

Sound Teaching Practices in Conducting a Physical Education Program for Persons with an Intellectual Disability

J. Young, A. Brown, and L. Konjarski

Abstract—This paper presents key challenges reported by a group of Australian undergraduate Physical Education students in conducting a program for persons with an intellectual disability. Strategies adopted to address these challenges are presented together with representative feedback given by the Physical Education students at the completion of the program. The significance of the program's findings is summarized.

Keywords—Adapted teaching, persons with an intellectual disability.

I. INTRODUCTION

AS part of its Adapted Physical Education suite of units, Victoria University conducts a weekly sports program for persons with an intellectual disability. The program is designed to: (a) equip Victoria University students with effective guidelines for working with a special population of participant and (b) provide a fun and safe learning experience for persons with an intellectual disability. This paper highlights effective strategies and insights gained in teaching the oft-neglected persons with an intellectual disability [1], [2].

II. THE PROGRAM

The program was conducted over a 12 week period in 2012. The program was now in its seven year since its inception in 2005. It was conducted in the gymnasium at Victoria University (Footscray Park campus in Melbourne, Australia) and primarily focused on the sports of soccer, netball and tennis. Twenty (10 male and 10 female) Third Year Physical Education students ('teachers') delivered a weekly 90-minute program to 20 (12 male and 8 female) persons with an intellectual disability (predominantly persons with Autism and Downs Syndrome). The persons with an intellectual disability attended two local special schools ('participants') and were aged between 10 and 16 years. The total number of teachers and participants were equally divided into two groups that allowed those participants from the same school to work together.

To assist teachers to prepare for, and conduct, the sessions a weekly series of 12 lectures on adapted teaching topics was provided. The topics included models for working with special populations, legal and ethical considerations for inclusion, barriers to participation for persons with an intellectual disability and session planning. In addition, teachers attended two practical sessions when guest presenters, who were experts in the Adapted teaching field, shared their experiences with the teachers and provided guidance with session planning and delivery.

Prior to each session with participants a designated teacher was asked to prepare a lesson plan for his/her group. The lesson plan was required to conform to 'game-sense' principles (i.e., consist of activities and games versus drills) and include a group warm-up game (e.g., Follow the Leader or Captain's Treasure) followed by a series of 4-6 activities around the sports of soccer, netball and/or tennis. To conclude the session a group warm-down activity (e.g., throwing and catching plastic balls on a large multi-colored parachute) was conducted. This was primarily done to end the session on a much loved activity and bring the session to a conclusion.

Immediately following each session all teachers attended a debriefing where teachers shared their experiences and exchanged ideas on what worked well, what were the main challenges and how these challenges were addressed. At the conclusion of the series of sessions, teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences and report on the insights gained. A series of inductive content analyses was conducted to analyze the teachers' responses.

III. KEY CHALLENGES IN DELIVERING THE PROGRAM

The key challenges reported by teachers, and the main way in which these challenges were addressed, are listed in the following table.

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TABLE I
KEY CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Challenge	Strategies to Address Challenge
How to effectively communicate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on non-verbal communications including facial expressions, smiles and body language • Gave accurate demonstration of what was required • Kept verbal instructions to a minimum, but where provided, these were clear and 'to the point' • Adopted cue cards and other visual material • Provided positive feedback and encouragement
Apprehensive about working with a new and different population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulted participants' school teachers and Victoria University staff • Asked questions in debriefing sessions • Worked in a team to deliver session and gained confidence from team members' support • Accessed Victoria University staff were on hand to provide support and guidance
Concern about safety (participants might hurt themselves)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed risk management plans in their group prior to commencement of sessions • Inspected the playing area prior to the commencement of the session • Enquired about any relevant safety or medical condition from participants' school teachers prior to each session • Ensured all participants had plenty of space and room to engage in activities • Assumed the role of 'eyes and ears' for the participants • Modified equipment to use short racquets/bats and light/soft balls • Adopted extremely vigilant approach to ensure all activities were 'safe' whilst also engaging, fun and challenging
What games and activities to adopt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified interests and abilities by asking participants (and their school teachers) what they liked to do • Used trial and error to identify activities that were enjoyed and then built on these to progress the activity's demands • Adopted a flexible approach and willingness to adapt activities to gain and maintain participants' interest • 'Over prepared' for sessions with at least 2-3 extra activities included • Made the activities fun
Participants' short concentration span	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned breaks between activities for a rest or drink • Included a variety of activities in session • Kept activities 'short and sharp'
Each participant was individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked on a one-on-one basis with targeted individuals (those who benefited most from individual attention) when practical to do so • Endeavoured to get to know the individual participants (not only their names but interests, goals and abilities) • Respected each participant's needs and displayed a willingness to adapt and incorporate a range of activities and methods of approach to engage participants

IV. INSIGHTS GAINED BY TEACHERS

The analyses of data revealed that teaching participants had been a most positive learning experience for teachers. Without exception, all teachers reported they had gained much from the opportunity and felt better equipped to work as a teacher in the future. Four representative quotes from teachers were:

"It has taught me that regardless of their disability they are equally keen and eager to learn. As a teacher I can offer them that opportunity. I have been

privileged to be in such a program and I have felt that I have made positive ground in teaching and demonstrating that the limitations of his disability are no means to discontinue participation. The most important thing I have learnt is to focus on the participant's abilities and move forward from there."

"It has been such a rewarding and challenging experience. I had the opportunity to work with persons with a disability, which I had not done before and I was able to pass on my knowledge whilst giving an active enjoyable experience in a fun, learning environment. Working and adapting the way I would normally teach taught me to deal with a range of diverse challenges. I believe the knowledge I have gained will extend further throughout my years of teaching and the fulfillment I have gained will only push me further to help and give to many other persons in similar conditions."

"I have learnt that you need a great deal of patience and that it is better to demonstrate and partake in activities more so than just explaining them. I have learnt that your lesson plans might not always go to plan but this is the thrill of teaching and adapting to the situation you have at hand. I believe that we can all learn from each other no matter if a person is disabled or not and that we can still interact whilst building friendships and developing as individuals."

"I have explored, experienced and learnt from all the people involved in the program. I learnt to always work with people's abilities rather than their disabilities. This is extremely important in all school/learning/teaching situations and environments. I have also learnt a lot of new ways to interact with different people, the type of language that can be used to make myself clear and I have gained a better understanding of intellectually disabled persons' experiences in regard to judgment and discrimination. Through learning these things it will now make me a more effective and efficient teacher, all abilities and all ages. I have developed a better sense of understanding and empathy."

V. CONCLUSIONS

The program's findings, as reported by the teachers, were not surprising. It had been anticipated that teachers expected their teaching of persons with an intellectual disability to 'take them out of their comfort zone'. This did happen as few teachers had had prior experience teaching special populations. However, most significantly, teachers recognized that sound teaching principles needed to be adopted irrespective of the teaching group. Sessions need to be planned, fun, safe and inclusive. To this end all participants need to be respected and empowered to develop their own unique set of interests and strengths [3]. A warm rapport between teachers and participants needs to be established and

maintained. Most importantly, the opportunity has to be provided to develop abilities [4]. Physical activity must be accessible and a positive experience. As such, the Victoria University Adapted Physical Education program was a winner. The teachers grew professionally and, from the participants' laughter and engagement, it could be assumed participants loved the opportunity to be active and feel included.

The implications of the findings of Victoria University's Adapted Physical Education program suggest that teaching individuals with an intellectual disability need not be an elusive goal or aspiration. What is required is a resolution to provide inclusive teaching and a commitment to adhere to sound teaching principles. The Victoria University experience suggests that the potential rewards for a teacher who embraces teaching persons with an intellectual disability can be exceptionally enlightening, inspiring and satisfying.

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