

Tackling Ableism in Sport and Active Recreation to Ensure Participation Parity for Disabled Young People in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Significant barriers limit disabled young people's opportunities in sport and active recreation. This is both a health and human rights issue: physical activity is vital for well-being, and equitable access to sport and active recreation is mandated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Using Q methodology, a participatory mixed-methods approach that uncovers shared viewpoints through statistical analysis of participant-ranked statements, we examined ableist attitudes in Aotearoa New Zealand that privilege nondisabled access while marginalizing disabled peers, despite decades of inclusionary rhetoric. Forty participants from sport, physical education, and recreation sectors ranked 40 attitudinal statements on disability inclusion. Factor analysis of these rankings revealed three distinct ableist "viewpoints." We present these viewpoints, propose a "variants of ableism" framework, and discuss implications for parity in participation in sport and physical activity.

Links between health, well-being, and physical activity are well-established (Black et al., 2015; Bull et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2021; Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010; Jeanes et al., 2024; Taub & Greer, 2000; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2015; World Health Organization, 2024). Aside from physical health benefits, participating in sport and active recreation can help build a positive sense of identity, facilitate social relationships, and improve overall quality of life (Carroll et al., 2021; King et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2006).

For many young people participating in sport is a defining feature of identity, providing a sense of inclusion and peer group belonging (Anderson, 2009; Black et al., 2015), along with opportunities to compete, have fun and develop competencies (Gibson et al., 2017; Kristen et al., 2002). Government funded sport, physical education (PE) and active recreation policies and strategies are developed and implemented under the umbrella of Sport New Zealand (hereafter Sport NZ) and take place in schools,

sports clubs, and other community settings across Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). However, participation levels of disabled people in sport and active recreation are lower than for nondisabled peers, potentially compromising their health and wellbeing (Aktive, 2023; Carroll et al., 2014; Martin Ginis et al., 2016; Spaaij, Magee & Jeanes, 2014; Sport England, 2018). The NZ Ministry of Health currently recommends 7+ hr of physical activity each week for young people, yet only 47% of disabled young people meet these physical activity guidelines for health, compared with 57% of nondisabled peers (Sport New Zealand, 2020).

Access to sport and active recreation is not only about health and well-being, but also about human rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) stipulates in Article 30.5 that member states must promote to the fullest extent possible the participation of disabled people in mainstream sporting activities at all levels and also ensure opportunities for them to participate in disability-specific sporting and recreational activities. Likewise, parties must encourage the provision of appropriate instruction, training and resources for disabled children, and ensure parity of access to participation in sporting activities including within the school system (United Nations, 2006).

Participation parity in all areas of life has been a stated goal of the NZ government since ratification of the UNCRPD in 2008, with sport and active recreation firmly embedded in government policy as a vehicle for establishing a nondisabling society (Ministry of Social Development, 2017; Sport New Zealand, 2019). Sport NZ, the lead government agency for active recreation and sport, called for change, reflection, and review in their 2019 Disability Plan asking those involved across the sector to question how unconscious bias might limit the participation of disabled people (Sport New Zealand, 2019). Disability was cited as a "strategic priority" for 2020–2021 (Sport New Zealand, 2020) and it remains a strategic priority for the 2024–2028 period. Inaccessible facilities, cost factors, lack of inclusionary policies and practitioner knowledge and confidence—and interpersonal attitudes toward inclusion—have all been suggested as barriers

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to participation parity in sport and active recreation for disabled young people in NZ (Wilson et al., 2023).

Informed by the social model of disability (Goodley, 2017; Minister for Disability Issues, 2001; Oliver, 2013), the NZ government frames disability as resulting not from individual impairments, but from disabling social and physical environments (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001) and the social model is the cornerstone of NZ disability sport policy (McBean et al., 2022). However, while the empowering language of the social model rejects individual deficit, discrimination remains—with ableism often an unrecognized and overlooked social force.

Ableism constructs “able-bodiedness,” which encompasses physical and cognitive “fitness,” as the societal norm (and inherently superior), and those with physical or cognitive impairments as “other” (and inferior) (Campbell, 2009; Davis, 2020; Wolbring, 2008). Embedded in political, economic, and social norms, ableism and its resulting discriminatory effects (disablism) are expressed at structural and institutional levels through priorities and practices that shape physical and social environments in ways that privilege the nondisabled and marginalize disabled people; and at an individual level ableism is expressed through a focus on individual impairments, further marginalizing disabled people (Garland-Thomson, 2009; Sanmiquel-Molinero & Pujol-Tarrés, 2020; Wolbring, 2008). The nondisabled gain “invisibility” and ease in society while the disabled are subject to the “stare” and problematized (Wolbring, 2008).

Like all systems of privilege, ableism is intrinsically linked to oppression, with ableism/disablism two sides of the same coin (Gappmayer, 2021; Goodley, 2011; Paradies & Williams, 2008). Ableism intersects with other types of privilege, such as sexism, and racism (see Garland-Thomson & Valentine, 2024), each working to mutually construct the other through stigmatization and stereotyping, and thus reinforcing hegemonic definitions of “deficiency.” Racism, sexism, ableism, and other -isms are interwoven through policies, practices, curricula, and interactions that (re)produce narrow expectations of normalcy to uphold white, able-bodied norms (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016), marginalizing those perceived as different (Hancock et al., 2021). For instance, Graham and colleagues note how, in NZ, embodied narratives and discursive practices force women, nonbinary and Māori to participate in ableist rituals and social practices in order to “fit in” (see Graham et al., 2023 regarding being Māori and blind).

In many sport, PE and active recreation settings disabled young people are disempowered by embedded ableist norms (Carroll et al., 2021; Fitzgerald, 2005; Gibson et al., 2017; Van Amsterdam et al., 2012). In addition, when ableist attitudes are internalized by disabled people individual psychosocial well-being is also undermined (Campbell, 2008; Martin Ginis et al., 2016; Thomas, 1999). In their systematic review of literature on disabled physical activity participation, Martin Ginis et al. (2016) describe the “psycho-emotional disablism” that limits what disabled people think they can do (such as participate in sport) or become (such as a successful competitive athlete). Numerous examples of institutional and individual ableism/disablism (including psychoemotional disablism) impeding young disabled peoples’ participation in school and community sport and PE in the NZ context (Calder-Dawe et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2021), prompted this investigation of ableist privilege.

Not all ableist attitudes are the same, or have the same origins (Sanmiquel-Molinero & Pujol-Tarrés, 2020; Wolbring, 2008). However, all are a reflection of interactions between the largely invisible able-bodied normativity and nondisabled privilege that permeate our society (Campbell, 2009; Paradies & Williams, 2008; Wolbring, 2008) and macrolevel political and economic contexts (Kincheleoe &

McLaren, 2005); and, as with other forms of privilege, involve both conscious and unconscious biases (Borell et al., 2009; Campbell, 2008; Lyons, 2013; McBean et al., 2022).

Sport particularly elite and competitive sport epitomize able-bodied ideals (Munro-Cook et al., 2024), privileging the able-bodied and constraining disabled people’s participation (Brittain et al., 2020; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2013; Jeanes et al., 2019). While government rhetoric and policies may champion participation parity, this does not guarantee inclusion (Jeanes et al., 2018, 2019; McBean et al., 2022). For instance, Jeanes et al. (2019, p. 989), investigating a disconnect between official participation parity policies and practices in community sports clubs, uncovered “deeply ingrained discourses that reinforced ableist norms”. A 2023 survey of community sports clubs in NZ similarly reveals a gap between official policies of inclusion and actions taken by clubs (Naylor et al., 2023). As struggles for racial and gender equality have shown, changes in social attitudes and practices frequently lag behind progressive legislation. Without surfacing and challenging ableism, exclusionary practices will continue, and inequalities endure.

The Research

Our *Tackling ableism to increase participation of young people in sport, PE, and active recreation* research sits within an overarching critical social science framework, acknowledging interactions between individual and collective attitudes, microlevel institutional policies and practices, and overarching macrolevel social, economic, and political contexts (Kincheleoe & McLaren, 2005). As authors we understand ableism permeates all levels of society—macro, meso, and micro/individual—with its attendant disablism more commonly manifesting as individual-level discrimination (Campbell, 2009; Scuro, 2018). This applied research project turns the gaze from disabled disadvantage (disablism) to the on-going production of nondisabled privilege (ableism; Borell et al., 2009; Inckle, 2015) at micro/individual levels, adapting Q methodology (Carroll et al., 2024; Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2012) to interrogate ableist attitudes held by nondisabled coaches, teachers, managers, and volunteers across the sport, PE and active recreation sectors in NZ and identify opportunities for change. As Inckle (2015, p. 42) notes, “It is not the other (raced, disabled, gendered) who should be explored, explained and interrogated . . . [but] rather, positions of privilege that need to become self-conscious and the subject of critical investigation.”

Q methodology combines quantitative and qualitative methods (factor analysis and in-depth interviews) to determine how ideas and attitudes cluster to constitute common viewpoints held by groups within a society (Carroll et al., 2024; Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Q’s data collection methods can facilitate the unconscious becoming conscious (Borell et al., 2009) and potentially avoid socially desirable responses which could result from direct questioning (Muriwai et al., 2019). As a methodology, Q can provide a nuanced understanding of how individuals and groups frame an issue within the broader societal context, and in applied research such as this with a social change agenda can highlight potential opportunities for change. The project was guided by the following key questions: How did nondisabled volunteers and professionals working across the sport/PE/ active recreation sectors in NZ reconcile discourses of inclusion and ableist discourses of “normalcy?” Did instances of conscientization (Freire, 1970) arise where participants reflected on hitherto unconscious ableist attitudes and the possibility of participation parity? Where were the opportunities for change?

Below we briefly outline Q methodology data collection and analysis processes used in the project (please refer to Carroll et al.,

2024 for a fuller account). The viewpoints and embedded ableist discourses emerging from the analysis are then presented, followed by a “variants of ableism” framework that draws on research findings, relevant literature, and research team discussions. The *Tackling Ableism* research team comprises disabled and nondisabled researchers and includes former young disabled participants from earlier *Enabling participation of disabled young people* research (Calder-Dawe et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2018, 2021). Indeed, feedback from participants in this prior project prompted our turning the gaze from “disablism,” with its focus on disabled *disadvantage*, to “ableism” and the *advantaging* of able-bodied people—particularly in terms of sports participation. Ethical approval was granted by Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Methods

The Q Set

Drawing on experiential narratives of disabled young people from our previous *Enabling Participation* research, the experiences of disabled members of the research team, teaching and coaching materials sourced from collaborating stakeholders, relevant academic and policy literature and mainstream media, a “concourse” of 130 attitudinal statements about sport, disability, inclusion/exclusion, ableism/disablism was generated (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Statements to identify potential for change were also included. The Q set was refined from the original 130 statements to a Q set of 40 (see Figure A1 in Appendix). This was a lengthy iterative process involving all members of the research team and advisors from within both the disability sector and the sports sector. The Q set was then piloted to ensure the statements captured the diversity of perspectives across the sport, PE, and active recreation sectors.

The P Set

A participant sampling frame ensured representation of nondisabled volunteer and professional personnel involved in various sporting codes (mainstream and disability), and PE/active recreation roles (e.g., primary and secondary school teachers, sports coaches and administrators, and governing bodies). Forty nondisabled participants ($n = 40$) working across three NZ regions (Auckland, Waikato and Wellington) were accessed through research team and stakeholder contacts and snowball sampling.

The Q Sort and Interview

During face-to-face data collection, participants arranged the 40 numbered statements on a grid (see Figure A2 in Appendix) according to their levels of dis/agreement, while an accompanying interview explored their placement of statements and rationales for their choices (Carroll et al., 2024; Muriwai et al., 2019; Stainton Rogers, 1995; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The statements acted as prompts for discussing participant perspectives in the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hr and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analyses

The 40 Q sorts were compiled into a database and statistically analysed using a dedicated analytical software for Q methodology research, Schmolck’s PQMethod (Schmolck, 2014). The correlation coefficients between the Q sorts were calculated, followed by a centroid factor analysis and factor rotation using the “varimax”

rotation method. Factor analysis condenses the Q sorts into “families” or factors of similar sorts that account for as much of a study’s variance as possible and enables identification of shared viewpoints. (Please refer to Carroll et al., 2024 for full explanation of the statistical analyses). Through by-statement examination of the factor arrays and reference back to participant discussion on attitudinal statements during the sorting process for clarification and meaning-making, narratives were created for each factor revealing ableist discourses at play (Carroll et al., 2024; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Challenging Ableism

The narratives presented below, coupled with a “Variants of Ableism” framework (Figure 1) developed from research findings, relevant literature, and research team discussions, formed the basis for “tackling ableism” discussions in subsequent sector workshops (see Townsend et al., 2025). The narratives and discussions from this later phase of the research led to the creation of the *Red Cards for Ableism* comic (Morris, 2024) and other resources to tackle ableism in sport, PE, and active recreation in NZ—for disabled young people and also disabled adults.

Findings

Three distinct factors emerged from the analysis, together accounting for 61% of the overall variance and encompassing 28 Q sorts with statistically significant loadings ($p < .01$). The statements that significantly correlated with each factor (either strong agreement or disagreement) were reviewed by the team. Based on the composition of the statements loading on each factor, they were labeled:

1. “Ticking over . . . doing our best”
2. “Rhetoric and reality: yes, BUT . . .”
3. Rhetoric and reality: yes, AND . . .

Each factor represents a composite configuration of statement rankings and reflects distinct patterns of thinking shared by participants whose Q sorts loaded significantly on each. Interpretation of these and the accompanying interview data provides insight into how inclusion, disability, and sport are understood across the sector.

Results of the Factor Analysis

Table 1 presents the factor loadings for each Q sort, indicating the degree of correlation between participants’ sorts and the three identified factors. Significant loadings are marked with an asterisk (*). In total, 28 Q sorts loaded significantly on one of the three factors. Ten sorts were conflated (i.e., significantly loaded on more than one factor), and one sort did not load significantly on any factor, so these are not shown in the table.

Q-sort participants are anonymized, with their roles in the sector categorized as either “vol” (volunteers coaching or managing school and community sport) or “pro” (paid professionals, such as PE teachers, or community sport/active recreation coaches). Most participants, whether volunteer or professional, were also involved in team management.

Factor Narratives

Factor 1 Narrative: Ticking Over, Doing Our Best . . .

This strongly acknowledges the right of all young people to access sport and active recreation—and the importance of this for making

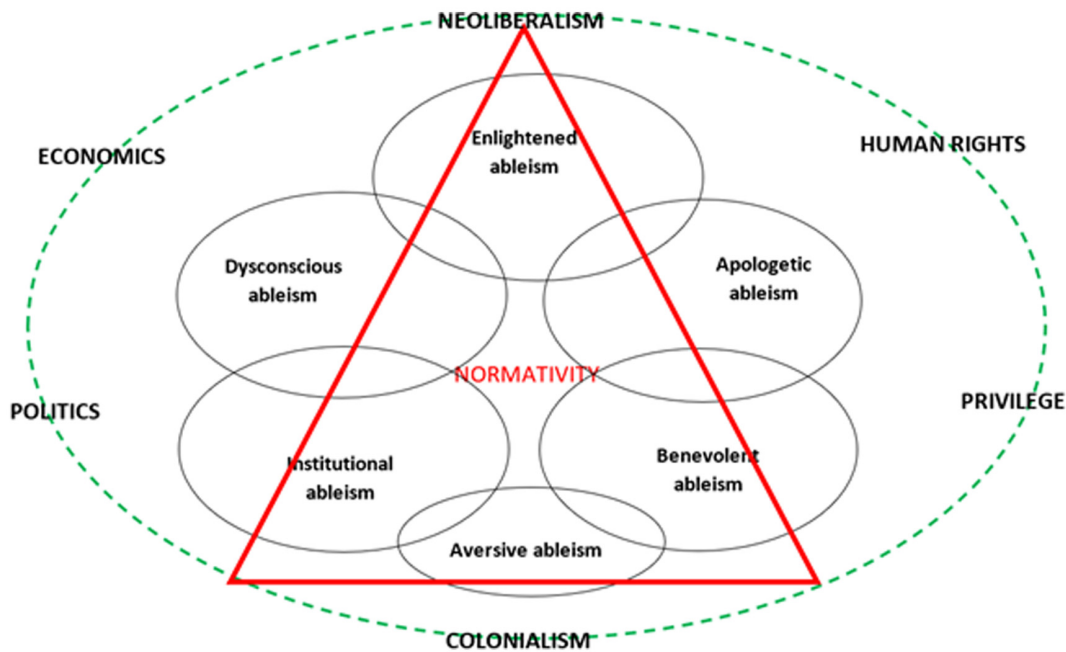


Figure 1 — Variants of ableism framework (The “variants” are not discrete categories and could also be characterized in alternative ways).

friends and building confidence. At the same time, the “realities” of mainstream sporting codes and settings and time and funding constraints were largely seen as ruling out disabled young people’s participation in mainstream settings. Somewhat contradictorily, there was strong agreement that there was always a way to include everyone; and strong disagreement that disabled people were too vulnerable to participate or took too long to learn; or that it was unrealistic and/or difficult to include everyone—and participation in disability-specific sport was seen as the best option for disabled young people. Funding sport and active recreation for disabled young people was considered a priority.

The statement with the strongest level of agreement was that “everybody should be treated the same.” Throughout the interviews, there was little or no recognition that inclusion might require a diverse range of resources and inputs including additional time, resources, and funding. Nor, despite agreement with statements that disabled people made others feel uncomfortable and their participation could deter nondisabled peers, was there strong agreement that interpersonal and environmental barriers currently excluded disabled young people from mainstream sport and active recreation opportunities. Overall, this perspective thought there were adequate measures in place to ensure everybody could participate—although there was always room for improvement (such as more volunteers).

Participants who loaded primarily to Factor 1 were predominantly volunteers coaching young people in mainstream and community and school sport settings. The rhetoric of inclusivity coupled with normalization of able-bodiedness and a “commonsense” “equality” approach to inclusion, ignored the current realities of exclusion or measures required to promote equity. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that participants noted in the interviews that in their roles they encountered very few disabled young people.

Factor 2 Narrative: Rhetoric and Reality: yes, BUT . . .

Like Factor 1, this factor also acknowledged the right of all young people to access sport and recreation and the importance of this

access for making friends and building confidence (tempered by observations that participating in sport/active recreation was not the only way that young people made friends or gained confidence). Perspectives conveyed in this factor were that sporting facilities were not accessible for everyone, and there were not adequate measures in place to ensure everyone could participate. Lack of organizational resources including teachers and coaches lacking expertise and confidence were highlighted as barriers to inclusivity. Unlike Factor 1 there was disagreement with the statements that everyone should be treated the same and that making adjustments and exceptions for individuals was wrong, but the reality of teachers and coaches only having so much time to work with any individual and a responsibility to look after the majority were highlighted.

Factor 2 did not support the notion that it made sense to keep disabled and nondisabled peers separate and was neutral on whether disability sport was the way to ensure disabled young people could participate: yes, disability sport provided particular sporting opportunities, but conversely disabled young people should also be able to participate with nondisabled peers. This factor was also neutral on whether funding to increase access for disabled people should be a funding priority, arguing there were potentially many other priority areas to ensure equity for all young people.

Participants who clustered to Factor 2 were predominantly professionals working as teachers, coaches/instructors in community sport and school PE, outdoor education, and team sport settings. This perspective was well attuned to government policies promoting equity and the inclusion of disabled young people in sport and active recreation while at the same time acutely aware of the difficulties of instituting such policies day-to-day.

Factor 3 Narrative: Rhetoric and Reality—Yes, AND . . .

Factor 3 also strongly acknowledged the right of all young people to access sport and recreation and the importance of this access for making friends and building confidence. A general lack of resources, inflexible sporting structures, and inaccessible facilities

Table 1 Q Participants and Factor Loadings

| Participants | Roles | Factors | | |
|----------------------------------|---|---------|-------|-------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Cane | vol cricket coach | 0.85* | 0.05 | 0.25 |
| Charlotte | vol cycling coach | 0.81* | 0.10 | 0.10 |
| Alan | vol touch/rugby/cricket coach | 0.75* | 0.27 | 0.47 |
| Sam | vol football coach | 0.70* | 0.25 | 0.28 |
| Mac | PE teacher/vol rugby coach | 0.70* | 0.21 | 0.45 |
| Peter | PE teacher/vol football coach | 0.65* | 0.23 | 0.43 |
| Jeb | vol hockey/croquet coach | 0.63* | 0.44 | 0.26 |
| Alison | vol netball umpire/manager | 0.62* | 0.10 | 0.39 |
| Suzanne | pro club sailing coach/admin | 0.60* | 0.47 | 0.25 |
| Nell | vol netball coach | 0.54* | 0.37 | 0.30 |
| Mitch | vol netball coach/admin | 0.51* | 0.41 | 0.22 |
| Niko | PE teacher/vol rugby league coach | 0.47* | 0.28 | 0.34 |
| Jackie | vol football coach | 0.46* | 0.12 | -0.08 |
| Rick | vol triathlon coach | 0.22 | 0.73* | 0.04 |
| Jason | PE teacher/vol ath/rugby coach | 0.19 | 0.68* | 0.09 |
| Carol | vol gym instructor | -0.02 | 0.64* | 0.44 |
| Len | pro mountain bike instructor | 0.14 | 0.64* | 0.41 |
| Delia | pro canoe/kayaking instructor | 0.27 | 0.63* | 0.41 |
| Roger | PE/outdoor rec teacher/vol cricket coach | 0.35 | 0.56* | 0.32 |
| Alan | vol touch rugby coach/manager | 0.36 | 0.54* | 0.43 |
| Jane | pro disability sport admin | 0.09 | 0.35 | 0.77* |
| Nicki | pro active rec coordinator | 0.21 | 0.45 | 0.74* |
| Aaron | pro active rec coordinator | 0.38 | 0.29 | 0.63* |
| Kay | vol underwater hockey/rugby coach/manager | 0.27 | 0.40 | 0.61* |
| Anna | pro inclusion strategist sport | 0.13 | 0.45 | 0.61* |
| Eva | PE teacher/vol hockey coach | 0.38 | 0.22 | 0.60* |
| Yves | pro parasport/cross-fit coach/manager | 0.49 | 0.19 | 0.59* |
| Gail | vol coach touch/hockey/netball | 0.33 | 0.40 | 0.56* |
| Percentage of explained variance | | 25 | 17 | 19 |
| Number of defining sorts | | 13 | 7 | 8 |
| Factor loading correlations | Factor 1 | — | — | 1.00 |
| | Factor 2 | — | 1.00 | 0.55 |
| | Factor 3 | 1.00 | 0.71 | 0.68 |

Note. vol = volunteers; pro = paid professionals; PE = physical education; rec = recreation; ath = athletics.

*Significant loadings.

were foregrounded as major impediments to participation, along with coaches' and teachers' lack of expertise and confidence—and lack of time to devote to individuals. There was also recognition that, although there was always a way to include everybody, some activities were hard to make inclusive and that successful inclusion required time, creativity, and imagination. As with Factor 2, there was a neutral response to the statement that everybody should be treated the same—yes, everybody should be accorded the same amount of respect, but additional inputs were required to ensure equity. There was strong disagreement with the statements that making exceptions and adjustments for individuals was wrong and the importance of making funds available to maximize the participation of all young people was stressed. There was a preference not to emphasize disability but rather to celebrate individual achievement, regardless of impairment.

This Factor recognized the possible value, depending on the situation, of keeping able-bodied and disabled young people separate in sport, both to “level the playing field” and allow disabled athletes opportunities to excel (as well as, at times, ensure their safety). That the inclusion of disabled people could deter the participation of able-bodied young people and that disabled people made able-bodied people feel uncomfortable were acknowledged as interpersonal barriers.

Factor 3 was supported predominantly by sector professionals working as strategists, administrators, coaches, and teachers in areas where diversity and inclusion were clear policy priorities. The ranking of statements and discussion revealed enlightened ideals related to diversity and inclusion, alongside awareness of institutional and interpersonal ableist realities across the sport, PE, and active recreation sectors.

Similarities and Differences

A rights-based commitment to access sport and active recreation for all young people—including disabled young people was evident across all three factors, although Factor 1 viewpoints (predominantly voiced by volunteers), appeared less steeped in official rhetorics of inclusion (and thus more overtly ableist) than Two and Three (predominantly articulated by professional sector participants). While the benefits for young people of participation in sport and active recreation have been extolled for decades, policies related to the right to inclusion have until recently been more geared toward participation parity for girls and women, Māori, and the LGBTQIA+ community than disabled young people (McBean et al., 2022). Such siloing of communities not only highlights a “hierarchy of rights” (in which disability often sits at the bottom), but also fails to recognize that disabled people belong to multiple identity sets (Munro-Cook et al., 2024), identifying simultaneously as female, bipoc (Black, indigenous, people of color), LGBTQIA+, and/or disabled in relation to context and experience.

Factors 2 and 3 also appeared more cognizant of interpersonal, institutional, and environmental barriers to participation parity for disabled young people than Factor 1—and highlighted coaches’ and teachers’ lack of confidence, time, and expertise to work with disabled young people, lack of organizational resources, and inaccessible sporting facilities. Factors 2 and 3 connected the dots between acknowledged ableist attitudes (for instance that “disabled people make others feel uncomfortable”; or that “including disabled people will deter others”) and exclusionary ableist attitudes and practices. Again, part of the explanation for these differences could be volunteers managing and coaching sports teams in mainstream settings (predominantly represented by Factor 1) had little contact with disabled young people who largely self-exclude in the current mainstream sporting environment.

Ableism at Play

Various ableist attitudes were expressed overtly, and covertly in Q sort statement rankings and in associated discussion, either as a participant’s personal belief, or reported on as a belief, practice, or policy of other sector actors. Some participants reflected unconscious biases, others conscious biases (Borell et al., 2009; Campbell, 2008); some downplayed the discriminatory effects of their attitudes in a display of dysconscious ableism, thus demonstrating limited or distorted understandings of social inequalities (King, 1991).

We are mindful there are numerous ways of categorizing and defining ableism and its many variants. Below we offer a “variants of ableism” framework informed by the literature, our quantitative and qualitative Q data, and ensuing research team discussion. This framework of six “variants” (Figure 1) dysconscious, enlightened, apologetic, benevolent, institutional, and aversive ableism has proved useful in raising awareness, promoting understanding of ableist privilege, and “tackling ableism” in sector workshops with those involved in the delivery of sport, PE, and active recreation to young people including disabled young people. Rather than functioning as discrete categories, the six variants intersect and overlap, each impacting on the expression of the others.

In the framework above six interacting “variants” of ableism are depicted in overlapping circles and nested within an all-pervading societal “soup” of normativity (illustrated by the red triangle). Interacting macrolevel environments; politics, economics, neoliberalism, human rights, privilege, and colonialism are shown on the outside dotted green line. While these macrolevel environments are implicit (along with microlevel institutional

policies and practices) in the production and maintenance of ableism (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), our focus here is on the different ways ableism was expressed by Q sort participants involved in the delivery of sport, PE, and active recreation. Below are brief descriptions of each variant as we have come to understand them through the process of our research, with anecdotal examples of its expression from the Q data.

Institutional Ableism

In institutional ableism institutions champion the inclusion of disabled people while at the same time embedded exclusionary ableist policies or practices exclude them (Scuro, 2018). It can be observed in the way sport is thought of, governed, and practiced in NZ (Falcous & Scott, 2023). Among examples highlighted by Q sort participants are school timetabling and staffing that precluded the effective participation of disabled young people in PE classes (Jason); a mountain-biking organization with a blanket prohibition on the presence of care-givers that excluded a neuro-diverse child (Len); and community gym staff resisting inclusionary initiatives (Nicki): “We’ve got some staff members who have been here for five years. And you know, ‘gymnastics runs like this, and parkour runs like this’ . . . they’re so set in how they work and how they run [classes].” As it pertains to policy and practices across society, institutional ableism functions at a systemic level, informing, shaping, and being shaped-by the other variants outlined below.

Enlightened Ableism

Human rights imperatives of participation parity jostle with neoliberal political and economic requirements of competition and economic viability to warrant inclusion (Hammond et al., 2019), to produce “enlightened ableism.” Here, exclusionary ableist attitudes and practices persist alongside an enlightened rhetoric of inclusion (Lyons, 2013; McBean et al., 2022; Peers et al., 2022). As Lyons (2013, p. 240) notes, “enlightened ableism presents a rational, modern, well-informed and humanitarian world view yet allows the continuation of practices that marginalize persons with disabilities.” While all Q sort participants acknowledged the right of disabled young people to participate in sport and active recreation, many questioned the possibility of achieving this. Most also saw themselves as unable to change embedded exclusionary policies and practices. For instance, Anna: “I think our society isn’t designed to be inclusive, so it actually is quite difficult to do the work”; and Harry: “Nice idea that every club in NZ would be accessible and welcoming to all athletes . . . but there’s this finite resource.”

Unconscious and Dysconscious Ableism

Both unconscious and dysconscious ableist attitudes often remain unacknowledged and unquestioned within the societal “soup” of normativity and equally unacknowledged and unquestioned non-disabled privilege. Many instances of unconscious ableism (a lack of awareness that a thought, action, or behavior is ableist) surfaced in the Q sort discussions, such as participants differentiating between “normal” and disabled people: “He might be faster than any normal kid, you just don’t know” (Cane); and/or identifying people by their impairments: “So for the cricket program we had blind, we had amputees, we had tetraplegia, we had Down syndrome with all the disadvantages” (Yves). In contrast, dysconscious ableists are aware ableist attitudes and practices exist, but downplay their exclusionary impact and fail to question how they interfere with equity and inclusion (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). It is an “impaired or distorted way of thinking about dis/ability . . . that tacitly accepts

dominant ableist norms and privileges” (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017, p. 895; King, 1991). Factor 1 in particular displayed dysconscious ableism in their beliefs that there were adequate measures in place for all young people to participate in sport and active recreation, and that sports’ facilities were accessible for everyone (when they clearly are not). The ranking of “everyone should be treated the same” as their most agreed-with statement also ignored the need for different inputs to facilitate inclusion for disabled young people.

Apologetic Ableism

Often associated closely with dysconscious ableism, apologetic ableism recognizes that ableism exists and sees it as regrettable but insoluble (and therefore not worth trying to find strategies to tackle). It often presents as a series of “yes . . . but” excuses, essentially placing responsibility elsewhere (Rudick & Dannels, 2019). “It’s a nice idea, but . . .” was how it was generally voiced in the Q sorts. Acknowledgment of the importance of access to sport and active recreation for disabled young people was frequently coupled with talk of the “difficulties” of inclusion—everything from the “realities” of sporting codes and safety concerns, to lack of teachers and coaches with expertise and confidence and of budget, resources, and time constraints making inclusion impossible: for example, “Accommodating everyone is a nice idea, but we’re time poor” (Eva).

Benevolent Ableism

In benevolent ableism, sympathy, pity or charitable praise abound, and attitudes and behaviors considered usual in nondisabled athletes become special and inspirational in disabled athletes (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019), generating the term “inspiration porn.” There were numerous instances of Q sort participants portraying disabled people especially disabled athletes as “inspirational.” A typical example: “They have had a tougher life than others so it’s really inspirational to see those people achieve” (Cane). Such attitudes were likely fuelled by media showcasing of the Paralympics in 2021, and the selective celebration of Sophie Pascoe, “an idealised type of disabled athlete” (Falcous & Scott, 2023, p. 896)—a phenomenon well-documented by media scholars internationally.

Aversive Ableism

Aversive ableism refers to the avoidance, ignoring, or dismissing (consciously or unconsciously) of disabled people. Friedman (2018) categorizes aversive ableists as people with low levels of explicit, but high levels of implicit, anti-disability attitudes. It is far more prevalent than explicit hostile ableism, he says, as “social norms dictate it is not acceptable to discriminate (at least overtly) against disabled people—people would look ‘bad’ doing so” (Friedman, 2018, p. 4). While evidence of hostile ableism was (unsurprisingly) absent in the Q sorts, acknowledgement of aversive ableism was not. Two statements—“disabled people make other people feel uncomfortable” and “including disabled people will deter others”—drew moderate levels of agreement across all factors (largely couched in terms of the attitudes of others). Responses to the latter statement ranged from “yes it does” (Niko) and “I think currently that is true” (Anna), to “I think it is a reality of society” (Jane). It can be difficult to draw a distinction between aversive and un/dysconscious ableism, yet the exclusionary language in the above statements implies an “aversion” to encounters with disabled bodies, even if participants were reluctant to attribute these feelings to themselves.

Nonableism/Inclusion

Nonableist/anti-ableist views were also expressed in the Q sorts, some previously touched on in the narrative summaries. While these are critical for building on to tackle ableism and navigate a way toward participation parity for disabled young people in sport, PE, and active recreation, the focus of this paper is on the ableist attitudes impeding inclusion.

Conclusions

Despite decades of official rights-based rhetoric, accessibility legislation and inclusionary frameworks, in NZ as elsewhere disabled young people—and disabled adults—continue to be marginalized in mainstream sport and active recreation activities. As McBean and colleagues have observed in the NZ context, the production of disability stemming from inaccessible sport and active recreation environments continues alongside government policies that champion participation parity; and across the Tasman, Australian research (Jeanes et al., 2019; Spaaij, Farquharson, et al., 2014) has noted the intransigence of community sports clubs in tackling exclusion and able-bodied privilege, despite official inclusionary policies. Without surfacing and challenging ableism, exclusionary practices will continue, and inequalities will endure, ableism a silent and unquestioned factor.

The Q sorts conducted with 40 volunteers and professionals working across the NZ sport, PE, and active recreation sectors surfaced ableist attitudes (conscious and unconscious, overt and covert); and the accompanying interviews (where discussion occasionally led to an “ah ha!” moment as a participant became conscious of some hitherto unconscious ableist attitude (Muriwai et al., 2019) unpacked the complexity of participants’ experiences and perspectives. They also confirmed that “variants” of ableism cannot be understood as deriving from a single set of assumptions or reduced to set indicators of particular priorities and practices. However, the fundamental tenet underpinning ableism—the “othering” of people who differ from the societal “norm”—was clear. All variants of ableism are dependent on notions of privilege and normativity, with “disabled” bodies situated as deviant (and thus marginalized), and “able” bodies as ideal (and thus privileged; Campbell, 2009). While we acknowledge the need to address intersectional barriers to participation parity in society (see Garland-Thomson & Valentine, 2024), it is beyond the scope of this paper to further unpack the complex relationship between disability and other social identities in sport, active recreation, and PE. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, we identify a dearth of literature focusing on intersectional analysis, indicating that the lived experiences of people placed in multiple minority groups may not be adequately represented in dis/ability research.

Our investigation of ableist attitudes is informed by a privilege framework and underpinned by the conviction that it is abled privilege, not disabled disadvantage, that must be tackled to halt the continued production of ableism. Tackling privilege demands self-scrutiny from those occupying “normalized” positions across the sport and active recreation sectors and acknowledgement that at least part of the onus of responsibility for change lies with those not experiencing its discriminatory effects (Borell et al., 2009, p. 35). Tackling, which implies effort and exertion, is an apt term to uphold a change in ableist attitudes, given how deeply embedded the normalization of able-bodiedness is in our social discourse, actions, and sporting environments. An example of applied research, our outputs (the variants of ableism chart and the comic) have both been

developed in order to raise awareness and “tackle” ableism within sport by helping practitioners to understand and face some of their own attitudes and those within their organizations.

We do not wish to infer that the exclusion of disabled people—young and older—from mainstream sporting environments will end solely by questioning and informing coaches, teachers, and volunteers and facilitating self-scrutiny and conscientizing (Freire, 1970); it is macrolevel neoliberal social, economic, and political environments that largely maintain able-bodied privilege and the associated ableist attitudes and practices that determine equity and social justice outcomes (Gammon, 2013; Monahan, 2014). However, as Jeanes et al. (2019) have noted, individual champions for inclusion are needed to tackle able-bodied privilege and disabled marginalization, along with clear policy guidelines at a school and community sports club level. Inclusive outcomes are not only contingent on macro environments. Governing bodies, coaches and teachers need to address ableist attitudes and beliefs that currently underpin exclusionary policies and practices. They need to give “Red Cards for Ableism” (Morris, 2024) and work together creatively with disabled people—young and older—to ensure participation parity in sport, PE, and active recreation.

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Appendix

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| All young people have the right to access sport and recreation 1 | Coaches and teachers don't have the expertise to work with everyone 2 | Inclusion or competition: you can't have both 3 |
| Winning is the best inspiration 4 | Disability sport is the way to go, that way disabled young people can participate 5 | Teachers' and coaches' responsibility is looking after the majority first 6 |
| Accommodating everyone requires more resources than the organisation has 7 | Disabled people are too vulnerable to participate 8 | Including everyone is a nice idea, but unrealistic 9 |
| It makes sense to keep disabled and non-disabled separate 10 | Disabled young people already have good access to sports and recreation 11 | Teammates won't accept disabled players if it means they don't win games 12 |
| You can't put a disabled kid in a race against non-disabled kids 13 | Participation is more important than winning 14 | Teachers and coaches can only spend so much time with any individual 15 |
| Coaches and teachers don't have the confidence to work with everyone 16 | Including disabled people will deter others 17 | There are adequate measures in place to ensure everybody can participate 18 |
| Everybody should be treated the same 19 | Disabled people take too long to learn, so it is a waste of time to try and teach them 20 | Funding sport and recreation for disabled young people should be a policy priority 21 |
| There is always a way to include everyone 22 | It is difficult for sport and recreation to include everyone 23 | Some activities are harder to make inclusive than others 24 |
| Disabled young people prefer recreational activities to competitive sports 25 | Participation is important for all young people to make friends and build confidence 26 | There aren't enough volunteers to include everyone 27 |
| Making adjustments and exceptions for individuals at the expense of the group is wrong 28 | Disabled people won't pull their weight if they are on the team 29 | Game day is just for the best players 30 |
| It is logical that Olympic sport gets more resources than Paralympic sport 31 | Disabled people make other people feel uncomfortable 32 | Expectations should be lowered for disabled participants 33 |
| Our facilities are accessible for everyone 34 | Seeing disabled people achieve is inspirational 35 | I don't see their disability, I just see the person 36 |
| It's better to meet the wants of many, rather than the rights of a few 37 | The media only see certain people as athletes 38 | Diversity and Inclusion have gone too far 39 |
| It is only right that funding and resources follow performance 40 | | |

Figure A1 — Q-set statements.

