Developing and Implementing a Community-level Para-Swimming Program

Mariett Teixeira Matias
MEMOS-Université Catholique de Louvain, mariett1981@gmail.com

Milena M. Parent
University of Ottawa, milena.parent@uottawa.ca

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Send all correspondence to the second author: Milena M. Parent, University of Ottawa, 125 University Private, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada; milena.parent@uottawa.ca.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the basic conditions required to implement a para-swimming program at the community level. This was undertaken using a qualitative benchmarking approach based on documents/literature and semi-structured interviews with representatives from 13 countries as well as from the International Paralympic Committee's Agitos Foundation. Results indicate that successful community-level para-swimming programs should focus on promoting the inclusion of para-swimmers in swimming clubs, with integration being a step towards inclusion. The basic conditions needed to do so include facilities and logistics, financial, and human resource needs. Findings also highlight the importance of the local context and culture. Based on these findings, guidelines are offered for implementing a para-swimming program at the community-level, notably: following inclusion principles, following a sport development pathway, and developing a stakeholder network. Funding remains an overarching barrier that must be addressed for such a program to be successful.

Keywords: Para-swimming, program, development, community, implementation, benchmarking, disability swimming, adapted aquatics

Introduction and Background

In general, community-level swimming programs for youth are important for attracting life-long recreational and competitive swimming. Doctors also recommend swimming as a sporting activity for children with disabilities (congenital or acquired). Based on the first author's international experience, para-swimming seems to lack a sport development model. In this paper, para-swimming is defined as a swimming program for persons with disabilities, whether these disabilities be functional, visual or intellectual, from the community level to the elite level (Swimming Canada, 2018).

Yet, clubs and pools have difficulty creating their own development model due to the many factors to consider and their general lack of time and other resources. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the basic conditions required to implement para-swimming at the community level. Combining practical and theoretical expertise, this paper provides empirically developed suggestions and barriers associated with developing a community-level para-swimming program and contributes to the literature by providing an international para-swimming benchmark study. Understanding disability within a sport context, how sport may contribute to the well-being of persons with disabilities, and the meaning of integration and inclusion in sport are important for the development of a disability sport pathway. Each is described below.

Disability and Sport

Disability can be described as an impairment or biomedical condition that restricts a person's physical mobility, sight, hearing, or mental functioning, and limits a person's ability to use certain skills, carry out certain tasks, or participate in certain daily activities or roles (Kung & Taylor, 2014; Nixon, 2007). In addition to physical ability limits, personal and societal attitudes result in further barriers to sport participation (World Health Organization, 2001). Individuals with disabilities can face stigmas and see their social, work, study, and sport opportunities diminish because of their disability (World Health Organization, 2001). The International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (2015) highlighted the most common barriers:

- *Physical barriers*, such as the lack of access to transport, poor lighting in public spaces, or communicating information in limited formats, create difficulties for persons with disabilities.

- *Attitudinal barriers*, such as ignorance and prejudice surrounding disabilities leading to marginalization and stigma, can severely undermine the psychosocial well-being of persons with disabilities. This harms their empowerment and efficacy, thereby affecting access to employment, education, and general social interaction.

- *Institutional barriers*, such as the lack of provision of services, problems with funding, or not applying standards and policies, can affect the opportunities and choices persons with disabilities have to fully participate in society.

Any program for persons with disabilities should address physical infrastructure, attitudinal and institutional issues. The way individuals with disabilities are viewed by society can have an important bearing on their sporting lives and their self-confidence. The lack of equality between people exists and can be measured by the limited opportunities to participate, lack of financial support, lack of media attention, and lack of spectator attendance (Groff, Lundberg & Zabriskie, 2009). Because of the potential attitudinal and barriers internationally, the United Nations (2006) called for the equal treatment of persons with disabilities through its eight guiding principles in article seven of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including: (1) respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy, including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons; (2) non-discrimination; (3) full and effective participation and inclusion in society; (4) respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity; (5) equality of opportunity; (6) accessibility; (7) equality between men and women; and (8) respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

Integration and Inclusion in Sport

Integration strives to increase opportunities for the participation of a person with a disability within sports clubs and governing bodies and, hence, is concerned with the placement and location of athletes with disabilities within sport's governance structure (Kitchen & Rowe, 2014). In turn, inclusion can be defined as the full participation of a person with a disability within mainstream sport organization programs and is concerned with equitable participation (Kitchen & Rowe, 2014).

Sport integration may be seen as the extent to which members of particular racial, ethnic, or minority groups or social classes participate in mainstream sport (Nixon, 2007). Kitchin and Howe (2014) defined their integration system based on a social theory of integration, which examines the relationship between a wider culture seeking to integrate a subculture. According to this definition, we find four scenarios:

- True integration, seen as harmony between both cultures, whereby each other's values are adopted and integrated;

- Assimilation, whereby the minority culture and its values are merged into the values of the majority culture;

- Segregation, whereby each culture keeps its values by avoiding integration; and

- Marginalization, in which individuals or groups withdraw from the values of the majority or minority culture.

Although these scenarios can be seen as distinct, Winnick (2011) argued for an integration continuum for sport participation. He noted five strategies for including disabled young people in physical activity, ranging from fully inclusive activities to activities where children participate in a segregated environment. Persons with disabilities may participate in regular sport or adapted sport conducted in unified, segregated, individualized or parallel settings. This continuum stresses association or interaction among athletes with and without disabilities. To some extent, the continuum reflects the severity of disability and ability to compete because the nature of disability and the ability to perform are greater factors than severity of condition (Winnick, 2011).

Instead of a continuum, Misener (2014) suggested an inclusion spectrum, where the goal is to provide persons with disabilities the choice to participate in the way they want to and with whom they want. The disability sport circle within the inclusion spectrum encourages the teaching of sports through adapted and disability sport-related games to compliment more traditional sports. The model promotes the

notion of reverse integration, where non-disabled persons play disability sports. This spectrum is based on the activities persons with disabilities are able to achieve so as to promote inclusion of all persons of all abilities.

Lepore, Gayle, and Stevens (2007) argued a zero-exclusion level should be the ultimate goal, meaning persons with disabilities can choose which sport they want to practice and receive the same attention as anyone else. However, simply combining people with and without disabilities does not result in an inclusive experience; there must be a method of creating inclusion which eliminates the internal and external constraints, such as administrative policies, physical accessibility, and favorable attitudes in all areas of the sporting environment (Lepore et al., 2007). We argue a para-sport development pathway is also one way to address inclusion.

Para-sport Development Pathways

Sport development is about participation and promoting the opportunities and benefits that people may acquire from such participation, from childhood through adulthood (Green, 2005; Shilbury, Sotiriadou & Green, 2008). The goals are to (a) increase the number of participants actively engaged in sport and (b) enhance the quality of sport performances (Green, 2005; Shilbury et al., 2008). More specifically, sport development refers to the policies, processes, and practice of facilitating opportunities for involvement in sport, from mass participation to elite performance (Taks, 2014). Increasingly, sport development is being embraced as part of a broader philosophy of sustainable development, which focuses on improving quality of life, tackling social exclusion, increasing access, preserving the environment, and expanding the pursuit of excellence (Taks, 2014). Thus, the need for a sport development model should be considered to foster sport opportunities for persons with disabilities.

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is the principal international entity responsible for promoting sports for persons with disabilities and seeking ways to help organizations increase the number of persons with disabilities in para-sports. It does so mainly through the Agitos Foundation, the IPC entity similar to the International Olympic Committee's Olympic Solidarity organization. However, these sport opportunities should also be promoted by other sport organizations at the local, national, and international levels (Hums & Wolff, 2015).

One way to have individuals engage in sport is through sport development models. The well-known sport development pyramid (e.g., Green, 2005) is the basis of many countries' sport systems (e.g., USA and Australia). Such national models are turned into regional and/or local sport development models, where sports for persons with disabilities can also be included. As such, we argue that, in the context

of para-sport, the development of promotion programs to attract people into a certain sport is crucial for the sport's success, and, in a longer term, the achievement of recognition/results, such as qualifying for the Paralympic Games or medaling.

The sport development pyramid is a common model for persons with disabilities, where health and well-being are at the bottom and Paralympic or elite level is at the top. If the athlete is not able to learn and build the necessary sport skills, it will be impossible to reach the next levels (Forber-Pratt, Scott & Driscoll, 2013). Sport development from the grassroots to high performance is not always considered a linear pathway. Sherry, Schulenkorf, and Phillips (2016) presented seven pathways to sport development. Sherry et al.'s model did not follow a straight evolutionary path, and noted participants may enter, exit and/or re-enter at various levels of participation.

Several countries have developed sports policies and sport development models for persons with disabilities based on Sherry et al.'s (2016) principles. One example is Canada, with its Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model (Canadian Sport for Life, n.d.). The basic principle of the Canadian model is that, as a person matures to adulthood, they will pass through several development stages affecting their physical, cognitive and emotional skills. Canada adapted the LTAD for persons with disabilities. Disabled athletes pass through the same stages as able-bodied athletes; however, the ages and rates of progression may differ depending on the type and degree of disability. As well, two additional stages are added: awareness and first contact. These are especially important for individuals who acquire a disability later in life and/or did not have contact with sport previously.

Forber-Pratt et al. (2013) developed a circular grassroots Paralympic sport development model. According to Forber-Pratt et al., to be successful, such a model should consider: (a) culture (e.g., the way disability is seen by individuals and the importance that sports have in a particular society); (b) a strong project leader; (c) "the current state of affairs for persons with disabilities (i.e., policies, demographics, healthcare, education)" (p.55); (d) existing (sport and non-sport related) opportunities and services; and (e) interest in Paralympic sport. By identifying, assessing and evaluating these aspects, managers can identify what should be developed in a grassroots Paralympic sport development program.

As noted above, the literature demonstrated the presence of guiding principles for para-sport. It also suggested various general sport development models. As the Canadian LTAD experience has shown, such sport development models need to be tailored to each sport (cf. Government of Canada, 2017; Marcotte, 2018). We argue a para-swimming-specific sport development model is required given its current absence as well as usefulness of para-swimming being

recommended by doctors for persons with disabilities (Portuguese Swimming Federation, 2017). We considered the various guiding principles and sport development models noted above, tailoring these aspects to a para-swimming context and determining the degree of integration or inclusion needed in a community-level para-swimming program. As a result, we developed five research questions:

- What is the current relationship between able-bodied and para-swimming programs at the community level (i.e., integration versus inclusion)?

- What are the basic facilities and logistical needs for para-swimming at the community level?

- What are the financial resources needed for para-swimming at the community level?

- What are the human resources required for para-swimming at the community level?

- How do the above conditions fit together into a community-level para-swimming program (program principles, resources, and suggestions)?

Method

To address the purpose and research questions, a qualitative, benchmarking approach was used and composed of document analysis and semi-structured interviews. These are described below, followed by the data analysis.

Benchmarking

To develop a community-level para-swimming program, we used a benchmarking research design to understand how 13 "good" or "successful" para-swimming countries approached community-level programs. To this, we added the perspective of the Agitos Foundation. Based on the first author's international para-swimming experience, we examined countries where "good" para-swimming practices have been implemented, meaning these countries are known in the international para-swimming community to be more developed regarding para-swimming programs, which appear to lead to successful results internationally (i.e., medaling). Australia, Canada, Finland, Great Britain and The Netherlands are recognized for their excellent work in para-sport development, which includes para-swimming. We also sought to understand issues faced by other countries where inclusion is not a reality yet, but where they still manage to achieve their objectives and have successful para-swimming sport results. These countries included Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States. Looking at these two sets of countries allowed us to extract possible suggestions and barriers to implementation, as well as noting what the fundamental aspects needed for a para-

swimming program are. Benchmarking was undertaken by analyzing documents from these countries and interviewing representatives.

Documents. The researchers collected documents (e.g., electronic documents and website pages) from each country, including swimming and para-swimming sport development plans and community-level para-swimming program details/guidelines. The material was examined to assess the degree of para-swimming integration and inclusion, the aspects included within a para-swimming sport development model, the degree to which countries had implementation guides for community-level and/or para-swimming programs, and any guidelines/principles, best practices and potential barriers to implementing a community-level para-swimming program. A total of 295 pages were analyzed, looking at each country's situation/context and the components that go into a para-swimming program at the community level using the literature noted above (i.e., guiding principles, integration versus inclusion, and para-sport development pathways).

Interviews. A semi-structured interview guide (see Table 1) was developed based on the literature noted above. Purposeful sampling of the group of national federations and/or Paralympic committees responsible for para-swimming were targeted in each country. These interviews were conducted through Skype with representatives from 13 countries, plus the IPC (total of 14 interviews). More precisely, besides the IPC (Agitos Foundation), we interviewed five individuals from countries where para-swimming is integrated into the swimming federation (Australia, Canada, Finland, Great Britain, and The Netherlands) and eight from countries where para-swimming is still in a segregated governance (Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States). Interviewees' roles/positions included para-swimming director/manager, world-class program manager, policy advisor, project manager, sports director/manager, high performance director/manager, and (para-sport high performance athlete) development manager. Interviews lasted 40 minutes on average and were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were returned to interviewees for member checking to increase data trustworthiness.

Table 1. Interview guide

Theme	Related questions
Sport, Disability and Inclusion	In your opinion, what does inclusion mean in terms of para-sports?
	It would be helpful if you could tell me about your role in para-sport and your general perspective about the inclusion of para-swimming in the National Swimming

	Federation.
	What were your or your organization's main principles to develop this inclusion?
	What are the main barriers you found regarding the inclusion process? In your country, do you think inclusion through sports is a reality or is it still something that needs improvement?
Para-swimming Development	What is the situation of para-swimming in your country from an organizational point of view?
	a. Who oversees para-swimming?
	b. Is para-swimming and able-bodied swimming together in your federation? Why or why not?
	What is the current relationship between able-bodied and para-swimming programs at the community level?
	Is there an official or formal para-swimming development pathway chart established by your federation/NPC? If so, can I see it/can you describe it? If not, why not?
	Is there a para-swimming grassroots program in your country? If so, can you speak about its main highlights?
	a. What are the resources needed to run such a program?
	b. What are the strengths or benefits of such a program?
	c. What are some of the barriers or challenges with such a program?
Community-level Implementation	In your opinion, what are the basic conditions required to implement para-swimming at the local community level?
	What are the basic facilities needed for para-swimming at the local community level?
	Regarding financial resources, how did you get funded for this kind of project?
	What are the logistics and human resources required for para-swimming at the local community level?

Data Analysis

Content analysis of all collected data (documents and interviews) was conducted following Corley and Gioia (2004). We used both inductive (emerging) and deductive (from the literature) codes, which were then grouped into categories, known as axial coding (see Corley & Gioia, 2004). Thus, the coded information was grouped into similar categories to help the researchers find trends and patterns in the data (i.e., higher-order themes). Themes included sport, disability, and inclusion; para-swimming development; and community implementation. These themes constitute our results noted below. Results were sent to participants for member checking to

increase their trustworthiness.

Results

No country examined had a formal community-level para-swimming program. However, the data analyzed provided relevant information about a possible pathway to follow and essential aspects to consider when developing a community-level para-swimming program. Results are structured around the three themes: Sport, Disability and Inclusion; Para-swimming Development; and Community-level Implementation.

Sport, Disability, and Inclusion

Analysis of the documents and interviews revealed the importance of creating an inclusion-based para-swimming program. To illustrate this fundamental finding, which addresses our first research question, we describe the inclusion reality in each country, how the concept is perceived, which principles are followed, the main barriers, and if inclusion is a reality or a work-in-progress. First, the British representative described the inclusive perspective:

> Every child has to learn to swim, and the less you get the children in learning to swim at the same age as their non-disabled counterparts, then you're fighting a losing battle … [W]e don't have special schools anymore in the country, so the kids are in mainstream schools. Why shouldn't they go to learn to swim swimming schools with their peers?

Two-thirds of interviewees noted changing perceptions regarding the abilities of persons with disabilities is not easy and much work needs to be done in their respective countries. The Italian, Greek and German representatives felt that people with disabilities are not as respected for their athletic potential. These representatives suggested that athletes with disabilities do not work as hard as their able-bodied counterparts, so they should not have the same rights. Their responses reflect the lack of knowledge towards inclusion by societies noted in the literature (e.g., Groff et al., 2009). As the British representative said, "there are still people who don't want to accept people with disabilities [in sport], but it's more around lack of knowledge, lack of understanding and fear."

Data analysis revealed that inclusion and integration appear to be concepts that "walk" together in the same spectrum, with inclusion being the ultimate goal and integration a prior stage to inclusion. The principle is to treat everyone equally regarding opportunities, no matter their gender, race, disability, or age, and using sport to gather and bring the community closer. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, already have in their state laws that discrimination

is unacceptable. Thus, sport becomes not only a vehicle but also a way of promoting inclusion in society. The Estonian representative noted "all the disabled people should have the right and possibility to engage in sport, and their achievements must be valued in the same way as everybody else." The Australian representative added "inclusion is about meeting the needs and wants, and adapting what we do to ensure that people can engage and participate."

Australia provided an excellent example concerning inclusion and inclusiveness through sport, as document analysis revealed it was the first country to create an evidence-based national inclusion framework (for details, see Swimming Australia, n.d.). The seven pillars noted in the Australian inclusion framework (access, attitude, choice, partnerships, communication, policy, and opportunities, Swimming Australia, n.d.) are not grassroots-specific, but they demonstrate how to grow and develop club capacity and educate clubs to become more inclusive. As the Australian representative stated, "inclusiveness is simply about ensuring our sport reflects the diversity of the broad Australian community. This means removing barriers to participation, eradicating discrimination, and understanding the important role swimming and aquatics can play in the lives of all Australians." Thus, the inclusion spectrum is used to provide an understanding of the type of engagement and level of modification that may be required for participation of people with disability through sports. Australia's goal is that local clubs will be able to understand the value and importance of inclusion, providing education and creating awareness of how to go about making a difference.

For some countries (e.g., Finland and New Zealand), however, inclusion in sport was seen as an unachievable theoretical concept, preferring the word integration, which was perceived as the stage before inclusion and where significant steps have been taken towards equality. As the Finnish respective mentioned,

> We use more the word integration because inclusion…is kind of full integration, fully inclusive, so a person with a disability has full access to everything… We are working towards inclusion, so we kind of speak more of integration because we think we are not there yet.

Guaranteeing participation in sport using para-swimming as a vehicle was also a concern for interviewees. The United States representative argued swimmers with disabilities participate in USA Swimming programs for the same reasons as swimmers who do not have disabilities: they want to have fun, they enjoy swimming, they want to be with friends and make new friends, they want to "get in shape" and stay healthy, they want to improve their skills and performances, and they enjoy competition.

The way the general public think of people with disabilities is another issue which reflects the social development of the countries examined. The less developed countries still see people with disabilities as handicapped and not able to perform as able-bodied individuals can. The low level of awareness of para-sports in many countries is seen as a disadvantage:

> What we try to do is to spread…the word of the Paralympic athletes. We want them to go to the schools, we want them to go to the universities, to raise awareness and visibility of the Paralympic Movement so that can change the society in a long term. (Agitos Foundation representative)

The Australian representative referred to the importance of raising awareness and promoting positives outcomes of para-sports to achieve the inclusion process. This involves access to timely and relevant information and the active promotion of ideas, tools and resources to foster inclusion. The Italian representative argued it is important to "bring para-swimming at the same level as able-bodied swimming, and their importance, especially in [terms of] public opinion."

Finally, the Australian representative felt a strategy based on inclusion is important when developing a para-swimming program, for instance through a Social Model of Disability and/or person-centered approach, where everyone has a role (i.e., not limited to "disability experts"). He added "it must also be positioned as 'part of the sport' meaning para-swimming is equal to Olympic swimming and is 'part of the core business.'"

Para-swimming Development: Understanding the Current Relationship between Able-bodied and Para-swimming at the Community Level

There were two main perspectives found in our data analysis: those who argued para-swimming should be included in the national swimming federation structure and those who argued segregation is the best way (most of them in the national Paralympic committee or sports for the disabled federation). Some countries, such as Germany and Italy, believed the work they are doing is more effective and the results achieved are far better because para-swimming is in their own sports for persons with disabilities federation. They argued that, if para-swimming was a national swimming federation responsibility, it would be seen as a secondary sport and not taken seriously. The Italian representative stated "serving the federations that have both disabled and able-bodied sectors, I can say that it is much better being autonomous. We are a real federation working hard to develop para-swimming." On the opposite side, results achieved by countries promoting inclusion in para-swimming cannot be denied, and the sense of justice, equality,

and belonging appears to be felt by those swimmers. The British representative argued a fair society is a better society and "the goal is to ensure that all the organizations, learn to swim schools and swimming clubs included, have to offer the same to everyone."

In countries where inclusion can be seen (e.g., United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and The Netherlands), there are few segregated systems for para-swimmers. Moreover, disabled athletes can have additional support when needed. Two of the most developed countries in para-swimming pathway development and implementation are the United Kingdom (see Amateur Swimming Association, n.d.) and the United States (see USA Swimming, n.d.). These countries have similar para-swimming development models based on the pyramid scheme. The para-swimmer will move from one stage to the other until they reach the high performance and Paralympic levels. Although this is not always the exact route followed by swimmers, it is an indication of the stages many of the swimmers do follow. The Dutch (see Dutch Olympic Committee, n.d.) created a broader, more complete scheme, though it is not para-swimming-specific. The scheme shows not only the evaluation of the athletes from the moment they start practicing a sport, whether Olympic or Paralympic, and the stages they may follow, but also considers the path to follow after the athlete's career is over, such as training to become a coach or manager. Thus, these models are useful guidelines to help para-swimmers think about long-term preparation, organize programs at the community level, and involve related human resources (parents, coaches, helpers, etc.) in para-swimming.

In contrast, in countries where there is no inclusive system (i.e., Germany, Greece, Italy and Finland), quite often, there is no relationship and no formal community-level disability program, which makes it harder to bring children into para-swimming. The lack of a development pathway means finding new para-swimmers is seen as the real challenge for these sport organizations.

Community-level Implementation

To establish a para-swimming community-level program, it is necessary to consider the basic conditions needed to achieve desired results. These conditions, described below, include facilities and logistics, financial, and human resource needs.

Basic facilities and logistics needed. The basic, mandatory resource for a community-level swimming program is a swimming pool. But, quite often, there are physical barriers at pools that prevent participation by individuals with disabilities. According to the British representative, "all our facilities have to be accessible due to the Equality Act, and so even Victorian swimming pools, which are really old, that have steps, have to provide lifts and access to them." Although access to pools and sport facilities should be a right for every person, there are

countries where facilities are not accessible and need improvement. As the French representative mentioned, "respect of the laws on accessibility is a minimum. Some obstacles to swim persist because of the person him/herself, but it's mainly still because of accessibility." The Estonian representative added "an accessible swimming pool [is needed] with changing rooms, toilets and showers that are adjusted in accordance with the needs of people with disabilities."

Related to accessibility are the safety and security risks people think are associated with practicing para-sports, especially by those with more severe impairments. The Canadian representative said management-wise, "we still struggle [with] more severe impairments…based upon the space, based upon the fear of the knowledge that [managers and coaches] don't have or don't understand, and then the safety and security concerns around lane usage." Interviewees from Agitos, Germany and the United Kingdom noted that parents and coaches seem afraid their children will get hurt during para-swimming lessons and tend to create barriers. As the Dutch representative noted, "at first, para-athletes, their parents, and board members were afraid to be part of the regular sport activities, especially the swimmers with a mental disability and severe disabilities." An additional support to consider is transportation for the more impaired swimmers. This may be needed for a community-level program even though, in all approached countries, none provided transportation for kids with disabilities to go to the pool.

The water space/time in the swimming pool was also identified as a consideration by Australia, Canada and Germany, as this water space/time is limited not only because all the swimming lessons and training happen at the same time but because other aquatic sports also need the pool. A para-swimming program must ensure water availability for additional time due to the specifications of swimmers with disabilities. The Australian representative noted "water space is limited and at a premium in most places. We are going to need more water space and more time in the water compared to others." The Canadian representative added "there are what we call pool shortages, not per se, but a proper time usage in facilities to be able to accommodate all aspects of our sport system because everybody wants facility time at the same time."

Financial resources needed. Obtaining funding for para-sports was perceived as a significant barrier. Even in countries like Canada, due to its large geography, it becomes difficult to have enough funds to support people that live on opposite coasts, in both cities and rural areas. The government appears to be a key funder in all countries examined. For instance, the Australian representative noted:

> We have a government funder at the top, who gives us all their
> money, and then we have the national federation…Swimming

Australia, then each of our state and territories has a swimming organization, which is an affiliate to us, and they look after the regions, and then the clubs sit at the bottom.

For children with disabilities to have swimming lessons, data from eight countries indicated it is usually a user-pays system, thereby treating people with and without disabilities the same way. The Australian, Finnish, German, New Zealand, British, and American interviewees thought inclusion should not only be about having rights but also about fulfilling duties. The Finnish representative said "that is something we've been discussing because able-bodied kids pay for their sports, pay for their hobbies. Because of the equality, we think that persons with disabilities must pay something for themselves." The New Zealand representative added "if the able-bodied [athlete] is paying a fee to do the swimming lessons, we don't see why the athlete with a disability should pay a lesser fee or no fee."

Human resources needed. Human resources considerations should be part of a community-level para-sport development model. Interview data indicated program managers should create a network of relevant individuals and organizations to undertake a community-level para-swimming program. As the Australian representative mentioned, "a great network connection is needed with several stakeholders, such as the federation, regional swimming associations, clubs, [and] local disability organizations that may have an important role in the program." A good relationship network and strong stakeholder support appear to be the first step in creating a community-level para-swimming program: find the right people that will help at logistical and social levels to develop the program and help create awareness about it. As the Canadian representative noted, "most organizations do a poor job of building partnerships between the 'generic' sports group and the impairment and rehabilitation/medical fields/education/facility management/club."

Next, the readiness level of the community and swimming clubs to receive para-swimmers appears to be a crucial factor in the inclusion process. More specifically, the lack of knowledge and understanding of individuals in those organizations constitutes a barrier. In some countries (e.g., Greece and Italy) where disability is still seen as a punishment and something to be ashamed of, families tend to hide their children, leaving them out of the sport system. This exclusionary behavior increases when we consider children more severe impairments. It is the fear and shame of the unknown. Thus, an educated community appears crucial for the success of a community-level para-swimming program. If the people interacting with para-swimmers have appropriate knowledge about disabilities, swimming and the adaptations required for persons with disabilities to take part in the swimming school, it enables program success.

Coaches and families, therefore, have an essential role to play in a para-swimming program. As the Australian representative explained:

> In an ideal world, to have a para-swimming development community coordinator would be huge, someone whose job would be to work on that coach education, to develop the program, to help direct swimmers, to ensure that everyone who wants to get involved in swimming has an opportunity to do so.

Managers should include education frameworks when developing programs, helping swimmers find a local swim club and getting everyone on board. This includes coach education. As the German representative stated, "coaches who motivate the kids with impairments to achieve more by providing them with a correct education program so that they know everything about the disabilities they are dealing with." Coaches play a crucial role, as they typically have the last word in accepting (or not) children with disabilities. As the Canadian representative stated, "[Canadian] coaches of all levels have a basis of understanding of impairment and how to coach an athlete with an impairment – physical, sensory or intellectual." However, the lack of knowledge among coaches remains high in many other countries (e.g., Estonia, Germany, and Finland), so it becomes crucial to ensure coaches obtain education on the inclusion/integration of para-swimmers.

Having the families/caregivers of the swimmers on board also appears crucial for successful para-swimming participation. Interviewees from several countries, such as Germany, Greece, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, stressed the importance of families understanding the benefits of para-swimming so their children can participate in sport like anyone else. The Agitos representative supported this position: "you need to sit down with the parents because they're overprotecting them, maybe they don't know their kids can do sport."

Findings from the interviews indicate communication and education are important when developing a community-level para-swimming program. As the Australian representative stated, "creating a positive environment and communicating in an effective way is crucial to successfully including people with disabilities in sport and active recreation." The Estonian representative suggested several specific aspects as important to consider given the particularities of a disability-based sport system including:

> Disability awareness raising within the community; specific guidelines for coaches on how to train a person with a disability; how people with disabilities could be included in a regular training group; and educating people with disabilities, parents and caregivers on the importance of physical activity.

People need to understand swimming can help any child build good, lifelong habits, higher self-esteem, good planning skills, and help build the community. The Canadian representative emphasized the importance of educating the human resources involved, which should include:

> Developing support materials for coaches and clubs on how to integrate, providing coaching education, provision of impairments-specific information and a coaching toolkit that will help to decrease the fear of the average coach on what to do when a person with an impairment joins or wants to join.

Additional considerations. When building a para-swimming program, findings highlight the importance of context and culture. For instance, specific laws and rules must be respected when creating a program or building infrastructure. Some countries have equality or disability and/or accessibility laws, which can make it easier for persons with disabilities to access para-sports, including para-swimming. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Equality Act and the Disability Discrimination Act mandates equality. The United States also has legislation (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act) that promotes equal treatment for swimmers and para-swimmers. The United States swimming representative noted that

> Having people with disabilities in our teams has helped [able-bodied] athletes understand adversity better and accept [athletes with disabilities] as equals… Athletes with disabilities who join USA Swimming clubs benefit from better sport-specific coaching, more rigorous training, more competition in practice, and higher expectations than they are likely to receive in other settings.

A significant obstacle for some respondents seemed to be the municipalities, which lose para-swimmers to swimming clubs, so their revenues decrease. As the Canadian representative said,

> We don't see a smooth transition between the learn to swim system into competition, because municipalities don't want to push people into the club system, because if they do and the club gets bigger, they will have more fights with pool time. Or they see it as a money loser because a child leaves their learn to swim program.

Discussion and Program Implementation Guidelines

Based on our results, it appears having a roadmap for the development of para-swimming is a crucial tool to ensure the correct steps are taken to foster long-term (successful) results within the sport. Understanding that a zero-exclusion level is

the ultimate goal (Lepore et al., 2007), our benchmarking findings above and recommendations below address the physical, attitudinal and institutional barriers noted by the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (2015), as well as the guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities from the United Nations (2006). More precisely, our findings noted above highlight the importance of:

- Equal access to physical resources (an accessible pool) for able-bodied and disabled swimmers – this addresses the physical barriers and some institutional barriers;

- Education programs for managers, coaches, and families – this addresses the attitudinal barriers;

- Fostering networks from which to draw financial resources and meeting the legal requirements in the context/culture – this addresses institutional barriers.

Opting for more integration and inclusion, our findings indicate the program should be at the least restrictive end of Winnick's (2011) continuum. We suggest adopting the regular sport with accommodation strategy to encourage association and interaction between swimmers with and without disabilities, understanding some swimmers may need more accommodation depending on the severity of their impairment. This approach, combined with an equal access approach to physical resources (e.g., both able-bodied and disabled athletes pay for their services), also addresses the eight United Nations (2006) principles related to respect (i.e., for dignity, autonomy, identity, freedom of choice, diversity, and evolving capacities of children with disabilities), non-discrimination, full/effective participation/ inclusion, equality of opportunity and between genders, and accessibility. Incorporating these principles into the education component for managers, coaches and families can also help bolster these principles.

Below, we combine the information from the literature and our qualitative findings to suggest guidelines for a community-level para-swimming program. We begin with a suggestion to follow inclusion principles to ensure the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (2015) barriers and United Nations (2006) principles are addressed. Then, we suggest following a sport development pathway to link the community-level to deeper engagement in the sport. Then, we suggest developing the stakeholder network. We end by noting barriers to address in a community-level para-swimming program. Guidelines are presented with the contextual consideration (e.g., different laws/cultures in different countries) that may result in specific guideline implementation variations.

Follow Inclusion Principles

It is logical to assume that, if a person with a disability is seen as any other person and given equal treatment and rights, then para-sport would be part of the regular structures/sport organizations. However, if a person with a disability is still marginalized and not granted the same rights and opportunities, para-sport would reflect this and be seen as a secondary sport sector, and not truly recognized as sport. This is therefore not an economic issue, but rather a cultural/social issue (cf. Forber-Pratt et al., 2013), as more developed countries like the United States do not have inclusive sport systems. If the country is on the inclusion pathway, it makes no sense to segregate children into different programs. As our findings have shown, even those countries, such as in Italy or Greece, with para-swimming programs outside the national swimming federation defend the concept that everyone should learn to swim together. Based on our qualitative findings and review of the literature, for inclusive swimming to occur, we recommend these key principles be followed:

- **Swimming for all** – provide the opportunities so everyone has access to para-swimming lessons and a chance to have a swimming career if interested.

- **Equal treatment** – guarantee everyone will have the same attention and treatment by all sports-related agents (i.e., coaches, managers, helpers, and community), no matter if they have a disability or not, thereby respecting and not discriminating.

- **Readiness of the sports organizations** – ensure the sports organizations involved are ready to receive athletes with disabilities and integrate them into their competition training.

These principles can be followed by facility owners guaranteeing pools are fully accessible and that the human resources have the appropriate knowledge/education to welcome and appropriately interact with potential para-swimmers to teach them how to swim. Pool accessibility can be fostered through local, regional and/or national accessibility laws or policies, such as the various accessibility laws in Ontario, Canada (see Government of Ontario, 2017). The educational component could be done through face-to-face (group-based) and/or online training modules.

Follow a Para-swimming Development Pathway

Findings indicate it is important to define a pathway that allows the para-swimmer to progress in a swimming career from the community level to the high-performance level (cf. Green, 2005; Canadian Sport for Life, n.d.). Based on our findings, we propose a universal para-swimming development pathway (see Figure 1). It uses the pyramid approach to sport development (Green, 2005), combined with the multiple entry and exit points found in para-sport (Sherry et al., 2016) and LTAD

approach to sport (Canadian Sport for Life, n.d.), with the inclusion principle. At the bottom, the learn-to-swim lessons are provided by municipalities, schools and clubs, depending on the country context, in an inclusive manner, so there is no separation between children with or without disabilities. Nevertheless, special attention must be given to the most severe impairments, which may require additional support from the coach.

Figure 1 – Proposed para-swimming pyramid
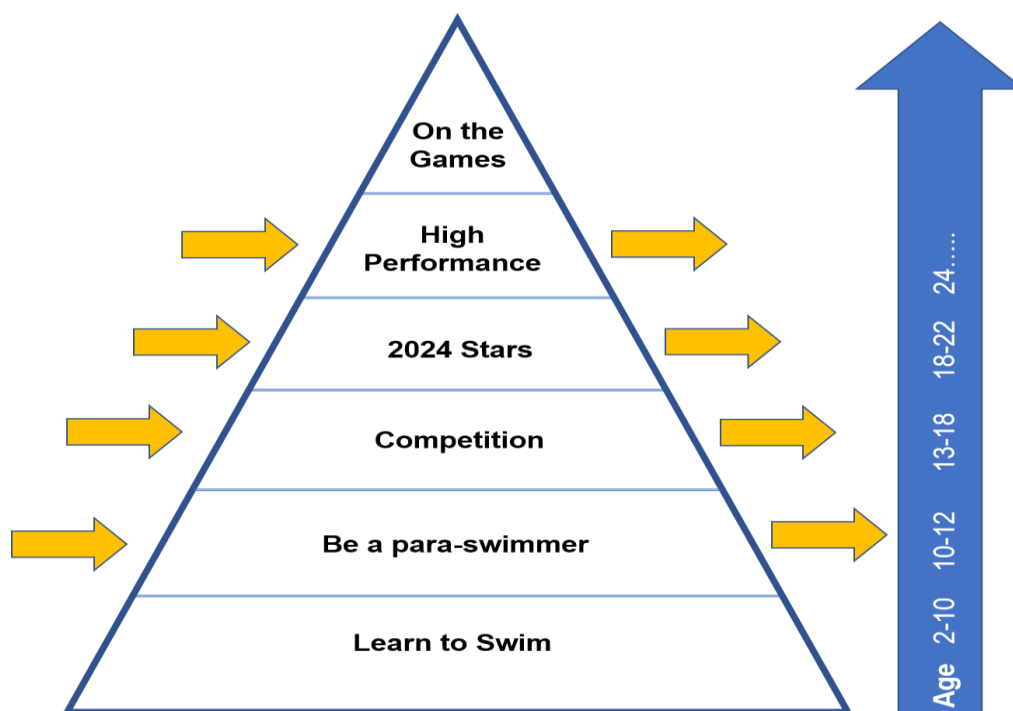
After this, children may participate in a "Be a para-swimmer" program in order to understand what it means to be "serious" about swimming and consider if they wish to pursue on a competition path, which is the next stage. During the competition stage, the number of lessons per week increases, these lessons turn into training sessions (a training program), and they culminate in the para-swimmer's first regional/national competitions.

If competition results indicate the para-swimmer demonstrates talent, the para-swimmer could move up to the 2024 Stars stage and/or the high performance level, depending on age. At this stage, para-swimming becomes a career for the individual, with their potential inclusion into the national team so they can compete at the international level. Results at the international level will determine whether

the para-swimmer can move to the final level and represent their country at the Paralympic Games. Of course, following Sherry et al. (2016), there may be entrances and exits throughout the stages, and the appointed ages for each stage are suggested age ranges, not absolutes.

Develop the Stakeholder Network

Defining the stakeholder network appears to be a significant contributing factor to the development and functioning of a para-swimming program according to our findings and the literature (Forber-Pratt et al., 2013). Each partner must see their role well defined to avoid duplication and confusion. Based on our study, municipalities, disability organizations/health institutions/schools, swimming clubs, and families are the most important stakeholders for community-level para-swimming programs:

Municipalities. The local government is, in most cases, the owner of the pool and has a significant role to play because their support and engagement is crucial to the success of the program. It is essential to meet with the municipality representatives and explain the purpose of the program and potential positive outcomes that will result in a win-win situation. However, depending on the context, independent pool owners or sponsors may need to be included if the municipality does not own the pools. Para-swimming program managers can argue that, by partnering with them, the pool owners or sponsors will create favorable images/impressions of their organization and increase their visibility in the community given their assistance of (especially younger) persons with disabilities.

Disability organizations/health institutions/schools. Meeting with the local disability organizations, health institutions and schools is important, as they are "sources" to attract more youth into swimming and increase the number of participants. Obtaining these organizations' buy-in can boost chances of having youth participate, as the youth and parents trust these organizations. In other words, if they approve these programs, then the likelihood of participating will increase.

Swimming clubs. Swimming clubs should create a welcoming and inclusive environment, get to know the needs of all the athletes, and support their participation in a way that suits the swimmer. Their coaches should also be aware of para-swimming and what techniques may need to be adapted or modified according to the swimmer's impairment.

Families. Families and caregivers should be taught to promote independence in their children. They should motivate and encourage their children to get into para- swimming and not create obstacles. We suggest involving families in some of the swimming club's activities (as event organizing, managing, officials,

etc.) or even convincing them to become swimmers, too, to show them the advantages of being in (para-)sport.

Barriers to Address during Program Development

The International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (2015) argued physical, attitudinal and institutional barriers constituted the most common barriers to participation for persons with disabilities. The guidelines developed above address these barriers. Nevertheless, the ultimate barrier in this type of program is funding. The main costs are pool-related. As municipalities are a major stakeholder, it is crucial that they allow additional use of the pool when swimmers with disabilities are present without additional costs. In some contexts, implementing the suggested guidelines with the view towards inclusiveness may be additionally hindered because of facilities' existing physical barriers (e.g., accessibility issues) and the lack of a legal context requiring equality and/or inclusiveness. Thus, additional funding (and a willingness to change) would be needed on the part of municipalities in such contexts. Also, there is a need to clarify the program and its benefits to these communities to educate and increase awareness. Additional coach training may also be required to prepare coaches to receive children with disabilities in the clubs. However, such education programs may require additional funding, unless a partnership could be developed (e.g., with an education organization or a sponsor) to support such educational initiatives to address the attitudinal barrier.

Limitations and Future Directions

Given the qualitative nature of the study, conclusions cannot be generalized, as our data do not cover all countries or represent all opinions. However, this study can still inform countries and other para-swimming initiatives, leading to improvement for para-swimmers overall. It would, therefore, be important to examine 1) a broader range of countries to determine the extent of transferability of community-based para-swimming programs across different contexts; and 2) examine other para-sports to determine what aspects – other than the pool – differ in creating a community-level para-sport program, and what is consistent across sports. Nevertheless, the community-level para-swimming program model developed here demonstrates not only how the concepts of integration and inclusion can be seen in practice but also provides guidelines for managers to implement such programs. It also demonstrates how theoretical principles and guidelines (e.g., the United Nation's (2006) guiding principles) can be realistically implemented in practice.

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