.

What is required is more research evidencing Para coaches' learning and development and exposing the minoritizing discourses in coach education that tend to limit coaches to a "narrow, specific, relatively fixed population" or context (Erevelles, 2000, p. 26). In reviewing the literature, we have provided some clarity and order to a disparate field with a view to informing progressive changes in Para coach education. Ultimately, the practical and theoretical dilemmas presented by the aspiration for an overhaul of the existing Para coach education system are, in the first instance, political and cultural. But, if we consider these discussions as a starting point for initiating change and avoiding dependence on the current categorical approaches commonly found in Parasport, such a shift, it can be argued, is long overdue.

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