Parents’ Experiences and Decisions on Inclusive Sport Participation of Their Children With Intellectual Disabilities

Eva Hiu-Lun Tsai and Lena Fung
Hong Kong Baptist University

This study examined the experiences of parents of persons with intellectual disabilities (ID) as they sought inclusive sport participation for their children. To understand their experiences, in-depth interviews were conducted with 49 parents. Qualitative data analysis was conducted to identify common themes from the responses. The analysis showed that most parents sought inclusive sport involvement for their children but they soon gave up their effort due to rejection by staff and other participants. Underlying these attitudinal problems were a lack of quality contact between people with and without ID and a lack of understanding of people with ID. Parents’ lack of sense of entitlement, low sport values, and lack of participation information and opportunities also contributed to their giving up of inclusive sport. Factors leading to successful inclusion included staff inclusion attitudes and abilities and the social skills of individuals with ID.

For individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID), being recognized, making friends, and participating in activities with friends are most enjoyable and valuable life experiences (Aitchison, 2003; Cummins & Lau, 2003). While providing individual satisfaction, these social interactions also facilitate individuals with ID to practice their social skills, learn the norms of the peer group, and maintain friendships and thus enhance their social competence (Goldstein, Kaczmarek, & English, 2002; Special Olympics Global Collaborating Center, 2006). Success in inclusive sport and recreation seems to be culture specific and relies on the stage of development of an inclusion ethic and its governmental and institutional supports. In Hong Kong, although athletes have excellent achievement in regular Special Olympics events (Special Olympics Hong Kong, 2007), the development of inclusive sports has been very slow. The low level of inclusive sport and recreation opportunities in Hong Kong is out of pace with its advanced economic development. This study explored the factors that influenced inclusive sport participation of individuals with ID in Hong Kong through the perspectives of their parents and other relevant information.

Eva Tsai and Lena Fung are with Hong Kong Baptist University Physical Education Department in Hong Kong.
Literature Review

Stage of Inclusion Development

Recent studies showed that in many countries, people with disabilities still participate in leisure on their own or with their parents, or with other people with disabilities most of the time (Aitchison, 2003; Emerson & McVilly, 2004). Although inclusion has been broadly accepted as a philosophy, the full acceptance of individuals with ID has not been achieved (Siperstein, Norins, Corbin, & Shriver, 2003). The provision of inclusive opportunities still have a low priority in community recreation and sport in many countries (Schleien, Stone, & Rider, 2005; Storey, 2004) and is virtually nonexistent in some countries such as Hong Kong and mainland China. The current social and cultural environments in Hong Kong do not seem to foster inclusion. Even in education settings, Hong Kong has not cultivated favorable learning environments for including students with ID. An important constraint is that teachers generally lack professional training in special education. The lack of inclusion ethics in schools can also be attributed to the intense competition for academic achievement in mainstream education. Consequently, students with ID are often not welcomed by mainstream students, parents, and teachers who fear that inclusion of students with special needs would retard the learning progress of other students and thus school performance (Wong, 2002). Sport and recreation settings, where people enjoy a common and intrinsic interest, might be an effective medium to bring together people with and without disabilities. At present, there is a lack of understanding of the factors that influence inclusive sport participation of people with ID in Hong Kong, however. This study examined the experiences of parents as they attempted to integrate their children with ID into nonsegregated sport in Hong Kong. For people with ID, their parents are usually the major directors of their leisure participation. The paper also investigates the social and structural conditions that cultivate successful inclusive sport participation and the factors that contribute to its failure with a view to proposing strategies for fostering inclusive sport at individual, organizational, and social levels. Contact theory (Allport, 1954) and the social ecological approach (Sallis & Owen, 1997; Spence & Lee, 2003) are used as the conceptual frameworks that guide the understanding of the multilevel influences on inclusive sport participation of individuals with ID.

Social Attitudes and Discrimination

In the past, people with disabilities were often seen as objects of ridicule or pity and as menaces in society (Wolfensberger, 1972). Although the prevalence of these reactions has decreased over the years, individual prejudice and institutional discrimination against individuals with disabilities persist, thus limiting the participation of people with disabilities in community activities. A number of studies have shown that negative social attitudes of people in the mainstream of societies toward individuals with disabilities were major obstacles for individuals with disabilities as they attempt to participate in community recreation programs (Bedini, 2000; Tsai & Fung, 2005). In Chinese societies, such as that of Hong Kong, individuals with disabilities are also likely to be disadvantaged by residual
culture-related attributions of the sources of disabilities. In these attributions, disabilities are perceived to be a consequence of or punishment for some serious wrong-doings or immoral activities committed by family members (Chan, 1992; Westbrook & Legge, 1993). Parents with such beliefs may feel disgraced and sometimes hide their children with disabilities to “save face” (Gow & Balla, 1994). Possibly this lingering set of cultural beliefs further deprives these individuals of opportunities to interact with people without disabilities in their community.

Among people with different types of disabilities, individuals with ID are particularly vulnerable to personal discrimination. Wong (2002) found that in Hong Kong, children with ID were more likely to be teased and maltreated by peers without disabilities than were children with other disabilities. In Hong Kong, community prejudice toward people with ID has been prevalent. Many attempts to set up centers and hostels in housing estates for individuals with mental illnesses and ID failed because of strong resistance from people living in the communities (Pearson & Yiu, 1993; Tse, 1994). In a study of adults’ attitudes toward people with ID in Hong Kong, 34% of the respondents thought that people with ID should live in hostels, 16% thought that centers for them should be away from residential areas, and 11% even believed that people with ID should refrain from public activity (Lau & Cheung, 1999). Prosegregation attitudes have also been prevalent in many other countries. A Special Olympics study that included ten countries found that the majority of surveyed adults believed that individuals with ID should be educated in special schools and work in separate settings apart from people without disabilities (Siperstein et al., 2003). Similar disapproving attitudes toward individuals with ID seem to pervade many aspects of life including sport and leisure (Siperstein, Norins, & Corbin, 2005).

**Reasons for Negative Attitudes**

People’s negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors toward individuals with ID may be partly attributed to their misunderstandings about individuals with ID (Pate, 1995; Siperstein et al., 2003). However, provision of factual information and knowledge about disabilities alone may not be sufficient for reducing the affective aspect of attitude although it is likely to improve understanding (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Pate, 1995). In his review of research studies that examined prejudice reduction, Pate concluded that the use of information in conjunction with providing contact between people with and without disabilities would be more effective in reducing prejudice toward people with disabilities. In Hong Kong, people with and without disabilities do not have adequate social contact opportunities. According to a survey conducted in 2000, only 36% of the primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong had known or contacted people with a disability (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000). Recently, a study on Hong Kong adults indicated that 94% of the respondents did not have any family members or friends with ID and 99% of the respondents had not heard of Unified Sports (Du, 2007). Not all contact between people with and without disabilities would automatically cultivate positive attitudes toward each other, however. As the contact theory posits, favorable interaction conditions are required if a community group is to improve its attitudes toward another group (Allport, 1954).
These conditions include mutual benefits, equal status rather than helping relationships, and frequent contacts characterized by cooperative efforts and personal interaction (Allport, 1954; Tripp, French, & Sherrill, 1995). Inadequate preparation for the contact, short interaction duration, and poor quality contact may have no or negative effects on the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of the contact (Hutzler, 2003; Pate, 1995; Smart, 2001). Several studies showed that attitudes of volunteers at Special Olympics did not change in a positive direction while their stereotypic negative attitudes toward people with ID were reinforced in the absence of favorable conditions (Burns, Storey, & Certo, 1999; Roper, 1990; Smart, 2001).

Apart from the problems associated with interpersonal contact and individual prejudice, institutional discrimination and other social and cultural factors may also have important impacts on the sport participation processes. The ecological approach provides a useful multilevel conceptual framework for understanding the influences of extra and intrapersonal factors on sport participation (Sallis & Owen, 1997; Spence & Lee, 2003) of marginalized groups. Most intrapersonal theories such as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1988) and the theory of interpersonal behavior (Triandis, 1977; Valois, Desharnais, & Godin, 1988) focus on intrapersonal aspects of the interaction such as psychological and cognitive factors and, at most, interpersonal factors. These theories are based on the assumption that environmental influences are mediated through individuals’ psychological processes. In contrast, ecological models argue that environmental factors also influence health behaviors directly. That is, intrapersonal, social, and cultural environments make unique contributions to the explanation of health behaviors (Sallis & Owen, 1997; Spence & Lee, 2003). Intrapersonal factors include individual attributes, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors whereas environmental factors include social, cultural, and natural and built environments. McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, and Glanz (1988) proposed five levels of influence on health behavior: intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes, institutional factors, community factors, and public policy. For people who have little control of social resources, such as people with ID, environmental factors, for example, unavailability of inclusive programs and absence of public policies regarding the provision of supportive services, may directly prohibit inclusive sport participation of people with ID.

At present, there is a lack of empirical research into the ways in which different levels of environmental and intrapersonal factors intermix to influence inclusive sport participation of individuals with ID in Hong Kong. The present study explored individual and social-environmental conditions that cultivated successful inclusive sport participation and the factors that contributed to the failure. Issues examined in the larger study included parents’ experiences in organizing sport and leisure participation for their children with ID in segregated and integrated settings, parents’ beliefs about the outcomes associated with their children’s participation in sports and leisure in segregated and integrated settings, and parents’ perceived constraints to supporting their children’s participation. This paper focuses on parents’ experiences and decisions in integrating their children in inclusive sport participation. We adopted grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and aimed at developing a substantive theory that explained par-
ents’ experiences and decisions regarding inclusive sport participation of their children with ID. We sought understanding from different sources (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), that is, from primary data obtained from interviews of the parents, from information obtained from sport program providers, and from the analysis of other reports and published materials. We adopted a constructivist paradigm that sought to understand the meanings of this world through interpreting them (Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, our interpretation of the parents’ experiences included not only the parents’ perspectives and viewpoints but also what we observed and learned from other sources (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). With this approach, we focused on assessing the utility rather than the validity of parents’ unique worldview and accepted the stories of participants at face value as their phenomenological realities (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993).

Method

Participants

Face to face semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 49 parents of persons with ID by the researchers and two trained research assistants. Of the study participants, 85% were women. Their ages ranged from 39 to 85 years (mean age = 53.2). The study participants were recruited from 11 organizations that provided services and recreation and sport programs for people with ID, sheltered workshops, and special schools. Methods used to recruit study participants included purposive sampling to seek out informative people, convenience sampling to recruit parents who were available for interview, and snowball sampling that asked interviewees to introduce potential participants whom they knew had certain special characteristics such as holding extremely withdrawn attitudes toward inclusion or those who kept persisting. Among the 50 children of the interviewed participants, 14 had mild ID, 15 had moderate ID, 13 had both mild ID and autism, 1 had autism, and 7 had Down syndrome. Their ages ranged from 12 to 50 (mean age = 22.3), and 36% were female. Of these 50 people, 23 were under the age of 20, 19 were between 21–30 years of age, 4 of them were 31–40 years old, and 4 were 41–50 years old.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in locations that suited the participants, for example, at special schools, sports hall where participants took their children to play basketball and cafes near their residence. Informed consent was arranged with participants before the interviews. Participants were assured of anonymity. The average length of the interviews was 45 min. They lasted for 20–90 min except one interview went for only 10 min. The wide range of interview durations mainly resulted from differences in the parents’ experiences and understandings of their children’s activities. The interviewers encouraged free and open responses and did not follow a rigid interview sequence. They followed the same interview guide that included a list of issues to be explored and general probes for following up on key topics and unclear comments (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in their entirety, except for two interviews for which
longhand notes were taken as the participants preferred not to have tape recording.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding, using the constant comparison process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify, combine, and organize themes and patterns emerging from the responses. Analytical memos were written to record the process of analysis, including reflections on the conceptual meanings of the codes, emerging categories, theories, and questions for subsequent interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Method of agreement was used in conjunction with method of difference as analytic tools (Ragin, 1987). Method of agreement helped to establish cases that had a common outcome (Ragin), for example, features that were not shared across cases were subject to possible elimination as potential causes. The method of difference was used for locating cases that were similar in many respects but differed in a few important ways (Ragin). Cases with similar causal features but different outcomes were located. For example, features that differentiated between those who persisted in inclusion but eventually failed and those that succeeded were identified. Cases with different causal features and outcomes were also analyzed. From these analyses, variations in behavioral and attitude patterns emerged (see Table 1). To establish the trustworthiness of the analyses, informant checks were conducted to establish the credibility of the interpretation of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Only five participants took part in informant check because most participants thought that the check was unnecessary and they said that they trusted our interpretation, whereas others were too busy. Peer auditing was also conducted to increase interpretation consistency. The first author analyzed all the interviews, the second author reanalyzed a randomly selected six interviews and a colleague with expertise in qualitative data analysis selected one interview for coding and analysis. Codes and interpretations from different analysts were compared and discussed. We also used other data sources to corroborate evidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, information obtained from program staff, research reports, and literature were checked to help confirm conclusions. From the analysis of these different sources of data, a theoretical representation of the factors that influence inclusive sport participation of individuals with ID was constructed (Figure 1). In the following discussions, fictitious names are used for the study participants.

Results

All the parents, except three of them, had sought community sport and recreation programs for their children. Most of the parents gave up quickly and a few persisted in face of failure. Only three parents experienced success in integrating their children in community programs. From the analysis of the interview data, nine common themes associated with the experiences of parents and their decisions regarding integrating their children with ID in sport and recreation programs emerged: (a) negative social attitudes such as discrimination from other participants and their parents, (b) community’s lack of understanding and knowledge about
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<th>Table 1  Emergent Themes Associated With Parents’ Sport Inclusion Experiences and Decisions</th>
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<td><strong>Emergent Themes (Parents’ Perception and Experience)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Parents’ Inclusion Experiences &amp; Decisions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Negative social attitude</strong></td>
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<td>Negative experiences: Gave up quickly</td>
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people with ID, (c) providers’ (instructor and staff) attitudes toward inclusion, (d) social contact opportunities and conditions, (e) behaviors of individuals with ID, (f) parents’ sense of entitlement and awareness of civil rights, (g) parents’ fear of harassment, (h) parents’ sport values, and (i) participation information and opportunities (see Table 1).
Negative Social Attitudes and Lack of Knowledge

Although most of the parents felt that people’s attitudes toward individuals with ID have improved over the years and the majority of people were not offensive, all the parents had experienced some kind of individual prejudice and discrimination from people in the community. These prejudices and discriminations came from strangers in the street, people with whom they had casual contact, other sport and recreation program participants, and participants’ parents. Some mothers also reported that their family members and friends were prejudiced against their children. Of these discriminatory behaviors, some were subtle and furtive whereas others were blatant. For example, Joy, the mother of a young woman who has Down syndrome, described the covert discrimination she experienced:

No, no one discriminated against my daughter. There are people on the street making more looks at her. I don’t think it matters; I have already accepted it because she is different from normal kids. It is reasonable for others to look more at her. When she was a baby, some people intentionally looked at me and then looked at her.

Many other parents, like Joy, had gone through this process of reconciliation during which they were conditioned to the subtle discrimination from people in the community, accommodated the lack of sensitivity of these people, and became resilient to this kind of offending behaviors. For example, Mary, who has a 34-year-old son with moderate ID said,

Other kids were not willing to play with him; people discriminated against my son in the past. Now that the number of people with ID has increased and I don’t feel very much discrimination around . . . but some people think that he has violent tendency, would beat people, but he has actually never beaten anybody.

This social prejudice could be attributed, in part, to a lack of knowledge and understanding of people with ID, for example, associating them with violence. Jenny, who has a son with moderate ID, provided an example of overt discrimination by hotel staff during a picnic trip:

The school went for a picnic at Gold Coast. We took the kids to the hotel lobby as a meeting place. A staff walked to us and said, “You can’t come here! This place does not welcome you.” In fact they [the kids] didn’t do anything, just gathered together there, waiting to go home. But things like this happened and we were so unhappy. From then on, I felt that not many people in our society accepted these kinds of kids.

Discrimination from one’s close friends and relatives seemed to have the greatest negative impact on the self-esteem of the parents. For example, Susan, mother of a teenage boy with mild ID and autism sighed:

They [relatives] are scared of having too much contact with these kids [her son], afraid that they are contagious and they would become stupid themselves. Some of my relatives have babies, but they would not let my son look at them. They were scared that my son would attack their babies.
That people avoided and prevented their children’s contact with young relatives who had ID demonstrated the strength of negative attitudes and lack of understanding of people with ID.

**Negative Social Attitudes and Contact Conditions**

All the parents and their children with ID had experienced some kind of discrimination from people without disabilities during casual social interaction. For example, Kate, who has an eleven year-old daughter with mild ID, described the nasty experience that led her to lose interest in integrating her daughter in community recreation:

Many years ago when my daughter was still young, she played with a girl in the park. Initially they had a very good time. Later on, the mother asked my daughter in which school she was studying. My daughter said ABC school [fictitious name of a special school]. Immediately the parent took her daughter and walked away.

Unprepared contact between people with and without ID might produce negative outcomes for both parties. Some people were fearful of people with ID because of the negative stereotypes arising from a lack of understanding of this minority group.

**Staff Attitudes and Lack of Knowledge**

**Gave up Quickly.** Christine and Jenny, who have sons with moderate ID, had been rejected by staff of community programs and gave up further attempts quickly. Christine recalled,

I have tried the community centers. Those staff thought my son was a monster. . . . I tried to make some enquiries at the Playground Association and other community organizations. . . . I told them about my son’s age and conditions, the staff immediately said to me, “This place does not suit your son. Our instructors don’t know how to manage your son.” Why should I give myself more disappointment, one of this kind of disappointment is enough for me, I don’t want more!

Similarly, Jenny vividly explained how she felt, “No (my son didn’t try any community activities any more), because it matters how other people look at us. . . . I think these other people don’t want to be with these types of kids, they think they have mental illnesses.” When program staff lacked knowledge and understanding of people with ID, rejection was inevitable. These negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors of program staff have negative impacts on the self-esteem of the parents and suppressed their enthusiasm to seek inclusive sport opportunities for their children.

**Persisted but Failed.** A few parents were very persistent in seeking community recreation and sports for their children but they eventually gave up. These parents had a strong belief in inclusion and wanted their children to be fit and healthy through active recreation. They tried hard to find active recreation in the commu-
nity for their children. Jo who has a son with mild autism and ID described how much effort she made for her son. She recalled,

I went to the Boy Scout Association to enroll him, I felt very difficult. The instructor scolded me and told me that other kids rejected him. For those YMCA summer courses, it was an utter failure for me . . . other kids and their parents could not accommodate him. Some parents complained to me that my son was a nuisance (he is an overly affectionate child and acts intimately when talking to people). Once, the instructor phoned me and complained that my son was unwelcome. Every year, I tried to apply for normal summer camp, but it was so tough. I have given it all up now.

With repeated failures, Jo turned to segregated programs. Jo’s experience was typical among parents with children who did not meet the behavioral expectation of the program staff and other participants. As people in our community generally lacked understanding about ID, an ability to behave in a culturally acceptable manner seemed to be an essential condition for gaining acceptance by staff and other participants.

Persisted and Succeeded. Three parents indicated that their children with ID had successful experiences in community sport and recreation activities. For example Kay’s daughter, who had moderate ID, started her dancing classes at the age of eleven with children without disabilities. Kay recalled, “It was nine years ago, at that time most kids were willing to accept her but some mothers were not. These people automatically disappeared, and the instructor didn’t mind that, so she keeps going with it.” Another woman, Mandy, was the mother of a girl with mild Down syndrome. Her daughter was a confident person with good social skills. She also had positive experiences in community programs. Mandy said,

Most children in Yan Oi Tong [a community organization] are able-bodied . . . they don’t have problems having activities together. At the beginning, these children were reluctant to accept her [daughter], but then they got used to her, and they got along okay. The instructors at Yan Oi Tong had no problem with my child. In fact the instructors would ask those kids without disabilities to let kids with disabilities to have priority in the activities.

The successful cases shared several common characteristics. First, the participants with disabilities tended to have good social skills and did not have behavioral “problems.” Second, both the parents and the people with ID persevered despite intolerance and rejection from their able-body counterparts. Importantly, the instructors of the recreation programs were supportive of the participation of people with disabilities.

Participation Information and Opportunities

Some individuals with ID participated in Special Olympics programs while they were attending special schools, but they dropped out after they left school because the parents were highly dependent on the school for providing information and activities for their children but this link was broken once their children left school.
Only two parents had heard of the Unified Sports program, but they did not know it in detail. Some parents only knew about elite sport opportunities and were unaware of Special Olympics and other programs. For example, Peter, father of a teenage boy said, “I have heard of Hong Kong SAM [Hong Kong Sports Association for the Mentally Handicapped], but he didn’t participate because the school would naturally recommend him if he has sport potential.” Peter thought that only those who played well could participate in organized sport. He was unaware of any mass participation opportunities. Individuals who studied in integrated schools, however, were less reliant on school provision because it was generally difficult for them to join school activities. As Nancy, who has a son with mild ID and autism complained, “The [integrated school] teachers don’t quite like him, so when my son participates in sport, those P.E. teachers don’t want to teach him.” A number of parents complained that the integrated schools were unable to cope with the special needs of their children because of lack of resources and trained staff. On a positive side, leaving school would have little impact on their sport participation as they did not rely on school.

**Fear of Harassment**

Almost all the parents at some stage wished that their children would be able to play with people without disabilities, because they believed that their children would acquire normal cultural behaviors and “be smarter,” although they also worried that their children “would be harassed by people without disabilities.” A few of them rejected inclusion for their children, however, as they had experiences of disability harassment of their children in their daily encounters. Their fear of harassment led them to protect their children by segregating them from community activities. For example, Paul, father of a 19 year-old woman with mild ID, said, “It’s better for her to stick to me. She’s stupid and dumb, I am afraid that she would get into great trouble if she goes outside. There are lots of traps in the society, very dangerous.” Another parent, Wendy who has a son with mild autism and ID expressed the same fear saying, “No, other people do not accept people with ID to participate in community activities together; they would give them an awkward gaze.”

**Sport Values and Lack of Sense of Entitlement**

Some parents did not believe that their children had an equal right to play sport like their able-body counterparts. Moreover, they did not think that sport has any benefits for their children. Paul and Wendy believed that their children’s work should not be distracted by sport participation:

> We have put too much resource on people with ID, just like using a dozen of people to plant three grains. . . . I have a different thinking now. When she goes out for a day’s activity, we need dozens of people to do the preparation and clean up work, like shooting a rocket into the sky, need thousands of workers. *Is it worth it?* I think there is too much support for people with ID and the effect is miniscule. (Paul)
And he is mentally retarded, he picks up relatively slowly and this would affect the progress of other kids participating in the program. Sport is not for people like us. . . . It’s useless; he would get nothing but trouble. I never do any sport but I am as fit as anyone. (Wendy)

Some people dropped out from sport after leaving special schools because their parents placed a very high priority on their work and a low value on sport. The parents were afraid that sport would distract their children’s concentration on work and thus affect their work performance. Susan who had a 27-year-old son with moderate ID spoke of her opinions:

School and workshop are two different worlds. Now, he doesn’t say he want to participate in any activities anymore. He knows that he can’t be as free as before. I teach him, “You need to work to earn money, to be able to go to work. Not every one can have a job.”

Another parent Ken, who also has a son with moderate ID working in a sheltered workshop, explained why he refused Special Olympics’ activities: “I refused the invitation of Special Olympics. If everyone in the workshop goes for training, how can the workshop operate? I don’t want people to ask how my son can participate in competitions, but their sons can’t. I don’t want unfair things to happen.” Ken believed that it was unjustifiable for people working in the workshop to participate in sport training. These incidences also reflected the tension of employment opportunities for people with ID, which intensified the difficulties of sport participation of adults with ID. Staff of Special Olympics Hong Kong also had the view that parents with adult children with disabilities generally placed a low value on sport for their children. Ho, the national director of Special Olympics Hong Kong, felt that some parents thought that their children had worked for five days a week and thus should take a rest in the weekend rather than playing sports (K.F. Ho, personal communication, August 14, 2006). Although people working in the sheltered workshop have a day off in the weekend, it was hard to find someone, including parents, to take them to the training venues (S.C. Mak, staff of Special Olympics Hong Kong, personal communication, June 1, 2006).

**Discussion**

The emergent themes reflected the current conditions and problems associated with inclusive sport and recreation development in Hong Kong. The themes can be categorized according to different levels or sources of behavioral influences proposed in the ecological framework (McLeroy et al., 1988; Sallis & Owen, 1997), which include the community level, institutional level, intrapersonal level, and physical attributes. An ecological model of substantive theory was constructed accordingly for explaining the inclusive sports experiences and decisions of the parents (Figure 1). In the model, the community level of influence included providers’ attitudes, social attitudes, and lack of understanding and knowledge about ID. These attitudes and knowledge of people in the community reflected the inclusion development of the community. The institutional level of influence comprised
participation information and opportunities and social contact opportunities and conditions. Social institutions such as sport and recreation organizations and schools have a responsibility to provide relevant participation information and opportunities and maintain favorable interaction environments for inclusive sport and recreation. The intrapersonal source of influence encompassed parents’ values toward sport participation, parents’ sense of entitlement, and parents’ fear of harassment. These individual values and fears, to a large extent, were internalized and directly influenced parents’ inclusive sport decisions. Lastly, physical attributes, such as social skills and behaviors of persons with ID are largely genetically determined although these are trainable to an extent. Cultural values, an invisible but powerful force, also play an important part in influencing parents’ attitudes and behaviors toward inclusive sport participation of their children. These environmental and intrapersonal sources of influence correspond to different levels of intervention potential for improving inclusive sport development in Hong Kong.

**Community Level**

The social attitudes of people in the community toward individuals with ID are largely negative. All the parents and their children with ID have experienced disability discrimination in their daily lives and have at some stages of sport and recreation participation experienced rejection from other participants and their parents. This consistent negative experience of parents indicates that prejudice is a pervasive social phenomenon rather than an occasional individual incident. It also reflects a systematic disability discrimination problem within the community. Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Bedini, 2000), negative social attitude is the most important barrier of inclusive sport and recreation development in Hong Kong.

The parents and their children faced a series of “human” barriers in their quests of inclusive sport and recreation participation. One barrier was presented by the registration staff who played the role of gatekeepers of the programs. Most parents were rejected at an early stage of inquiry. A second hurdle was to gain acceptance from instructors. Instructors’ attitudes toward accommodating individuals with specific needs and their abilities in handling inclusion resistance are critical determinants of successful inclusion. Some studies found that coaches’ and instructors’ perceived competence was positively related to their attitude toward integration (Conaster & Block, 2001; Rizzo, Bishop, & Tobar, 1997). At this early stage of inclusion development in Hong Kong, essential conditions of successful inclusive sport include the holding of a strong belief in equity for all kinds of participants by program staff and their confidence and persistence in upholding the equity principle. There is a lack of trained professionals with the ability and knowledge for promoting and running inclusive programs in Hong Kong, however (K.F. Ho, personal communication, August 14, 2006). In Hong Kong, the first university program that trains sport and recreation leaders, managers, and coaches to serve people with special needs started in 2005, and only full-time programs are available. Thus, people currently providing community sport programs and services generally lack professional training in serving people with ID. Their lack of specific knowledge and skills is likely to make them reluctant to
accommodate people with specific needs in their programs. Consequently, when participants with ID do not behave in a culturally normative manner, they are liable to be rejected by the staff and participants. Under these conditions, physical attributes of individuals with disabilities (e.g., having good social skills and culturally acceptable behaviors and “normal” physical appearance) become crucial determinants for gaining acceptance by other participants and program staff.

Prejudice and discrimination continue to pervade most domains of life of people with ID in Hong Kong despite the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance in 1996. At the present stage of social and inclusion development in Hong Kong, discrimination legislation has little effect on improving sport services and provision for people with ID. Although the legislation has validated the rights of people with disabilities and advocates an integration philosophy, very few people with ID are able to enjoy inclusive sport and recreation.

**Institutional Level**

Barriers operating at an institutional level reflect the ineffectiveness of organizations in providing well-managed social contact opportunities and sport participation information. Our findings support the proposition of the ecological model that certain kinds of environmental factors (e.g., lack of participation opportunities and information) directly influence individuals’ behaviors such as inclusive sport decisions.

**Social Contact Opportunity and Condition.** Although increasing people’s knowledge about ID is likely to rectify the cognitive aspects of their attitudes, this understanding may be inadequate for improving the affective and behavioral aspects of attitudes, thus reducing prejudice (Pate, 1995). Morland (1963) has pointed out, “... although sound knowledge is necessary to combat false information, it is not sufficient to change attitudes. Facts do not speak for themselves; rather they are interpreted through the experience and biases of those hearing them” (p. 125). Researchers have proposed that the affective components of attitudes may be more effectively developed through direct social contact under favorable conditions (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Pate, 1995). In Hong Kong, however, very few opportunities present themselves for individuals with and without ID to recreate with each other or to train or compete together in sport regularly. Only few of the study participants had favorable inclusive experiences. Ho, the national director of Special Olympics Hong Kong, also felt that there were few opportunities for people with and without ID to socialize with each other (K.F. Ho, personal communication, August 14, 2006). Ho has pointed out two salient difficulties in developing inclusive sport in Hong Kong. First, people without disabilities did not quite understand the benefits of inclusive sport and therefore were not interested in playing and training together with people with ID and second, there was a lack of resources. In the absence of favorable social interaction environments and opportunities, people with and without ID are unable to interact in a meaningful manner and therefore are unable to develop mutual understanding and acceptance. The findings of the current study supported the propositions of the contact hypothesis that both the frequency and quality of the social contact are essential for improving mutual understanding and acceptance (Allport, 1954;
Tripp et al., 1995). Unprepared social contacts in which individuals with and without ID are inadequately equipped with relevant social skills and understanding could entrench negative stereotyping, stigmatizing, and discrimination. The negative attitude shifts might be attributed to the anxiety and stress that might be experienced when interacting with unfamiliar people who have been stereotyped (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Devine, 2004; Storey, 2004; Tripp et al., 1995).

**Participation Information and Opportunities.** The sport information and program support for people with ID who have left school are inadequate. Many of the parents were unaware of the sporting opportunities provided for their children. As most parents relied on their children’s schools to provide and coordinate sport activities for their children, the parents generally did not develop information seeking skills and social networks to assist the sport participation of their children. Consequently, when their children left school, the parents lost their major sport provider and facilitator and did not have the capacities to acquire alternatives. This provision gap reflects a lack of coordinated efforts in the promotion of inclusive sport.

**Intrapersonal Level**

Barriers at an intrapersonal level directly inhibit parents’ desires to seek inclusive sport for their children. Three kinds of intrapersonal barriers were identified, that is, parents’ fear of harassment, lack of sense of inclusion entitlement, and holding of a low value for sport. For most of the parents, unpleasant experiences of disability prejudice stimulated an enduring fear of harassment against their children. Consequently some of the parents over-protected their children and preferred social segregation of their children, such as the cases of Paul and Wendy. Fear of harassment appears to have strong negative impacts on parents’ inclusive sport decisions.

In contrast with the parents who were keen to integrate their children, parents who preferred segregation and those who quickly gave up seeking inclusion were unable to foresee the benefits of sport participation for their children and gave up their hopes for them. These parents also seemed to be unaware of their children’s right to recreate with people without disabilities. For example, Wendy and Ken’s feelings that their children’s participation in community and Special Olympics activities would affect the progress of other participants or would affect work production, indicated their lack of sense of entitlement for their children to participate in inclusive sport or sport in general. Ken declined Special Olympics activities for his children also to maintain social harmony in the sheltered workshop. In collectivistic cultures, such as that of Hong Kong, people tend to emphasize the needs and goals of the in-group rather than of the individual (Bond, 1991; Cheung et al., 1996). They generally seek to maintain social harmony among the members of the in-group and are prepared to sacrifice personal interests for collective interests (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Another aspect of Chinese culture, the strong work ethic, in which leisure is often considered as an unimportant part of life (Stevenson & Lee, 1996; Sullivan, 2005), may also has a negative impact on sport participation. Possibly, a lack of job opportunities for individuals with ID has intensified the tension between work and
Therefore, unless parents value sport highly and make a considerable effort to seek out alternative opportunities for their children, people with disabilities are likely to discontinue their sport activities after they leave school.

Although most parents wished their children to become part of the community, they tended to withdraw when they were rejected by other participants or staff. Parents’ lack of persistence in seeking inclusive sport may be attributed to their lack of awareness of program access rights of their children as none of them had lodged complaints to the organizations in question or to the Equal Opportunities Commission. The Equal Opportunities Commission complaint conciliations reports show no record of complaints for harassment or discrimination related to community sport and recreation program participation during the six-year reporting period (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2000–2005). A basic requirement of inclusive sport development, however, is that people in the community thoroughly understand the principle of equity and develop a sense of social responsibility and disability sensitivity.

**Implications**

Systematic disability discrimination and pervasive ignorance among people in the community reflect the existence of a community problem in Hong Kong. Interventions that target the change of social attitudes may effectively improve the inclusion opportunities for individuals with ID. There is a need to prepare individuals with and without disabilities and program providers with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills for inclusion. These preparations require coordinated efforts and investment of additional resources by the government into relevant sport organizations (e.g., the Hong Kong Special Olympics and community sport providers) and education institutions. As Special Olympics has the experience and knowledge in sport development and provision for people with ID, it plays an important role in the growth of inclusive sport in Hong Kong. Development of long-term partnerships between the organizations is also essential for a sustainable development of inclusive sport, for example between Special Olympics and community sports organizations, and between special schools and mainstream schools. Other public organizations also have responsibilities in inclusive education including the Education Department and the Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education. Given the general lack of disability knowledge of sport and recreation staff, there is an urgent need to provide in-service professional training for them. Tertiary education institution may consider providing relevant part-time, diploma, and certificate courses and regular workshops. It would be desirable to start disability education early in elementary schools so that children with ID can be more effectively included in sport and other settings at an early age. Students without disabilities need to learn how to interact with their peers with disabilities, while more social skill training and leisure education should be provided to students with ID. After leaving their schools, individuals with ID are likely to experience greater difficulties in sport participation. Special Olympics may consider increasing its efforts in outreach work for adults who have left school. Schools might also strengthen their networks among their graduates
through active alumni, newsletters, and coordination with sport organizations. To reduce the work-sport tension, Special Olympics could consider negotiating with employers of people with disabilities and the parents to coordinate suitable activity schedules to facilitate sport participation. As the employers need to inject additional resources if they are to release their employees to participate in sport training and events, the government might consider providing incentives and additional support to encourage employers to release their staff.

At present, public agencies in Hong Kong generally do not have relevant regulations, guidelines, policies, or philosophical statements in place regarding the inclusion of participants with special needs in their programs. The absence of these mechanisms and a weak sense of social accountability have hindered the development of inclusive sport and recreation. The government, in conjunction with appropriate community organizations, needs to develop policies and clear guidelines for inclusion. The Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission should delineate long-term policies and systematic approaches to help people understand the legal rights of people with disabilities and to help organizations to fulfill their moral and legal obligations. It is not so much the limitations of the individual, but a lack of an inclusive environment and low social acceptance that hinder persons with disabilities in their quest for inclusion (Devine, 2004). Most of the factors that influence parents’ inclusive sport experiences and decisions are not under their control because of their minority status and lack of necessary resources. Intervention at community and institution levels may effectively improve the opportunities and quality of inclusive sport and recreation.

**Limitation of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research**

Our understanding of the factors that influence inclusive sport participation came mainly from the parents and from staff that served individuals with ID. Although conclusions are drawn about people with ID, we have not interviewed them to obtain understandings of their perspectives and feelings. As well, we have not interviewed participants without disabilities and staff who worked in community sport and recreation settings. Perspectives from these sources are important in providing more elaborate understandings of the achievements, failings, constraints, and values operating within the inclusive sport phenomenon in Hong Kong and thus should be included in future studies. As well, while we had hoped for greater parent ownership of the study, we managed to solicit only a few study participants to check our interpretations of information. Action research that involves individuals with ID and their parents lends itself to the exploration and testing of strategies for overcoming the complicated attitudinal, political, and logistical barriers to inclusive sport (Burns, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). It is also timely to conduct a comprehensive population survey to increase our understanding of the disability awareness and sensitivity of people in Hong Kong and their cognitive and affective attitudes toward those with special needs. Findings from the study will provide bench marks for evaluation of progress in inclusive sport and recreation.
In conclusion, the present findings demonstrate the utility of the ecological model and contact theory for understanding the impediments to inclusive sport participation for people with ID. Although the proposed model may need further development and testing, it provides some insights into important factors that contribute to the success and failure of sport inclusion in Hong Kong. In particular, the model identifies a hierarchy of sources of influence and thus highlights different levels of interventions for developing inclusive sport in countries that are at an early stage of inclusion development.

References


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