

# The BASES Expert Statement on Disability and Creating an Empowering Environment for Disabled People to Flourish

Produced on behalf of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences by  
Dr Tabo Huntley, Dr Tori Sprung, Dr Toni L. Williams, Prof Brett Smith, Lydia Bone and Disability Rights UK.

The International Paralympic Committee seeks to challenge society's perception of disability, and yet research continually highlights that disabled people continue to face disproportionate barriers to sport and physical activity (PA) when compared to their nondisabled counterparts (Activity Alliance, 2020). Furthermore, the complexity associated with understanding, representing, and delivering impactful solutions to address the barriers faced by a diverse disabled community remains incompletely understood. Meeting the needs of disabled people is further compounded by a lack of high-quality educational opportunities for those studying sport and exercise (Williams *et al.*, 2021) and those who pursue working with this population (Huntley *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, in keeping with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), the aim of this disability expert statement is to advocate for the removal of physical and social barriers disabled people face in sport and PA and provide recommendations to encourage the BASES' community to embed inclusive and empowering practices across disciplines, accredited training routes and ongoing professional development.

people (Townsend *et al.*, 2018). Thus, a critical understanding of 'disability' that goes beyond the medical model is imperative to creating an inclusive and empowering culture.

## Challenging ableism in sport, exercise and physical activity

Within sport, medicalised and scientific discourses of disability are reflective of an ableist society. Ableism refers to a cultural favouritism of able-bodied characteristics such as walking, talking, independence and homonormativity and devalues disabled people as, conversely, impairment is considered undesirable, abnormal, inferior and in need of repair (Campbell, 2009). Consequently, ableism often manifests in everyday communication. For example, disabled athletes are often portrayed in the media as 'superhuman' where inspirational stories feature para-athletes defying their impairments to achieve exceptional feats of athletic prowess (Silva & Howe, 2012). The act of overcoming disability through athletic prowess aligns with ableist logic as it implies the expectation of inferior ability and performance. Similarly, within the context of PA and sedentary behaviour communication, statements such as 'stand more', 'sit less' and 'run more' also favour ableist norms

**To effectively challenge ableism and disablism, both individually and corporately, disabled people need to be empowered to create their own means of empowerment.**

## Understanding disability

Disability is a contested term that is shaped by societal perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. Despite contention, understanding 'disability' is of vital importance for creating inclusive and empowering environments. Historically, disability has been conceived through two competing models: the medical and social models of disability (Goodley, 2014). According to the medical model, disability is defined as a 'problem' with an individual's inability to perform a task considered 'normal' due to living with an impairment. Consequently, when compared to 'normal functioning' bodies, disabled people are often made to feel inferior and excluded from full participation in society (Goodley, 2014). Within sport and PA, medical model practices are evident when researchers and practitioners exclude disabled people from studies and/or 'solely focus' on developing strategies to overcome individual impairment thereby enhancing their professional reputation without addressing the barriers disabled people face in society. To challenge the medical model, advocates of the social model argue that disability is not a result of individual impairment but a product of the physical structures and social relationships within society that restricts - disables - full participation (Oliver, 1996). As such, the social model draws on political powers to dismantle 'disablism' as a form of oppression. For example, the development of anti-discrimination legislation in the UK (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995) ensures, by law, that disabled people have the right to fully participate in all aspects of society and sport. Nevertheless, despite these successes which have led to more inclusive sport policies, education and practices, research still identifies the prevalence of medical model practices in sport and PA which shape the experiences of disabled

about bodies that can perform such activities (Smith *et al.*, 2019). Ableist language is also evident within scientific experimental designs, whereby data from disabled cohorts are often compared with the nondisabled ideal or, more commonly, are excluded altogether. Finally, changes made to Paralympic sport classification systems which attempts to achieve 'fairness' by considering the interplay of 'ability', 'impairment' and 'technology' (McNamee *et al.*, 2021), may reinforce ablism as some bodies are excluded. Taken together, this implicit ableist sporting culture requires reflexive awareness whereby a philosophy of identification and constructive challenge are embedded.

## Challenging disablism in sport, exercise and physical activity

In addition to the barriers experienced in sport and exercise participation, disabled people also face disablism within sport and exercise science. For example, disabled people may experience discrimination due to inaccessible laboratories, gyms and equipment. Furthermore, research questions and methodologies, which rely on homogeneous samples as a precursor of research quality, implicitly creates barriers for disabled people's participation in research studies and reduces the translational value of findings to broader society. In education, a lack of disability specific education and training has been recurrently observed in sport coaching research (Huntley *et al.*, 2021) and across sport science higher education curricula, with the implication that practitioners are unprepared to support disabled people due to a lack of knowledge and/or confidence. Resultantly, practitioners working with disabled people can make assumptions regarding 'what disabled people can or cannot do' or overly rely on 'trial and error' or 'experimentation' to determine appropriate

# “Advocating for more co-produced research approaches also offers the disabled community opportunity to be equal partners, or lead, the direction of projects for their benefit”

corrective interventions, based on ableist ideals (Huntley *et al.*, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2021). Finally, and importantly, a ‘nondisabled’ sporting culture may also implicitly discriminate against disabled people taking up practitioner and leadership roles due to a lack of role models and a recruitment strategy that privileges nondisabled applicants. These examples of disablism further assert the need for reflexivity to facilitate social change.

## Advocating for empowerment

To effectively challenge ableism and disablism, both individually and corporately, disabled people need to be empowered to create their own means of empowerment. Here Wallerstein’s (1992) definition of empowerment as “people assuming control and mastery over their lives” offers the BASES community an opportunity for reflexivity by considering the extent to which disabled people are valued and how their voices could positively shape this evolving sport science context. It is vital that ‘disability is infused’ into the training and continuous professional development of management, supervisors, and practitioners (Townsend *et al.*, 2021). This would support the development of a suitably trained, reflexive workforce who are able to identify and challenge ableist and disabling values and practices, individually and institutionally. Extending BASES’ endorsements and accreditations to include references demonstrating increased support to the disabled sport and PA community would provide greater opportunities to connect disabled people with practitioners. Advocating for more co-produced research approaches also offers the disabled community opportunity to be equal partners, or lead, the direction of projects for their benefit (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Finally, if practitioners adopt a positive pedagogical approach by positioning themselves as co-learners, actively listen to personal values and goals, provide autonomy, and focus on positive communications and outcomes, these will enhance disabled people’s experiences of empowerment.

## Recommendations

- Ensure sociocultural understandings of ‘disability’ are embedded within curricula and training of all sport and exercise science programmes.
- Understand and work towards removing barriers to disabled people within sport and exercise science.
- Conduct co-produced research and evaluations that meet disabled people’s needs, including empirical studies exploring the effectiveness of disability related interventions and the impact on practice.
- Work in partnership with disabled people to upskill both the health and social care work force in how to promote PA, specifically for disabled people. ■



Dr Tabo Huntley

Dr Tabo Huntley is a Senior Lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University and a BASES Professional Member.



Dr Tori Sprung

Dr Tori Sprung is a Reader in Clinical Exercise Physiology and the strategic lead for EDI at Liverpool John Moores University. Tori is also a member of the BASES EDI Advisory Group.



Dr Toni Williams

Dr Toni Williams is an Associate Professor at Durham University.



Prof Brett Smith

Prof Brett Smith is a Director of Research and Professor of Disability and Physical Activity at Durham University.



Lydia Bone

Lydia Bone is the Disability Rights UK Programme Manager for ‘Get Yourself Active’.

## References:

- Activity Alliance. (2020).** Annual Disability and Activity Survey. Available from: <https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/how-we-help/research/5563-activity-alliance-annual-disability-and-activity-survey-january-2020>.
- Goodley, D. (2014).** *Dis/ability studies: theorising disablism and ableism*. London: Routledge.
- Huntley, T. D. et al. (2019).** Pan-European Work Force Audit and Best Practice Case Study Report: The Experiences of Coaches in Paralympic and Disability Sport.
- McNamee, M. et al. (2021).** Fairness, technology and the ethics of Paralympic sport classification, *European Journal of Sport Science*, 21(11), 1510-1517.
- Silva, C.F & Howe, P.D. (2012).** The (in)validity of supercrip representation of Paralympian athletes. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 36(2), 174-194.
- Smith, B. et al. (2021).** Disability, the communication of physical activity and sedentary behaviour, and ableism: a call for inclusive messages. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 55(20), 1121-1122.
- Smith B. et al. (2019).** Infographic. Physical activity for disabled adults. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 53, 335-336.
- Townsend, R.C. et al. (2018).** ‘It’s not about disability, I want to win as many medals as possible’: The social construction of disability in high-performance coaching. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 55(3), 344-360.
- Townsend, R. C. et al. (2021).** Infusing disability into coach education and development: A critical review and agenda for change. *Physical education and sport pedagogy*, 27(3), 247-260.
- United Nations. (2006).** United Nations Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Available from <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/convtexte.htm>: United Nations General Assembly A/61/61.
- Wallerstein, N. (1992).** Powerlessness, empowerment and health: Implications for health promotion programmes. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 6(3), 197-205.
- Williams, T. L. et al. (2021).** Stories of physical activity and disability: Exploring sport and exercise students’ narrative imagination through story completion. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*.

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank the *Disability Rights UK BASES Expert Statement Group* for their invaluable input into the development of this statement.

Download a PDF of this article: [www.bases.org.uk/BASES-Expert-Statements](http://www.bases.org.uk/BASES-Expert-Statements)

## Copyright © BASES, 2022

Permission is given for reproduction in substantial part. We ask that the following note be included: “First published in *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, Issue 73, Autumn 2022. Published by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences - [www.bases.org.uk](http://www.bases.org.uk)”