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'He has been the worst coach, but he's also the one that said "let's give it a go": exploring the promise and potential of inclusive research in disability sport coaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a novel methodological illustration of the fusion of Inclusive Research (IR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles in disability sport coaching in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Using this hybrid methodology, we undertook semi-structured interviews with disabled people, community sport coaches and national coach developers to explore how 'mainstream' sports coach development systems can be more inclusive of disabled people. Guided by a Disability Advisory Group, and drawing on reflexive thematic analysis, the research highlighted the strong desire from athletes to participate in mainstream sport, alongside the desire by coaches and coach developers to provide more opportunities for disabled people. Yet, findings indicate that despite the potential for coach education to act as a mechanism for enhancing coaches' knowledge of inclusion, gaps in support available for both coaches and national coach developers hinder the implementation of inclusive policy. The analysis further illustrated how systemic forms of ableism and structural barriers across mainstream sport, coach education and coaching practices can limit opportunities for inclusion. These findings demonstrate that achieving greater inclusion therefore requires addressing systemic barriers within sport coaching and fostering a culture that supports inclusive practices at all levels. In addition, this paper critically reflects on the participatory research practices employed, examining how these approaches shaped the research findings, and highlights the depth and significance of knowledge generated through such inclusive methods. These reflections offer valuable insights for future sport coaching research seeking to embed participatory and inclusive principles.

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Introduction

The inclusion of disabled people¹ in mainstream² sport in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to be a problem outlined in both sports policy (Sport New Zealand, 2020) and in research (McBean et al., 2022). Research reports that 17% of the New Zealand population – an estimated 851,000 people – experience disability. Typically, disabled people have lower levels of participation in sport and activities relative to non-disabled people across all four key indicators of participation; weekly participation, time spent, average number of sports and activities and meeting the physical activity

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guidelines (see Sport New Zealand, 2024). Disabled people are also less likely to participate in competitive sport, while disabled young people demonstrate lower participation in sports and activities for fun (Sport NZ, 2022). Simply, at the level of participation, mainstream sport is not consistently, nor truly, inclusive of disabled people across New Zealand. These patterns of participation are indicative of the lack of equitable access disabled people have in sport and suggest that sport perpetuates sets of exclusionary processes and practices. This is problematic, considering the fundamental rights of disabled people to participate in sport are not being upheld (UNCRPD, 2006).

Coaching and coach education have been identified as crucial to support the inclusion of disabled people in sport contexts (Townsend et al., 2022) and coaches have long been recognised for their critical role as facilitators of such inclusion; hence much disability sport coaching research has centralised the voice of coaches to date (see, for example Hammond et al., 2019). Yet, as experts in their own lived experiences, disabled people are the most significant stakeholder within disability sport and are instrumental to informing coach education programmes that are responsive to disability (Townsend et al., 2024). Despite notable exceptions of research that centralise disabled people's experiences of coaching (see Alexander et al., 2020; Allan et al., 2020; Culver & Werthner, 2018; Ferguson & Spencer, 2021), Townsend et al. (2022) has argued that the use of collaborative and participatory approaches *with* disabled people to reform coach education are a glaring omission within wider disability coaching discourse, and there is often a lack of clarity about *how* to engage with disabled people in truly participatory or empowering ways.

Furthermore, research indicates that there is a lack of knowledge and confidence by coaches to enact inclusion, which can largely be attributed to the absence of disability-specific content in formal coach education provided by National Sports Organisations (NSOs) and governing bodies (see McMaster et al., 2012; Townsend, Cushion, et al., 2018; Wareham et al., 2018 *inter alia*). In the New Zealand context, disability-specific coach education opportunities are 'ad hoc' and generally limited in terms of scope and focus, taking the form of episodic inclusion training delivered by national disability charities or as a series of impairment-specific modules. While progressive in terms of raising awareness about disability, such 'inclusionary' coaching discourse is often driven by a focus on medicalisation, emphasising 'adaptation' and the need to 'be creative' and 'think outside of the box' (Cregan et al., 2007; Douglas & Hardin, 2014). These approaches position disability – and by inference inclusion – knowledge as a specialist body of knowledge to be acquired; hence positioning disability and inclusion as 'other', and 'different to' what is considered core sport coaching knowledge (Townsend, Cushion, et al., 2018). Such approaches have been challenged for reinforcing negative stereotypes and ableist beliefs, and for failing to address the exclusionary power structures embedded within existing coaching practices (Townsend, Cushion, et al., 2018).

It can be argued, therefore, that coaching is a structure in which ableism is deeply entrenched – that is, the network of beliefs, processes and practices that privilege non-disabled normativity (Campbell, 2009) are embedded in sports coaching (Townsend et al., 2026). Research *by* and *with* disabled people can challenge entrenched ableist assumptions in coaching and advance anti-ableist approaches to coach education. As such, in this study, we aimed to undertake a programme of research in sport coaching that reflected the '*nothing about us without us*' dictum of the Disability Movement, as a means of altering the dominant knowledge systems that inform coaching and positioning lived experience as a legitimate source of expertise (Charlton, 2000).

Inclusive research and participatory action research: changing relationships and informing practice in disability sport coaching

Despite a broader 'turn' to participatory research in the field of sport, exercise and health (see for example Pettican et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023), forms of research which adopt inclusive or emancipatory approaches are not well established in the field of sport coaching. The participatory 'turn' recognises historical inequities within both research and service provision and attempts to create a dispersal of power between researchers, 'service users', practitioners and policymakers. This

is significant as it is recognised that disability research should at a minimum, be driven by inclusive principles (Macbeth, 2010) and focus on emancipatory or transformative outcomes for disabled people. Furthermore, given the development of coach education is typically ‘top-down’, expertise-driven and ableist, there is a need to ensure that research approaches do not replicate such exclusionary power structures.

Many areas of disability research are now led by and co-developed *with* disabled people. Examples of these approaches include Participatory Action Research (PAR), Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR), Inclusive Research (IR), and, more recently, co-production methods (Benz et al., 2024; Bishop et al., 2024; Hole & Schnellert, 2024; Liddiard et al., 2019). The use of these methods reflects a shift towards ‘research by’ and ‘with’ disabled people, rather than more traditional ‘research on’ approaches that have been evident historically and which still persist in some contemporary disability research (Milner & Frawley, 2019). In the field of sport, however, the shift to more inclusive approaches – defined by a deliberate and early engagement with disabled people in research – is less evident. Instead, while sport coaching research does include disabled voices, largely transactive research processes still exist which reflect the dynamics of ‘research on’, rather than ‘by’ or ‘with’. Furthermore, disability knowledge within coaching research is frequently derived from individuals with physical impairments, reinforcing a narrow understanding of disability and constraining the explanatory power of research seeking to examine disablement across diverse impairment experiences. As such, there is a need for research which centralises the *diverse* perspectives and voices of disabled people as co-researchers, as a means of generating a fuller understanding of the disabling barriers that permeate sport coaching.

In this research we draw on a hybrid methodology which utilises principles aligning with both PAR and IR approaches to provide insights into disability coach education reform. PAR is considered an ‘umbrella’ methodology which can be achieved through a range of IR practices (Pettican et al., 2023). In practice, PAR involves recurrent cycles of consultation and collaboration on specific processes of research, with each phase informing the development of the next. It also has an emancipatory function, in this case to challenge dominant forms of knowledge production in disability coaching, promoting high degrees of participation and control from disabled people, power sharing and reflexivity. As such, PAR positions disabled people as collaborators whose experiences and knowledge are equally as valuable as academic expertise (Luguetti et al., 2023), and promotes equitable partnerships between the two.

Aims and purpose

Given persistent patterns of exclusion within mainstream sport pathways, as well as the pivotal role of coaching in reproducing or disrupting these patterns in community sport settings, there is a clear need to focus on how coaches are prepared for inclusive practice. The aim of the research was to understand how we can improve coaching and coach development practices to be more inclusive of disabled people in mainstream community sport. Additionally, in this paper we critically reflect on the participatory research practices employed in this study, offering insights for future sport coaching research. We examine how these approaches shaped the findings and highlight the depth and significance of knowledge generated through inclusive methods.

Method

Establishing an inclusive research process

To operationalise our PAR process in the context of disability sport, we drew on IR which was first developed as a means of involving people with learning disabilities in a way that moves towards a relationship as research *partners* (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). IR derives from the emancipatory disability research framework that was developed with its roots in both the Disability Movement and

the Social Model of disability (French & Swain, 1997). Inclusive disability research has also been defined by Walmsley and Johnson (2003) as an umbrella term to encapsulate a wider range of research approaches. Within these approaches, Walmsley and Johnson (2003) also detail the following prescriptions for IR:

- The research question must be owned (although not necessarily initiated) by disabled people;
- Research should further the interests of disabled people and non-disabled people should support their priorities, rather than determining them on their behalf;
- Research should be collaborative, and disabled people should be involved in the research process;
- Disabled people should be able to exert some control over the research process and the outcomes, which should also be accessible to them.

While we do not claim our research fits all these prescriptions, it does hold a place on the continuum of IR as described by Bigby et al. (2014). Bigby et al. (2014) suggest that the continuum of IR begins with the involvement of disabled people in an advisory capacity, moving to disabled people having control and leadership of research projects, and collaborative research groups with disabled and non-disabled researchers. Inclusive research can therefore be understood as a collection of approaches that attempt to 'flatten' the traditional transactional, extractive, and hierarchical nature of research and works in alignment with approaches dubbed 'participatory' and 'action research'. By drawing on PAR and utilising an 'Advisory Approach' on the continuum of IR above, this study consequently and intently employs an assortment of approaches, further detailed in the following section, that assume space within the IR umbrella. The research team includes academics deeply engaged in disability research, practitioners in sport and recreation, and disabled leaders in their fields. Through our collective experiences, we share a commitment to disability advocacy, shaped by scholarship, applied practice, and lived expertise.

Participants and sampling

To operationalise our hybrid IR and PAR process, participant recruitment involved four stages of sampling:

- Group 1A Disability Advisory Group
- Group 1B Disabled participants
- Group 2 Coaches
- Group 3 Coach developers

The first phase involved the identification and establishment of a Disability Advisory Group (DAG). This was important to establish the direction of the research together, and to initiate the shared decision-making processes for the participant recruitment. The DAG included four people with diverse lived experiences of disability. All had participated in sport and recreation, with experience ranging from local disability and mainstream sport participation to event organisation, employment in a disability sport organisation and participation in national disability sport events.

The DAG also acted as key connectors for the recruitment of groups 1B, 2 and 3, which utilised a snowball sampling strategy. As well as the views of disabled people, in order to provide insights into existing coach education provision, a range of community sports coaches and national coach developers were also recruited as participants, an approach strongly supported by the DAG. Together, these groups provided a multi-dimensional perspective on the factors shaping the inclusion – or exclusion – of disabled people in community sport. (see [Figure 1](#)).

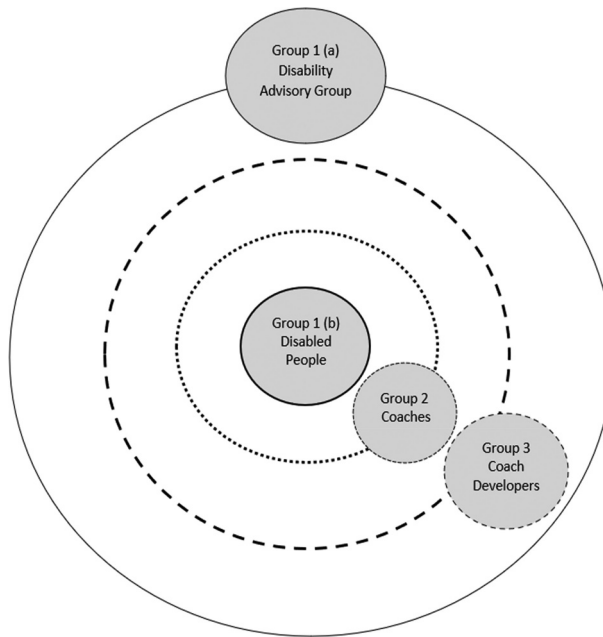


Figure 1. The multidimensional research approach and relationship between research participant groups.

1A. Disability advisory group

The DAG were initially identified using maximum variation sampling. The DAG participants were either known to the first author or were recruited using snowball sampling. These participants had lived experience of disability, resided in New Zealand and had participated in, and been coached in sport. Participants were identified to represent the ‘most important possible variations of these dimensions’ (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 70), which in this instance meant a wide range of experiences of disability. One advisor had a physical impairment, one was Deaf, one had a vision impairment and one advisor had a hearing, vision and intellectual impairment. Each participant was contacted via email, phone or in person to discuss the role of the DAG and was invited to take part. For the Deaf advisor, the initial meeting took place face to face to ensure effective communication. All four participants verbally consented to be a part of the DAG. Consent was further re-confirmed with the DAG at the first group meeting and re-sought throughout each subsequent consultation.

1B. Disabled participants

Forming the core of this research project was the focus on disabled peoples’ experiences of sport coaching. As such, five disabled interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, with support from the DAG (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Participants had a lived experience of disability and had experiences of participating and being coached in mainstream sport. Five participants expressed interest in taking part and were contacted by phone or email, to further explain the aims of the study. Participants were subsequently sent follow-up participant information and consent forms, in a format most appropriate for their communication preference (one was modified to meet Plain Language Guidelines and a DAG member discussed both forms with a participant in NZSL). All five participants consented to volunteer as a participant in the study. The age of participants in Group 1b ranged from 17 to 63 years of age. Two participants had physical impairments and were wheelchair users. One participant was Deaf, one was blind and one had an intellectual impairment. Three participants were female, and two were male. Two participants also had coaching experience.

Community sport coaches

Community sports coaches were selected using criterion-based sampling using specific criteria (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Each of the five participants had to be a community 'grass roots' coach of one of the five 'mainstream' sports chosen for this study³. The first author drew on both the DAG and existing relationships within Regional and National Sports Organisations to identify five coach participants, who were subsequently contacted via phone to discuss the participant information and consent process. Participants were invited to participate and received follow-up participant information and consent forms. All five coaches volunteered to participate in the research. Two coaches were female, three were male. Two coaches had paid coaching roles, and the remaining three coaches were volunteers. One coach also had experience as a coach developer. None of the coaches identified as disabled.

Coach developers

Furthermore, to understand how coaches are educated and supported to be inclusive, there was a clear need to involve coach developers; this approach was also supported by the DAG. At a national level, NSOs have the responsibility for developing and providing standardised coach education and accreditation opportunities to their coaching workforce across the country. Such opportunities span from high performance sport, through to youth sport and community 'grass roots' sport coaching. As some of the bigger participation sports in the country, the five sporting codes all offered end-to-end coach development pathways, providing a unique opportunity to understand coach developers' experiences of disability. As such, coach developers were also identified and recruited using criterion-based and snowball sampling. Five participants were identified based on specific selection criteria: they had to hold a National Coach Development role within one of the five sports selected for this research.

Procedure

As we have illustrated so far, to provide insights into disability and coach education, the research purposefully drew on a multi-phase research design incorporating a range of key stakeholders within the sport sector in NZ. An iterative approach to knowledge production was employed throughout this research project, in collaboration with the DAG (illustrated in [Figure 2](#)).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) were conducted with all participants from Group 1B (disabled people), Group 2 (coaches) and Group 3 (coach developers). A process of refinement with the DAG followed each group of interviews. The key themes generated from the literature review, alongside the objectives of the research, were used to form a draft interview guide for participant Group 1B. The draft was refined by the DAG in the first research meeting (represented by the first grey circle in [Figure 2](#)). The interview schedule was also tested with one Advisor in a mock interview, and further iterations were made in response to their feedback. The intentional combining of DAG meetings within the research procedure provided a means to honour and value the perspectives of disabled people and ensure relevance. Meetings with the DAG ranged from 65–90 minutes in length and were conducted via Zoom, utilising NZ Relay NZSL interpreters to support the inclusion of the Deaf Advisor.

Interview approach

Once the amended interview guide was approved by the DAG, all participant groups were interviewed sequentially. Key points of interest and questions that arose from the interview dialogue were recorded as handwritten notes, which framed the subsequent discussions with the DAG after each group of interviews (depicted in [Figure 2](#)). From these discussions, interview guides for the proceeding group were then developed and refined. Interviews with the five disabled athletes

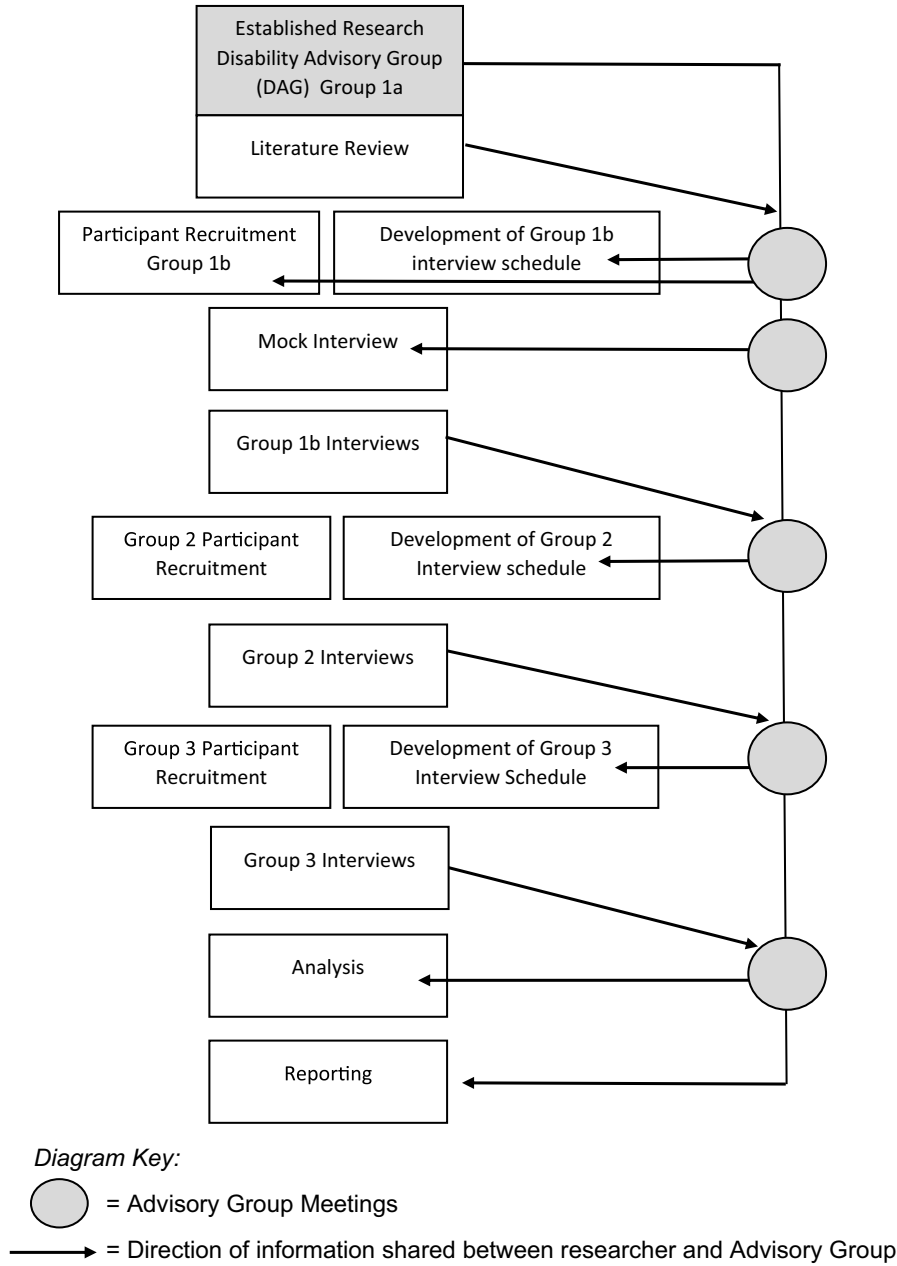


Figure 2. The inclusive research process.

ranged from 49 minutes to 135 minutes in length, totalling 440 minutes (7.3 hours) of interview data. Interviews with the five coaches ranged from 49 minutes to 86 minutes in length, totalling 344 minutes (5.7 hours) of interview data. Finally, interviews with the five coach developers ranged from 73 minutes to 80 minutes in length, totalling 385 minutes (6.4 hours) of interview data.

Data analysis

Together, 19.5 hours of interview data were generated across the three cycles of data collection. Interview recordings were shared back with each participant to review. This data was then

transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. While member reflections were offered, no participants made changes to their interview data. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect their anonymity.

Within the PAR design, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was the principal method of data analysis. Analysis began with data from the disabled participants to ensure coding was centralised around the experiences of disabled people. In an inductive, exploratory fashion, codes from Group 1B data were then generated into themes and sub-themes which formed 'buckets' to guide the subsequent coding of the Group 2 (coaches) and Group 3 (coach developers) interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This afforded the opportunity to generate a range of meanings within the data that centralised disabled people's voices.

The analysis generated the following themes "The same, but different" – recognition, belonging and negotiating ableist norms', and 'Cycles of absence and marginality: Disability, coaching knowledge and institutional reproduction'. An abductive approach was taken, involving a repeated interplay between disabled people's lived experiences, and the theoretical perspectives on ableism (Campbell, 2009) and the invisibility of disability (DePauw, 1997). Beginning with disabled people's experiences, the process moved back and forth between experiential data and theory, where personal narratives were layered with theoretical insights to develop the resulting themes.

Importantly, a central feature of RTA is the ability to critically examine the research process itself, its embedded politics and subjectivities, and the power dynamics that shaped it (cf. Trainor & Bundon, 2021), as a means of tracing the co-construction of our specific insights into disability sport coaching.

Rigour

Rigour was ensured through a strong foundation in Participatory and Inclusive approaches. The centralisation of disabled people's voices, layered with the voices of coach and coach developer participant perspectives, and the intentional engagements with the DAG after each round of data collection enabled a more layered and richer interpretive insight (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This engagement also enabled an opportunity for the DAG to share their reflections on the interview findings, whereby additional data and insights were provided, which then influenced the subsequent data capture activities, and consequently, shaped the study's results (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

What did the hybrid IR/PAR approach enable us to explore?

To illustrate our use of the hybrid IR/PAR approach, in this section we detail some key findings. Specifically, we discuss how the methodological approach enabled us to highlight opportunities for change and transformation at structural, systemic and individual levels, by starting with the experiences of disabled people, and tracing these insights through to coaching.

'The same, but different' – recognition, belonging and negotiating ableist norms

A strength of the IR process was that we were able to centralise the experiences of disabled people and connect these to the wider practices evident within coaching and coach education. For many disabled participants, their continued exclusion from other aspects of society meant that they placed heightened value on opportunities for inclusion in sport, framing it as a meaningful site of belonging, recognition and social inclusion:

It's already hard enough for some of us to be included in the community. So, you know, so getting us included in mainstream sport it's really important, because we're quite left out, I guess. (Jane – athlete, interview)

Sport, therefore, represented a potential counterspace to the social exclusion that many disabled people continue to experience within society. However, participants also highlighted that sport was

not immune from exclusionary practices, as ableist assumptions and structures continued to shape many of their sporting experiences. For example, Ella (athlete) recalled her experience of not being 'allowed' to progress to the next stage of her sport, despite 10+ years of training, due to the fixed, ableist club structure based on normative rules concerning what people must physically be able to do to progress to the next 'level':

The tutor at the time said to me that I can't move forward (to the next level). They were like, 'you can do all the normal strokes, like freestyle and backstroke. But you can't do breaststroke' because my legs can't do the frog legs. (They) said that I would find it very difficult to move forward if I'm not able to do that specific movement.

Inclusion in sport, however, was not simply a matter of access. Participants emphasised the importance of being held to 'the same' standards and expectations as their non-disabled peers, while recognising and accommodating the specific ways disability shaped participation:

I think coaches have to realise that the people that want to compete in mainstream sport don't want to feel disabled. I know that sounds stupid, because we are, but please, don't patronise me. Push me as hard as you can. And if I break, that's part of it, you know. I want to know that you're coaching me because you think that you can get better out of me. And I want to be coached to get the best out of me. I don't want to hear that, 'oh this is good enough'. It's more important to my self-esteem to be told you didn't try hard enough ... Yeah, I don't want to be treated any different. (Thomas – athlete, interview)

Here, Thomas expressed a desire for coaches to create a non-disabling environment that recognised his competitive ambitions and athletic potential, rather than lowering expectations on the basis of disability (cf. Culver & Werthner, 2018). Indeed, a range of disabled athletes sought recognition through their sport, while resisting lowered or patronising expectations associated with disability:

I think try to include me like I don't have a disability. That, to me is inclusion, if I want to be included into a normal able-bodied sport, it would be overlooking my disability and making me feel like I was just like everyone else ... If a coach is coaching a disabled person in a different way, it makes you feel more disabled. But if they just coach you as a normal person, it makes you feel like you don't have a disability, (and takes) what you want to achieve, like your goals and stuff, seriously, and knows what you want to achieve, and is helping you get to that point. (Leah – athlete, interview)

Understandably, some athletes sought recognition not primarily as disabled people, but as athletes whose disability should not diminish coaches' perceptions of competence, commitment or performance potential. However, their accounts also reveal the extent to which belonging was often associated with the desire to 'fit in' with non-disabled normativity and proximity to non-disabled norms. Although this reflects a desire for recognition, legitimacy, and inclusion, it may simultaneously reinforce the privileging of non-disabled norms and reproduce the marginalisation of disability as a valued identity (cf. Campbell, 2009). This tension was reflected in participants' expectations of coaching:

I don't think it's a big step to go from coaching an able bodied person to a disabled person. The basic reason you became a coach is there. The only thing is you have to adapt your thinking to what works for them ... I just really want the coaches to know that I'm not expecting anything other than what anybody else would expect. But a heads up about a metal object coming up my face, would be great (laughs, reflecting about an experience preparing for the activity in the equipment shed). (Thomas – athlete, interview)

You're the same people on the inside, you are all people. And they (coaches) make you feel like, that you're there, and make you feel like you belong. (Jane – athlete, interview)

Here, the findings reinforce the common discourse that disabled athletes wish to be treated on an equal basis with non-disabled peers (see Allan et al., 2020). However, participants did not advocate for identical treatment. Rather, they articulated an equity-oriented approach whereby athletes were held to comparable expectations and standards, while coaching environments and practices were adapted to accommodate individual needs. However, some coaches perceived that such treatment was not always realistic in some situations, and instead equated inclusion with reducing task difficulty or lowering expectations:

It might just be that you're just a little bit easier on them as far as what they can do and stuff like that, if you're asking (the team) to do something with just the left foot or something, and they use both feet, well, then it's not a big deal. So, you know, just making it so that it's achievable for them. Because if it's not achievable, then they're just gonna give up. (Jess – community coach, interview)

In contrast to athletes' calls for equitable coaching and high expectations, such assumptions risk reproducing ableist perceptions of incapability and reinforcing forms of exclusion through well-intentioned practices (Townsend et al., 2026).

Despite similarities in motivation and the desire to be treated 'the same' as non-disabled athletes, there was a recognition by disabled participants that their impairment can and does impact on their ability to train and compete in sport. Such findings are consistent with the social relational model of disability, which 'makes room' for impairment and 'impairment effects' by suggesting that although disability is socially constructed and culturally fashioned, the restrictions of activity in the lives of disabled people can also arise as a result of both their impairment effects, and the resulting relations of *disablism*, that is, disabling barriers, attitudes and practices (Smith & Bundon, 2018):

I tried to get in (to a mainstream sports team) and I failed because of my deafness, because it was hard to communicate. They were all hearing and they were a high level, and so I wasn't able to get in because of my communication. I feel like I'm a bit excluded. And that hurts. I want to play more. I want to be more involved ... And I think there were lots more barriers, I would ... try to be in the sport, but sometimes we kind of get pushed to the side, I think. (Steven – athlete, interview)

Ella (athlete) also explained how her physical impairment impacted her ability to perform the techniques expected of her within her sport:

So I actually, I can't do that, physically, I can't do that. So, we had to adapt how I could still have my arm out, without being in pain, but being able to have a steady position. Whereas most people wouldn't have that problem, because they don't have that disability, I guess. So yeah, we did have to ... fiddle around with a lot of stuff and ways of how we could adapt it. (The sessions) were only made for able bods, we're just like an add on.

Jane (athlete) also described how her intellectual impairment impacted her ability to participate:

Because I know some people like us, we may take a little bit to learn something, whereas they (non-disabled people) are quicker to learn ... But yeah, I guess (my disability) does (impact on my participation). Like, it may take me longer to learn stuff than others, you know, to learn something. So it may take me a while to ... get it right. Even maybe a few goes or a few practices or something. It may take me a bit to get there, but I will get there. [Coaches should] know that they (disabled people) are different, but they're also human. And, you know, treat them like you would anyone else, but maybe have more patience with them. You just, take the extra time to let them learn. I guess have patience with them.

In centralising participants' experiences, the data reveals the simultaneous recognition of impairment effects and disabling social relations comprising coaching:

I find, I struggle with my coach ... And I think that's because we don't have that, well, he doesn't listen to me (laughs) ... And I get frustrated. And then I probably become more negative because of that ... (He) has been the worst coach, but he's also the one that said 'let's give it a go'. (Thomas – athlete, interview)

Thomas's account highlights the important role coaches play in either challenging or reproducing ableist assumptions through their willingness to recognise disabled athletes as experts in their own experiences. Yet participants' experiences also suggest that ableism extends beyond individual coach–athlete interactions. Rather, it is embedded within the histories, practices and taken-for-granted knowledge of sport and coaching, shaping assumptions about who belongs, what is possible, and what constitutes legitimate participation. As a result, disabled people may come to problematise themselves, rather than the broader structures and values that produce exclusion:

It's not too often you see a disabled person playing. Like someone with an amputated leg playing in a team, you don't often see that. So, I never really played (the sport) once I was in a wheelchair. I didn't think I could. (Leah – athlete, interview)

The taken-for-granted assumption that sport is 'not for' people who are wheelchair users is a stark reminder that ableism shapes and constructs dominant notions of inclusion as well as the visibility of opportunity for disabled people in sport (cf. DePauw, 1997). It is this that our attention turns to next.

Cycles of absence and marginality: disability, coaching knowledge and institutional reproduction

So far, these findings outline the ways in which sport perpetuates a cycle of absence and invisibility – a systemic pattern of ableism and disablism that both athletes and coaches are socialised into and which shapes 'what abilities are recognised, valued, nurtured and accepted, while others are rejected' (Evans, 2004, p. 177) within coaching and its associated institutions (e.g. coach education). The invisibility of disabled people within the structure of 'mainstream' sport perpetuates a 'model of marginality' (DePauw, 2022, p. 90) whereby disabled people do not fit the normative (i.e. able-bodied) standards of sport. This evidently presents a barrier for disabled people who currently do not see people 'like them' participating in mainstream sport:

So the classes that I was doing were the mainstream classes, right. But I didn't really see any other people with disabilities joining those mainstream classes. I only saw, you know, how they set aside a class for people with special needs and things like that. Like you see that, so it kind of left me in a weird place to be like, 'okay, well, do I just join mainstream? Or do I just do my thing on my own?' (Ella – athlete, interview)

Here, engaging in the inclusive research process foregrounded the extent to which disabled people were positioned outside of, or marginal to, sport and the associated implications for the socialisation of coaches:

Yeah. I've never thought of it [disability] ... didn't even cross my mind. And part of me feels bad for it, because you're sitting there going, 'well, why? Why have you not thought about it?' And it's just because you never see them ... you see injured people on crutches, walking and supporting their teams ... because they're injured. But you don't actually see the impaired people, even in the games or anything. (Mitch – community coach, interview)

Additionally, there is a taken-for-granted assumption that disabled people will not attend coach education or pursue coaching or leadership opportunities. Thus, disability is often not considered in the design and delivery of education opportunities, which tend to be tailored towards the needs of non-disabled coaches and coach developers.

Sometimes there'd be 200 coaches, it would be a big event and there'd be one person who was Deaf, and they wouldn't provide for me. They would be stunned when I said I was coming. (Steven – athlete, interview)

So, there's a real-life example with someone that's in a wheelchair locally, and they're just trying to work out how to get them into the room and stuff upstairs [for the coach developer training] and have their lifts and all that kind of stuff, sorted. We didn't consciously think about it [disabled people participating in the training]. (John – coach developer, interview)

Importantly, although participants recognised the value of including disabled people's experiences in coach development, their accounts also reflected assumptions that individualised responsibility for inclusion. Rather than foregrounding the accessibility of coach education programmes, inclusion was often discussed in terms of whether disabled people felt comfortable or confident enough to participate or come forward. When asked their thoughts on having disabled coach developers supporting their coach education opportunities, Sam, (a coach developer) explains:

Yeah, there was, one to two wheelchair-bound coaches, another couple of coaches that had reduced sight, disability. Two or three coaches that were partially deaf and one in particular that was profoundly deaf. But yeah, so I, do I think it would be great to have more people that had a disability that felt comfortable enough to come forward and say, hey, look, I would like to help in the coach development or the development of coaches.

This absence was further reflected in the limited extent to which key disability inclusion documents and policies appeared to inform coach developers' understandings of inclusive practice – despite considerable policy attention being directed towards disability sport in New Zealand (see McBean et al., 2022):

So complete honesty here. And so, the Sport NZ Disability Plan. I've heard of. The rest (NZ Disability Strategy and UNCRPD) I've somewhat heard of, but they're not, they're not documents or policies that I would engage with. Sorry. (Amy – coach developer, interview)

A lack of awareness of inclusive policy commitments is suggestive of a general inability to confidently speak, and thus act, in inclusive terms (cf. Hammond et al., 2019). Greater familiarity with, and understanding of, supporting policies and key documents presents a significant opportunity for future coach development practices to facilitate the translation of inclusive policies into practice in New Zealand, particularly as coaches are widely recognised as critical to ensuring quality experiences for disabled people. The limited familiarity with these resources may reflect broader challenges regarding the production and circulation of disability-related knowledge within coaching structures.

Thus, coach development appears to be shaped by a politics of knowledge whereby disability-related knowledge has not yet been consistently embedded within mainstream coaching practice. The absence of disabled people from coaching and coach development roles limits opportunities for disability-related knowledge to emerge, circulate and influence educational provision, reinforcing the perception that disability is a specialist rather than mainstream coaching knowledge. Such a finding is new within the context of disability sports coaching research; however, as the voices of coach developers have largely been omitted from existing research to date (Huntley et al., 2019). Subsequently, disability is also largely absent from existing coach education content and its delivery within many mainstream coach accreditation pathways. The following examples are illustrative:

It's (disability) not something that I would necessarily always, wrongly, or rightly, think too much about as a developer or an educator ... I think, with the disability lens on and looking through that, it's, you know, for many, many years of [being] involved in the game now. it's ... it's not front of mind, because it's not that common. (Luke – coach developer, interview)

It is therefore unsurprising that disability-specific education and content was recognised by community coach participants as either not existing 'at all' or at best, being 'briefly touched on' within the education opportunities they had received:

Not one single thing (related to disability), and part of me sits there and goes, that's crap ... nothing in there was put towards, disabled kids, or disabled people. (As) a coach, you sit there and go, right, well, I'm (just) going to be coaching people, kids, whoever. It sets that expectation. (Mitch – Community Coach, interview)

Such a lack of dedicated training or educational resourcing for disability inclusion means that many coaches' exposure to disability is limited (see also, Culver et al., 2021) and – coupled with the absence of disabled people due to exclusion – reduces opportunities for exposure to coaching disabled people:

I remember early on in my coaching there, you go into schools, and there was a few that had, like, we had a kid that was in a wheelchair. So, you go, oh god, we've just bought this generic kit, and we don't have any bigger balls, or it's getting stuck under the wheelchair. I really haven't coached that many (disabled people). (Amy – coach developer, interview)

I think experience and exposure (to disability) is a huge, huge thing, because people go, 'oh, I didn't know about this before', or 'I haven't worked with this before'. And it's like, yeah, but you probably haven't had chances to? Like ... it's like you haven't seen it (laughs)". (Ella – athlete, interview)

Importantly, these patterns of absence and marginality may have remained invisible without the involvement of disabled participants in the research process. Through the IR approach, the apparent absence of disability from coach education reflected the ways in which ableist assumptions shape what knowledge is considered necessary within coach development. As such, a self-

reinforcing cycle was discovered, whereby the absence of disabled people from coaching, coach development and educational provision limits opportunities for exposure, learning and inclusive practice, which in turn contributes to the continued marginalisation of disabled people within sport.

Reflections and implications

This study represents the first attempt to combine Inclusive Research (IR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) to examine disability sport coaching, positioning disabled people not simply as research participants, but as contributors to knowledge production. Through the involvement of a Disability Advisory Group (DAG), the study traced disabled people's experiences across multiple levels of the coaching system, revealing how ableism is embedded within coach–athlete relationships, coach education, and broader sporting structures. In doing so, the findings move beyond identifying barriers to participation and instead draw attention to the systemic factors that influence how disability is understood and addressed within mainstream sport. Coaching emerged as a key site in which inclusive knowledge, values, and practices can be strengthened through future development efforts, while recognising that further work is required to realise its full potential. Theoretically, the study advances disability sport coaching scholarship by demonstrating that ableism is reproduced not solely through individual attitudes or behaviours, but through interconnected systems of knowledge, visibility, and practice. The analysis reveals a cyclical process of absence and marginality whereby the underrepresentation of disabled people in sport, coaching, and coach development limits opportunities for disability-related knowledge to emerge, circulate, and influence practice, reinforcing the very conditions that sustain exclusion. Importantly, given the central role coach developers play in determining what knowledge is valued and transmitted through coach education, future research should investigate how they understand, construct, and operationalise disability inclusion, and how these understandings can shape the development of more inclusive coaching practices and systems.

The study also foregrounds how disabled athletes advocate for equitable coaching environments characterised by high expectations, recognition of athletic potential and responsiveness to impairment effects (cf. Culver & Werthner, 2018). At the same time, their accounts reveal the complex ways in which belonging is often negotiated through proximity to non-disabled norms, highlighting the ongoing influence of ableism on how disabled athletic identities are produced, resisted and recognised.

Methodologically, the study highlights the value of combining PAR and IR within disability sport coaching research. The DAG played a critical role throughout the research process, influencing recruitment, data generation, analysis and interpretation. This collaborative approach challenged traditional researcher-participant hierarchies and enabled forms of experiential knowledge that may otherwise have remained invisible or been interpreted differently. Our experience also suggests that inclusive disability research requires more than the adoption of PAR or IR principles alone. Rather, it demands that researchers challenge and stretch conventional methodological expectations to respond to the realities of disabled people's lives. This includes building flexibility into future research processes, valuing lived experience expertise through appropriate remuneration, investing time in relationship-building, prioritising accessibility, and ensuring research timelines and funding structures are responsive to participants' needs. Furthermore, reflecting on this study underscores how meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved through rigid adherence to predetermined research processes and priorities; instead, it requires researchers to be intentional in their inclusive research design, share decision-making, and remain attentive to the diverse ways in which disabled people can contribute to knowledge production in sport coaching. Of course, while the DAG strengthened the relevance, credibility, and accountability of the research, power asymmetries were reduced rather than eliminated, and the perspectives represented within the group cannot be assumed to reflect the full diversity of disabled people's experiences, impairment groups or sporting contexts.

Practically, the findings reaffirm that disability cannot remain a specialist or peripheral concern within coach education if we truly wish to work towards more inclusive coaching environments. Rather, echoing Townsend et al. (2022) and Townsend et al. (2026), disability-related knowledge, perspectives and experiences should be embedded throughout coach development systems, with disabled athletes, coaches, coach developers and leaders actively involved in shaping educational content and delivery. Such changes may help disrupt the cycles of absence and marginality identified in this study by increasing both the visibility of disabled people and opportunities for meaningful engagement with disability within mainstream sport.

More broadly, IR offers promise as both a methodological approach and as a mechanism for social change that centralises disability and disabled voices within research and practice. Future research should continue to progress along the continuum of inclusive research by exploring models in which disabled people assume greater ownership and leadership of research as co-researchers, advisory group members and principal investigators. Ultimately, challenging ableism within coaching requires more than the inclusion of disabled people within existing structures; it requires transforming whose knowledge is valued, whose experiences are visible, and whose voices shape the future of coaching.

Notes

1. The term 'disabled people' is used throughout this research to reflect the Social Relational Model of disability (Thomas, 1999). The social relational model recognises the bodily reality of disability, yet disability is not limited solely to the impairment, nor is it entirely socially constructed (Smith & Bundon, 2018). It is important to recognise however, that not all participants or Disability Advisory Group members in this research identify with this language. Data extracts from participants therefore reflect their individual language preference.
2. 'Mainstream' sport is a historically loaded term that assumes an undercurrent of ableism and is used to describe sporting experiences that 'other' disabled people. This is separate – spatially and symbolically – from Para sport and disability sport that is designed specifically for disabled people.
3. Coaches involved in the five sports were signatories of the Sport New Zealand Balance is Better Statement of Intent (Sport New Zealand, 2019) – a contemporary policy underpinning Sport New Zealand's approach to youth sport, which includes a commitment to 'Ensuring all young people who play our sports receive a quality experience, irrespective of the level at which they compete' (Sport New Zealand, 2019, p. 1.). This approach was supported by the DAG.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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