An Examination of Disability-Inclusion in Canada's Coach Education System

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

High-quality coach education is critical in creating an inclusive coaching workforce from the grassroot to high-performance levels (DePauw, 2005; Ohrberg, 2013). However, empirical evidence has shown that coaches are not being effectively educated on the intricacies of coaching athletes with a disability (Wareham, Burkett, Innes & Lovell, 2018). More specifically, coaching research has shown that coach education programs are often framed around outdated views of disability, built on the assumption that able-bodied coaching principles can be unproblematically applied in parasport contexts, or do not present any content related to coaching athletes with a disability (Allan, Evans, Latimer-Cheung, & Côté, 2020; Townsend, Cushion, & Smith, 2018).

As a result, researchers have called on coach educators to develop coach education programs that highlight the complexities of coaching in parasport through more contemporary understandings of disability (Townsend et al., 2018). If more coaches are exposed and educated about coaching athletes with a disability and parasport contexts, there will be more opportunities for people with a disability to participate in sport. However, little is known about how coach education programs in Canada discuss and include content about coaching athletes with a disability.

The purpose of this research was to examine disability-inclusion within Canada's National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP). Put simply, disability-inclusion relates to content that focuses on coaching athletes with a disability. For this examination, disability-inclusion encompasses two facets:

1) Coach education program *curriculum or content* includes appropriate, consistent knowledge about disability, parasport coaching, and society.
2) Coach education program *delivery or pedagogy* is inclusive and accessible so that people with a disability have the same opportunity to participate in every aspect of the program.

This report will focus on the first facet (i.e., curriculum). In particular, this report will provide an overview of the relative *visibility, structure, and content* of disability-inclusion in the NCCP materials and resources for 27 different sports that offer programming for persons with disabilities in Canada.

RESEARCH METHODS

Phase 1: Quantitative Analysis

The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) sent a letter of information about the project to all national sport organizations (NSOs) with programming for persons with disabilities. In total, 27 NSOs agreed to participate (response rate = 81%) and shared their NCCP materials and resources (*n* = 966) with the research team. The research team reviewed and coded all documents based on NCCP context (i.e., instruction, community, competition), document type (e.g., learning facilitator guide, coach workbook), and whether or not disability, parasport, or a related term (e.g., athlete with impairment) was mentioned. Only documents that mentioned disability or a related term in the context of coach education AND were coach-facing (i.e., documents that the coach would see or use as part of their training) were included in Phase 2.

Phase 2: Qualitative Content Analysis

In total, 74 coach-facing documents that mentioned disability or a related term were included in Phase 2. These documents were pulled from 21 different sports. The research team first examined where and how the content fit within the broader coach education program or the structure (Part A). Second, we performed a content analysis to identify broad areas of coaching knowledge included in content specific to coaching athletes with disabilities, as well as more specific topics related to coach education in parasport (Part B). The findings of this analysis were contextualized using the Côté and Gilbert's (2009) definition of coaching effectiveness, which Allan and colleagues (2020) adapted for use in parasport, as well as the NCCP Coaching Outcomes. In addition, the researchers situated the findings with a social relational understanding of disability (Townsend et al., 2018).

Participating sports included:

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Alpine Skiing	Cycling	Rowing	Taekwondo
Archery	Fencing	Sailing	Tennis
Athletics	Goalball	Snowboarding	Triathlon
Badminton	Judo	Soccer	Volleyball
Boccia	Ice Hockey	Special Olympics	Wheelchair Basketball
Canoe Kayak	Nordic Skiing	Swimming	Wheelchair Rugby
Curling	Powerlifting	Table Tennis	

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings are organized into four main sections. First, we provide an overview of the *visibility of disability inclusive content* relative to all content reviewed from the 27 sports (Phase 1). Second, we provide an overview of how the sports with disability-inclusive content *organized or structured* the content (Phase 2, Part A). Third, we describe the *areas of coaching knowledge and specific topics* covered within disability-inclusive content (Phase 2, Part B). Finally, we provide examples of best practices and areas of improvement for coach education in Canadian parasport.

1. **Visibility of Disability-Inclusive Content**

In total, 24 of the 27 sports that submitted their NCCP materials for review included *at least some* content focused on coaching athletes with a disability. Of these sports, 21 had coach-facing disability-inclusive content. However, it is important to note that 'some content' could have been a single mention of disability. This does not mean the coach education program included any significant coaching knowledge related to coaching athletes with disabilities. For example, only **12%** of all the NCCP documents that we reviewed included educational content that mentioned factors related to coaching athletes with a disability. Furthermore, only half of these documents were coach-facing — meaning that only **7%** of this content was visible to coaches.

Figure 1. Amount of content focused on coaching athletes with disabilities (and accessibility to coaches) within the NCCP materials reviewed for all sports.
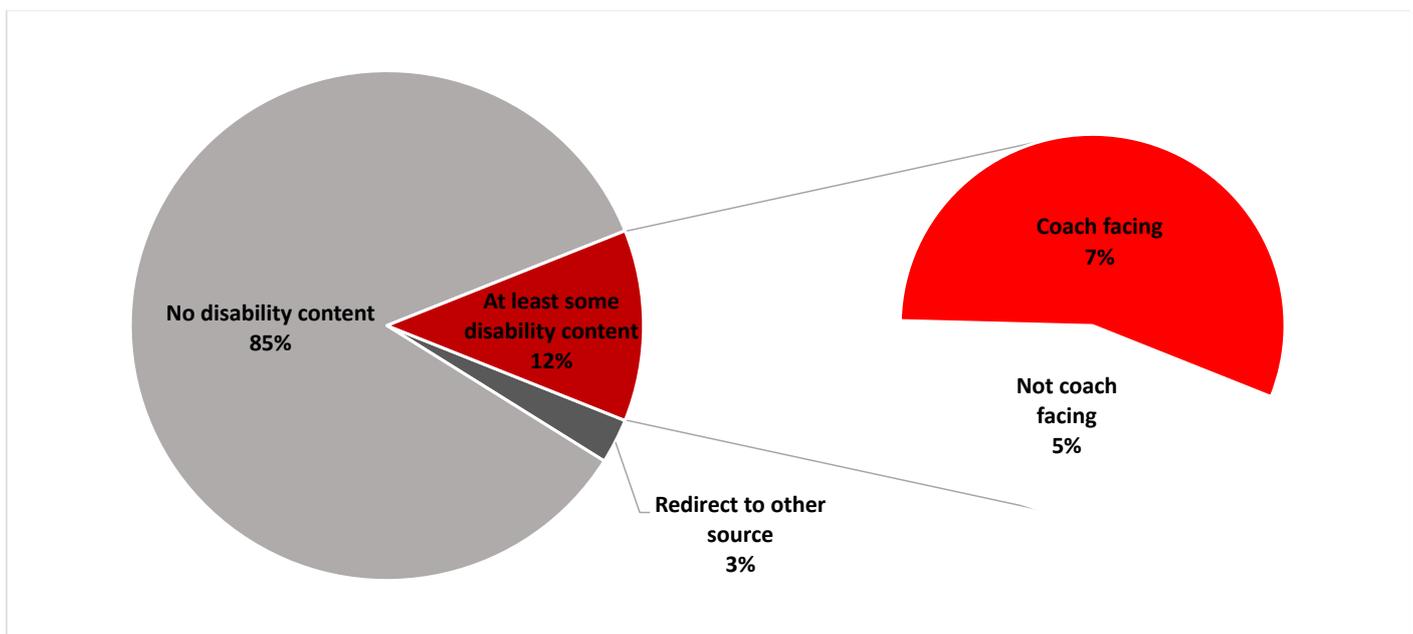
2. **Structure of Disability-Inclusive Content**

Sports were then organized by where and how disability-inclusive content was included in their NCCP curriculum. The structure of disability-inclusive content within the NCCP curriculum was categorized into a typology including para-specific, separate or segregated modules, integration into mainstream coach education, or a hybrid of both, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Typology of disability-inclusion in NCCP structure.

Type	Description	# of Sports
Para-Specific	Disability-inclusion is implicit by virtue of sport or impairment-specific sport has own NSO.	5
Separate	Disability-inclusion modules are separate from the mainstream NCCP coach education pathway.	5
Hybrid	A combination of separate module(s) that address disability-inclusion AND some disability-inclusive content in the mainstream NCCP coach education pathway.	6
Integrated	Disability-inclusive content is integrated into the mainstream NCCP coach education pathway. No separate para-specific module.	5
Minimal or None	The NCCP coach education pathway included no or limited disability-inclusive content or only redirected to other sources.	6

Note: *Some of the materials reviewed included professional development modules that were not an 'official' part of the NCCP but were considered an integral part of the coach education pathway for the sports that submitted them for review. Para-specific coach education included varying degrees of disability-inclusion despite the implicit nature of disability inclusion within the sport structure.*

3. **Topic Areas of Disability-Inclusive Content**

Overall, the NCCP materials and resources for the sports that participated in this project varied greatly in terms of the amount and quality of disability-inclusive content and topics covered in the curriculum. The NCCP pathways for some sports included a comprehensive amount of disability-inclusive content that spanned several effective coaching, disability, and parasport-specific topics, while some sports included little to no disability-inclusive content in their NCCP programs.

In general, disability-inclusive content contributed to five types of knowledge: disability-specific (knowledge specific to disability or impairment; e.g., classification), parasport-specific (knowledge about the parasport; e.g., rules, history, how to play) , professional (knowledge related to the technical, tactical, and sport science aspects of coaching; e.g., analysing performance), interpersonal (knowledge related to behaviours, skills or pedagogies required for effective interaction and communication; e.g., coach-athlete relationships), and intrapersonal (knowledge related to a coach's core values and philosophy; e.g., coach's assumptions about disability) (Allan et al., 2020; Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Nearly three-quarters (74%) of the sports that participated in this project included disability-specific and professional knowledge, while just over half (52%) included parasport-specific knowledge. In contrast, only one-third (33%) of sports included content that contributed to interpersonal knowledge, and less than one in five (19%) included content that informed coaches' intrapersonal knowledge. These types of knowledge were further divided into a range of topics related to coaching in (para) sport, as outlined in Table 2.

Across all five types of knowledge and corresponding topics, all seven NCCP coaching outcomes were supported. However, the disability-inclusive content for the majority of sports only supported a selection of these outcomes, and none of the sport-specific NCCP programs supported all seven outcomes. The most commonly supported outcomes included **support the competitive experience** (63% of the sample) and **plan a practice** (56% of the sample). Around half of the sample also

supported the **make ethical decisions** (52%), **design a sport program** (52%), **manage a sport program** (52%), and **analyze performance** (48%) outcomes. Perhaps most notably, only 37% of the sample included content aimed at **providing support to athletes in training**.

Table 2. *Types of knowledge, NCCP coaching outcomes supported, and topic areas covered within disability inclusive content in NCCP materials and resources for 21 sports.*

Type of Knowledge	NCCP Coaching Outcomes Supported	Topic	No. of Sports	% of Sample
Disability-specific	Provide support to athletes in training	Health and safety	5	19%
	Support the competitive experience	Impairment	17	63%
		Classification	13	48%
		Long Term Athlete Development	14	52%
	Make ethical decisions	Ethical considerations	7	26%
		Inclusion	12	44%
Parasport-specific	Design a sport program & Manage a sport program	About the sport	15	56%
		Equipment	13	48%
		Transportation	4	15%
		Accessibility	8	30%
		Integration	7	26%
Professional	Analyse performance	Analysing technique	15	56%
		Skill acquisition	13	48%
	Plan a practice	Practice planning and adapting	17	63%
Interpersonal	Provide support to athletes in training	Communication and Pedagogy	14	52%
		Wider support team	6	22%
Intrapersonal	Make ethical decisions	Addressing biases/assumptions	4	15%
		Disability and inclusion advocacy	2	7%

Note: While some sports covered the coaching topics outlined above, in many cases, the content was very limited and/or outdated. A complete breakdown for each sport can be provided upon request.

4. Best Practices and Areas of Improvement

Through our analysis, we identified best practice examples for selected topics based on the coach education and disability-inclusion literature. In many cases, we also identified areas of improvement. Please use these examples as initial learnings (or primers) towards a more detailed framework (forthcoming) for (re)evaluating disability-inclusion in your coach education programs.

Table 3. *Best practices for select topics related to disability inclusion in NCCP coach education.*

Type of Knowledge	Topic	Best Practices and Areas of Improvement
Disability-Specific	Impairment	• Provide an overview of some general functional considerations for ALL disability groups that can play your sport. • Consider that some impairments can intersect with other impairments. In the same way, disability can intersect with other marginalized identities, such as gender, sexuality and/or race.

	Classification	• While classification is important, many sports conceptualized classification as the 'first' step to inclusion and participation of athletes with a disability regardless of the goals and level of the participant. • **Solution:** Scaffold all disability inclusive content to make sense for the level.
	Ethical considerations	• Many sports used an outdated generic example that framed the inclusion of athletes with a disability as an ethical dilemma. • It is important to consider how athletes with a disability are framed in an ethical 'dilemma'. • **Solution:** Make sure the athlete with a disability is not seen as the 'problem' in the case study.
	Inclusion	• Inclusion principles should be emphasised early (before classification) and should be revisited at every level of coach education (even high performance!). • Definitions of inclusion should explain what inclusion is (and what it is not) and how attitudes and pre-conceived notions can affect coaching practice. • Ensure that statements about inclusion explain what coaches can do to support inclusion (e.g., how can coaches ensure that "every athlete has a right to participate"?). • Provide examples to show what inclusion looks like in practice for your sport.
Parasport-specific	Accessibility	• Physical and structural barriers exist in many sporting facilities across the country. • Be sure to include up-to-date, detailed information about accessibility requirements specific to your sport, this includes equipment and transportation options.
Professional	Practice planning and adapting	• Using several activities and case studies to illustrate practice adaptations in action can help coaches contextualize what adaptations can look like in practice for their sport. • However, only a handful of sports contained guidance on how to adapt for athletes with a disability specific to their sport. • Inclusive practices should as start with "involving para-athletes in all discussions": Whenever developing new parasport programs or practices, always include the voices of those who experience disability. • **Solution:** Consider frameworks from adaptive physical activity (TREE - teaching style, Rules, Equipment, Environment) as a starting place to give coaches practical tools to adapt practices. Be sure to provide practice design examples too.

Interpersonal	Communication and Pedagogy	• Consider using a wide array of pictures that represent both coaches and athletes with a disability. Include ALL impairment groups that can play your sport, not just those that are most visible or easily integrated. • Avoid situating the athlete as a problem that needs to be fixed. • **Solution:** Consider reframing the problem as the coach needing to adapt practices, physical environment, and sport culture to include more athletes. • "Coach the person, not the disability": This person-first language is central to coaching athletes with a disability, but it can also come off as rhetoric without further explanation. Going too far away from disability can mitigate the lived experience of athletes with a disability. • **Solution:** Explain how it is important to also consider the athletes disability as central to their identity and their everyday realities.
Intrapersonal	Addressing biases/assumptions	• Overwhelmingly, sports had little opportunity for coaches to reflect on their pre-conceived notions and assumptions about disability. • Creative and reflective pedagogies can be used to help draw out these critical reflections • Challenging biases and assumptions about disability should be central to coach all coach education (e.g., "Try the sport to gain some experiential knowledge") • However, do not assume all coaches taking the course will be able-bodied!

Brief Summary

In many cases, there was not enough background knowledge provided on who can play, history, rules, equipment, accessibility of facilities, etc. Generally speaking, sports focused on performance aspects (e.g., classification) over participation and inclusion. Relatedly, technical and sport science knowledge tended to be emphasized over relational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledges. Interestingly, integrated sports that stayed close to able-bodied concepts for parasport content missed important disability-specific and parasport-specific content. In a similar way, para-specific sports that stuck too close to able-bodied concepts missed important disability-specific content.

KEY INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, sport-specific coach education programs contained some disability-inclusion content, but when considered relative to all coaching modules combined there was very little content. The structure of disability-inclusive content varied. In terms of topics covered, the hybrid structure was appeared to be the most effective. The effectiveness of different structures in terms of curriculum and delivery, and coach learning is an important future research direction.

Importantly, many sports just mentioned topics, while other sports included detailed overviews. There are several topics that can be added to sports coach education programs. Most notably, topics related to inter (coach-athlete-environment interactions) and intrapersonal (assumptions, biases) coaching knowledge need to be included. Arguably, these knowledges are critical when coaching in parasport contexts at any level. It should be noted that only one sport had any mention of the accessibility of coach education for coaches with a disability (e.g., screen readable modules, alt text, accessible facilities).

Our main recommendation is to use this report to help sport practitioners become more aware of the visibility, structures and topics that are possible. Additionally, this report can be a starting point towards developing a more robust template or framework for disability inclusive coach education that can be transferable across sports.

Table 3. Recommendations to enhance disability-inclusion in the NCCP.

Priority	Recommendations
Revamp sport-specific coach education curriculum to align with current research	- Work with 1-3 sports to develop a disability-inclusive coach education program framework - Co-produce the template with experts and disability community members (e.g., researchers, managers, disability community, coaches, and athletes) - Scaffold topics from community sport coach through to high performance coach - Build a framework that can be transferrable across all sports
Examine accessibility and inclusion within Canada's coach education system	- Understand accessibility and inclusiveness of the 'delivery' of coach education - Examine if coach education currently supports coaches with a disability to step into coaching roles (parasport or mainstream) - Ask coach education managers about how they ensure full participation for people with disabilities in coach education - Ask coaches with a disability about their experiences with coach education
Train coach developers to deliver disability-inclusive coach education	- Survey coach developers to understand key knowledge areas needed and barriers to disability-inclusive coach education delivery - Develop a coach developer/facilitator workshop for all sports

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