

# Reverse inclusion and the question of disability

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Wheelchair basketball: It's a fast, skillful game, dazzling to watch, gruelling to play. It's also a sport that in Canada has become one of the most inclusive, welcoming athletes with disability and able-bodied athletes alike to its leagues and teams. And athletes like it that way.

In fact when researchers talked to [female athletes](#) experiencing disability about "reverse integration" – a phenomenon where able-bodied athletes join athletes with disability to play competitive sport on one team, the overall response was well-captured by one participant who asked: "What's the difference?"

Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere, the study's lead author in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta, says, "Maybe this is a question people who experience disability may ask more often because they don't see themselves differently, at least in some instances, but disability is often perceived as a difference by others."

Researchers interviewed nine female athletes with a median age of 34.6, all of whom experience a disability and who play competitive wheelchair basketball. "Our focus was on women athletes who are classifiable," says Spencer-Cavaliere. "That means the athlete is eligible to compete at the international level because they meet a minimum standard of disability."

There were two phases to the questions. "We posed statements like, 'I see myself as an athlete' and asked the athlete to rank themselves, then

we'd re-ask the question and adapt it to include the able-bodied idea. For example, we asked, 'Does competing with and against able-bodied athletes affect how you see yourself?'" says Spencer-Cavaliere, adding that open-ended questions about athletes' positive and negative experiences with able-bodied athletes were also asked.

"In our study participants spoke quite favourably about the inclusion of able-bodied athletes and I think a lot has to do with one's own experience. Only one player said her view of self was negatively impacted by the inclusion of able-bodied players but this was related to her perception that able-bodied athletes had more opportunities in sport, nevertheless she was still very supportive of including these athletes," says Spencer-Cavaliere.

"What we didn't expect was the question of 'What's the difference?'" she says. "We also noticed that players started to mix up who they thought did and didn't have a disability (on the team). For example some athletes were described as able-bodied who were classifiable and vice versa. There were different ideas of what disability meant emerging and we (the researchers) then started to ask that question: What's the difference? Sometimes the athletes perceived no difference. When everyone's playing they're all in wheelchairs. They all use the same equipment; it's an equalizer."

Talking about the irrelevance of disability in wheelchair basketball one participant said, "It makes me feel like I'm included in something, something that doesn't have separation in it. So it's something inclusionary in the fact that it doesn't matter whether you have a disability or not, you're there because you're an athlete and you love to play."

Where difference was noted tended to be about specific areas, such as injury. "If a classifiable athlete injures her shoulder she cannot push her

wheelchair, but if the same thing happens to an able-bodied athlete she has options. She can run or walk," says Spencer-Cavaliere. "As one participant said, '... for me it's a huge issue because that means no transfers, no wheeling.'"

She noted that there were many positive comments about the inclusion of able-bodied athletes in promoting and strengthening the sport: "I don't know where the sport would be, really, if we didn't have AB players," or performing team-related roles: "They're organizers, they're volunteers, they're board members..." and in looking out for others: "...They'll make a point of picking us up or they'll offer to put our chairs in the back of the vehicles."

There was one area where classifiable athletes unanimously drew the line: able-bodied athletes should not compete at the Paralympic Games. After all, "...that's where we showcase our disabled athletes, right?" asked one.

Spencer-Cavaliere emphasizes that classifiable athletes saw the inclusion of able-bodied [athletes](#) as a way to promote their sport, train together, strengthen the team and increase their opportunity for competition, not to legitimize it as a sport. "But when you want to increase opportunity you bring in new skill sets," she says.

"I think as researchers or practitioners we go in with an assumption of difference instead of asking the questions: what is the difference and does it even matter here? We found in this study that people were finding what they have in common – their interests, strengths and abilities and how they could support each other in meeting their goals."

**More information:** "What's the Difference?" Women's Wheelchair Basketball, Reverse Integration, and the Question(ing) of Disability was written by Nancy Spencer-Cavaliere and doctoral student Danielle Peers.

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