



Perspectives of Community Sport & Recreation Providers on Delivering Inclusive Services

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Background

Stakeholder collaboration is key to inclusive recreation: this includes support services, sporting clubs (Declerck et al., 2021; García et al., 2017; Jeanes et al., 2018; Kitchin et al., 2019; Vanderbom et al., 2018) and children with disability and their parents (Züll et al., 2019). In Australia, exploratory research (Jeanes et al., 2018) indicates that while some clubs actively seek and promote the engagement of people with a disability, they require more financial aid to enhance their inclusive practice. Züll et al. (2019) identified a lack of knowledge around health and sports for children with disability as a barrier to their inclusion in these activities and called on health/sports professionals to promote participation opportunities. Other studies similarly highlight the facilitative role that sport/recreation professionals and volunteers can play in recreational inclusion (Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Oriol et al., 2018) as long as these personnel are adequately trained to support people with disability (Kitchin & Crossin, 2018; Kitchin et al., 2019; Mooney et al., 2019; Richardson et al., 2017), particularly in high-risk setting such as gyms (Richardson et al., 2017).

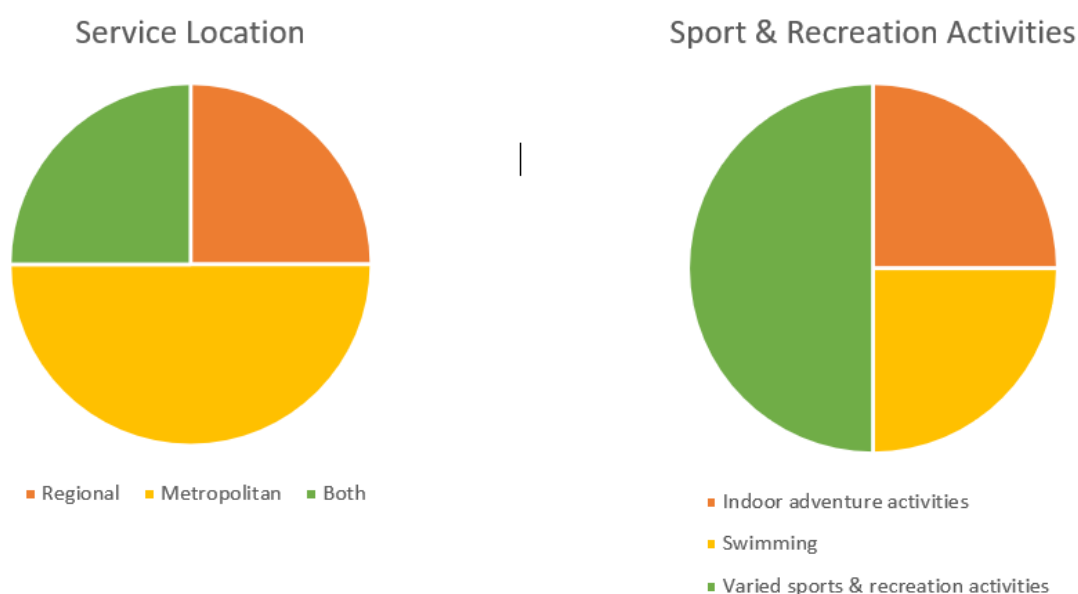
While it is evident that inclusive practice can elicit positive outcomes for service users (Kitchin et al., 2019), our literature review identified gaps in this field of research. Notably, we did not identify any research addressing the impact that specialist disability service partners or lived experience experts may have on the capacity of a community sports and recreation provider to deliver inclusive services. Such insights could be used to enhance current and future partnerships, and guide resource allocation within the sector. To address this gap, the following arm of our research explores firsthand perspectives of community-based sport and recreation service providers regarding their partnerships with a TAD service.

What we did

This research study aimed to evaluate the impact of TAD partnerships on the capacity of community agencies to deliver inclusive sport and recreational services for people with disabilities. We addressed service providers' perceptions of the support provided by TAD services, and their perspectives on recreational inclusion, including perceived barriers and facilitators to inclusive service delivery. To inform related capacity-building resources (developed by Inclusion Melbourne as part of the MAL program), service providers were also asked about their experiences engaging with the NDIS.

All sport and recreation providers that had partnered with a TAD service as part of the MAL program to enhance their delivery of inclusive services were invited to participate. Four organisations, from Victoria (n=2), Tasmania (n=1) and Queensland (n=1), consented to participate, and an online interview was conducted with a staff member from each. Participants were aged 25 to over 55 years and as seen in Figure 3 provided a range of sport and recreation services in both metropolitan and regional areas. Participants held the following organisational roles: Sports Development Manager, Stadiums Coordinator, Disability Access and Inclusion Officer, and Sport and Recreation Manager. Two participants elaborated on their role, indicating additional responsibilities: instructor and coach, acting centre manager, assistant centre manager and guest experience officer. Participants had worked for the organisation for 3 years (n=1), 5 years (n=1), 9 years (n=1) and 35 years (n=1).

Figure 3: Demographics of Service Provider Interview Participants



What we learnt

Reflections on the partnership

Participants shared varied accounts of how their partnerships developed, some hinting that they were 'discovered' by their local TAD service. Some had been part of a TAD Inclusive Community Sports Day, one partnership was due to a previous acquaintance who now worked for a TAD Service, and another felt their partnership *"definitely came about because they [TAD Service] were looking for a location"*.

"... to deliver activities to engage all abilities participants and disability groups across various regions. The aim is to provide sustainable programs for the target group and encourage regular participation in these activities."

Partnership with a TAD Service enabled the participating sport and recreation providers to offer services beyond those that had normally been achievable. For one provider it allowed the TAD Service to run Inclusive Community Sports Days on site during the school holidays. Another two service providers mentioned how the partnership enabled a monthly All-Abilities group and school holiday disability programs, offered at reduced or no cost to families. Sustainability and increased participation from an existing All-Abilities Group was also reported.

Opportunities for growth arising from the partnerships were different for everyone, with participants expressing a vision for extended collaboration in the future: *"I would like to see us being able to expand it. I'd like to be able to see something happening on a regular basis, weekly, and utilising our centre, and probably the connections that [TAD] has. That would be my sort of next big wish list between us."* One participant suggested extending collaborative services to their company's broader franchise, while another focused simply on embedding: *"regular communication and updates from the partner organisations' coordinators"*. Having experienced successful collaboration with a TAD service, two participants were also interested in securing funding to extend the duration and sustainability of the partnership, particularly around human resources: *"Longer term funding contracts and projects to aid with sustainability of activities offered to participants, and to aid with [our organisation]'s staff retention."*

What are the potential outcomes of partnerships?

Our findings indicate that partnerships between a disability service provider and sport and recreation providers offer several potential benefits for both parties, as well as for end-users of the service. Partnerships had afforded staff *“the opportunity to increase their working hours to deliver more sport and recreation opportunities”*, including low-cost or free activities, increased sessions at more accessible times for clientele with disability, expansion of existing inclusive programs, and the ability to advertise their service during TAD Inclusive Community Sports Days. Regarding the latter, one participant had found that the free Inclusive Sports Day event attracted new clients of all abilities, not just those with disability. Another reported that Inclusive Community Sports Days held during school holidays were a catalyst to host more open day-long activities: *“So we will use *name* and his [TAD] open day as one of our days during the school holidays. But then we'll have our own day as well just building, building on the program that we're sort of starting”*. Finally, one participant explained how the discounted cost of their inclusive activity sessions specifically addressed pitfalls in current disability support: *“The [TAD Service] funding allowed us to run the class at \$5.00 a lesson and cater to many children who could not afford our term-based disability swim classes, which at the time were \$50.00 and were not being regularly recognised by the NDIS for Gap funding.”*

Developing and maintaining an effective partnership was a dynamic process and unique to the individual person and organisation. One participant stressed the importance of meeting in person rather than online, as it allowed for *“many opportunities for questions and collaboration”*. While the ability to discuss accessible and inclusive practice was valuable, it was one participant's passion of inclusive practice which played a key role in networking toward an effective partnership, and arguably the success of their inclusive practice.

Building an effective partnership is complex and unique, offering potential for wide-reaching positive outcomes. As one participant highlighted, some initiatives held mutual benefit for all stakeholders, while others were more altruistic but still valuable:

“... I suppose, of my enthusiasm to bring the diversity, again because that's my role to ensure that we bring everybody into the Centre. So, I have made sure we have always enabled them to come every single holiday. And make sure we have these courts available for them to use”

“... when I hear of things, and I can think of things, and I can make the connections. And it may not necessarily mean that it's going to benefit me. It may not necessarily mean it's going to benefit our

organisation. But if I know that this particular group would work with this particular group, and the, the connection between them and I'm talking everything. I'm talking right across the board. Not just necessarily you know the all-abilities, it's basically everybody".

Partnerships were fruitful, but participants still reflected on what could be improved. Funding availability was a common theme and participants reflected needs raised in other arms of our study: “[We need] external funding sources to be able to keep the price of lessons down and expand the amount of lessons. We currently have a waiting list of 10+ people without the teachers or funds available to currently cater for them.” Another participant described tensions around the individual versus broader impact of funded interventions: “You know it's a few thousand dollars to get this harness. Then we think about how many numbers of customers will actually use that in the years - not many. So, it's the justification of spending that cash on that particular tool, when you can still deliver [a service] to people without it.” Participants shared varied experiences with the NDIS, however there was a clear desire to understand more about how they can use it to better serve their clientele.

While not directly related to partnerships, some participants shared accounts of how they engaged people with disability in their workplace as a paid staff member or part of a work-experience program. These decisions were reported to have been a positive experience for all involved, leading to enhanced social interactions and camaraderie, improved confidence for the worker with disability, and in some cases forming a pathway to paid employment. One participant recalls the impact that work-experience had on one person with disability: “He's actually moved on to working in a café now. We've brought...him out of his shell. We gave him a bit of structure that it took a while for him to accept”. Workplace flexibility was seen to be imperative, for example offering a worker a combination of on-site and work-from-home conditions or collaborating with a case worker to develop individualised communication assistive technology for a person completing work experience. While affirming the importance of flexible working conditions, another participant found that their employee relished the social aspect of in-office work: “... because he likes the social aspect as well, so he'll drive here usually on a Thursday. And do an 8-hour shift on the Thursday.” Given the importance of lived experience to the design and delivery of inclusive services, these insights may guide the growth and support of an expert lived-experience workforce within the sport and recreation sector.

Conclusion

Partnerships between TAD organisations and sports and recreation providers are unique, dynamic and offer benefits to all stakeholders. This research illuminates factors that support improved collaboration, which may help shape organisational practice guidelines for similar partnerships in the future. It is important for supporting organisations like the TAD Australia Network to realise there are many ways to target support and that flexibility is valued. During the interviews, participants highlighted adjacent areas of practice that may benefit from partnership input, such as the employment of people with disability in their services. They also emphasised a dire need for additional funding, particularly to staff additional classes and activities.



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