

CREATING SPACE FOR THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED COMPETITOR IN INDIVIDUAL EVENTS

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Current research regarding the integration of students with disabilities into public school classrooms has implications for all who educate, including the forensics coach and critic. While it has been demonstrated that physical access and equal educational opportunity can be legislated, experts generally agree that complete integration and acceptance of students with disabilities will happen only if as much attention is given to attitudinal barriers (Beattie, Anderson, & Antonak, 1997; Jones, 1984). Extensive research has shown that the attitudes of educators toward students with disabilities are crucial to their overall integration into the educational institution. Positive attitudes toward physically challenged students, for example, encourage new policies to be developed and help to increase the allocation of the resources necessary to increase integration. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, reinforce expectations of low achievement and inappropriate behavior by students with disabilities (Airman, 1981; Jamieson, 1984). The findings of the most recent research in this area (Beattie, Anderson, & Antonak, 1997) suggest that teachers who see physically challenged students functioning successfully in educational settings perceive themselves to be more successful in dealing with such students and thus, express more favorable attitudes toward their overall integration.

Recently I have written about the challenges of creating a space for physically challenged students in individual events competition (Kosloski, 1994). My research suggests that attitudes and inexperience among coaches and critics are preventing the total integration of physically challenged students into the forensics activity. Many coaches have admitted that while they will not discourage students with disabilities from participating in forensics, certain barriers make such participation difficult, if not impossible. These barriers include budget constraints,

building/room accessibility, transportation, peer rejection, and judging concerns, among others. While increasing gender and minority diversity in forensics has recently been given much needed attention in the forensics community little attention has been given to the issue of physically challenged students in forensics. Yet their integration is important to the idea of total diversity in forensics.

It might be useful to begin addressing some of the concerns raised in a recent questionnaire on physically challenged students in forensics. I am particularly interested in discussing how judging criteria is applied to the physically challenged student. My research has shown that when forensics coaches responded to the question, "Do you have concerns as a judge about evaluating a physically challenged student in competition?", 25% expressed some concern. These were some of the typical comments:

"[I am concerned] that judges subconsciously grant to challenged students more leeway or credit for performance beyond whatever allowances must be taken into account--the 'sympathy' ballot."

"I wonder if I'm being too hard or too forgiving for some individuals. Take persuasion, delivery is obviously an important element and, everything being equal a . . . (traditional) student who has movement and the ability to stand would have some advantage over a student confined to a wheelchair."

"Judging a student with cerebral palsy was a challenge because it was difficult to tell how much control he had over his motor skills. Thus, I was hesitant . . . to comment on his excessive use of hand gestures."

"In the case of the hearing-impaired student, the only category not applicable is vocal quality--should it count that much? . . . [At] a tournament the student 'signed' the speech while the interpreter sat, in the audience, back-to-the-judge, and [vocally] interpreted the speech."

"It was never a problem for me because I am very open-minded. However, I must admit when I judged the girl in duo interpretation doing 'Children of a Lesser God' and found out she was really deaf, I felt a bit cheated. I felt perhaps she had an unfair advantage."

These salient concerns offer us a point of entry for a discussion on how successfully the forensics activity is integrating physically challenged competitors. At issue for the coach is how a judge's decision can help or hinder a physically challenged student in their desire to continue to participate in forensics. At issue for the physically challenged competitor is how judging decisions impact their self-esteem and confidence. And, at issue for the critic is how to be fair in applying certain criteria to both physically challenged and traditional competitors.

The following are some questions that I hope will foster discussion on this issue:

1. Do current delivery expectations in competition hinder the challenged competitor?
2. Should all competitors be held to the same standard when evaluating platform movement, gestures, and vocal expression?
3. A student with Tourette's Syndrome or cerebral palsy may shake or twitch uncontrollably during competition. How should that student be evaluated against other "traditional" performances in the round?
4. A student with a degenerative muscle condition or nerve disorder may have a slightly slurred vocal style or a slower rate of speech than others in the round. How should that competitor be evaluated in comparison to the other performances?
5. Should a visually impaired student be required to use a black book in interpretation events?
6. Should the competitor who is confined to a wheelchair be penalized when visual aids seem clearly necessary in an informative speech?
7. Research shows that most forensics administrators believe that education is the key to successful integration of physically challenged students into our activity. How is that accomplished?

8. Are traditional (without disabilities) competitors disadvantaged when delivery is discounted for a physically challenged competitor in a round?
9. Is it ever justified to discourage a physically challenged student from competing? What disabilities might be considered too severe for this activity?
10. How do coaches prepare the physically challenged student for "healthy" competition? How does a coach interpret ballot decisions for the student after competition?

Works Cited

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