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REVIEW

The leisure experiences of university students with physical disabilities in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Students with physical disabilities should have equal access to leisure activities as their peers without disabilities. The aim of this study was to explore the factors that influence the participation of university students with physical disabilities in leisure activities. This qualitative study, guided by the social model of disability, reported on findings from two focus groups: one with university staff members and one with students with physical disabilities. The results revealed that students with physical disabilities engaged in some leisure activities although they encountered environmental barriers that impeded participation. Staff members were conscious of the difficulties in creating a barrier-free environment for the participation of these students and were working on initiatives that would support the inclusion of students with disabilities in leisure activities on campus.

RÉSUMÉ

Les étudiants atteints de handicaps physiques devraient disposer d'un accès à des activités de loisirs égal à celui de leurs pairs sans handicap. L'objectif de cette étude consistait à explorer les facteurs qui influencent la participation des étudiants universitaires atteints de handicaps dans les activités de loisirs. Cette étude qualitative, guidée par le modèle social du handicap, élabore à partir des résultats de deux groupes de discussion: l'un avec des membres du personnel universitaire et l'autre avec des étudiants atteints de handicaps physiques. Les résultats révèlent que les étudiants atteints de handicaps physiques ont participé àcertaines activités de loisirs même s'ils ont rencontré des barrières environnementales affectant leur participation. Les membres du personnel sont conscients des difficultés de créer un environnement sans barrière relativement à la participation de ces étudiants et travaillent sur des initiatives favorisant l'inclusion des étudiants atteints de handicaps aux activités de loisirs sur le campus.

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Introduction

While research has been undertaken to explore the journey of students with disabilities at Irish universities from their commencement to the completion of their course and to their entry in the labour market (Treanor, Doyle, & Reilly, 2013), on their social inclusion in education (Van Aswegen & Disability Federation of Ireland, 2013), and on the supports for their professional placements (Nolan, Gleeson, Treanor, & Madigan, 2014), the experiences in leisure activities of such students have not been explored. As well as little being known about the leisure activities of university students with physical disabilities, very little is known about the perception of staff regarding the support needed for these students to participate in on-campus leisure activities. Research has articulated the myriad of barriers that students encounter (Nichols & Quaye, 2009; Ntombela, 2013). Having inclusive infrastructure as well as inclusive environment would facilitate and encourage students' participation in leisure activities.

The primary legislative drivers for the promotion of inclusion and equality in Irish universities are the Equal Status Act 2000–2012 and the Disability Act 2005 (Equality, 2014; National University of Galway, 2015; University College Dublin, 2016). Despite the existence of this legislation, students with disabilities still encounter discrimination. For instance, a case about a third-level student with a visual disability suffering from discrimination was brought to the Equality Tribunal under the Equal Status Act 2000–2011 on disability grounds. In this case, Coogan (2012) declared that reasonable accommodations, such as allowing the use of a voice recorder in the classroom, were not provided to this student who suffered mental health difficulties. As a result, this case is a reminder that legislation needs to be reinforced in universities so students with disabilities have positive educational experiences without having to resort to the courts. This example demonstrates that there is a link between the inclusion of students with disabilities and the provision of reasonable accommodations. As Lord and Brown (2011) stated, social actors have the duty of providing reasonable accommodations and adjusting policies that impede the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities. This paper seeks to examine the barriers and facilitators that impede the participation and the inclusion of students with physical disabilities in their leisure activities in one Irish university and to explore the knowledge of university staff members toward these students in their on-campus leisure activities.

Background to the study

Leisure experiences and barriers of students

The pursuit of leisure activities are an inherent part of students' academic lives. Universities offer panoply of intellectual and physical activities for

students to enjoy. According to Stumbo, Wang and Pegg (2011), leisure provides psychological, physical and social benefits. Despite the benefits that leisure activities bring to students, they may encounter barriers that impede their participation. This literature review will briefly explore the benefits of leisure and the barriers students encounter.

Previous research has shown that leisure provides psychological benefits. During the academic year, many students concentrate on their studies to achieve their goals. But in order to accomplish their assignments, students may need interludes so that they can refresh themselves. According to Blanco and Barnett (2014), leisure activities help students to focus on their academic work by helping them to handle stress. Furthermore, leisure activities reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve quality of life and improve opportunities to take control of one's life (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Pegg & Patterson, 2016). Students therefore obtain psychological benefits when they participate in leisure activities.

Equally important are the physical benefits leisure activities provide. Research has documented the positive impact that physical activities have on students' health (Boyce & Fleming-Castaldy, 2012; Doerksen, Elavsky, Rebar, & Conroy, 2014; Stumbo et al., 2011). A large amount of literature demonstrates how engaging in physical activities supports well-being. According to Stumbo et al. (2011), being physically active reduces health problems such as having high blood pressure, helps to make healthier choices and improves general well-being. Moradian and Moradian (2013) conducted a study that examined the role of sports among university students. The research participants of their study stated that athletic activities strengthened their body and mental capacity. This study supports the view that being physically active improves general well-being (Stumbo et al., 2011). Another study conducted among undergraduate students who took recreational swims indicated that swimming reduces stress and increases self-efficiency (Eubank & DeVita, 2015). While swimming reduces stress, physical activities help to reduce health problems. Furthermore, engaging in sports enables students to experience a sense of community from the group networks that they form (Boyce & Fleming-Castaldy, 2012; Warner & Dixon, 2013). Experiencing a sense of community can be one motivation students have for engaging in physical activities.

Understanding what motivates students to engage in physical activities enables administrators to determine suitable programs and improve facilities to increase their participation (Young, Lee, & Sturts, 2015). Despite finding ways to increase the participation of students in physical activities, the literature notes that many students are reluctant to participate in them. Many reasons are suggested for this including: a lack of appropriate facilities (Moradian & Moradian, 2013), a sedentary lifestyle (Monica, 2014), a lack of knowledge about campus recreational sports programs and time constraints. Other factors such as discontent with program offerings and facilities,

few peers with whom to participate, a perceived lack of personal ability, the type of campus (MacRae, 2011) and socio-economic and body-based barriers which students with disabilities encounter also hinder their participation in sports (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003; Moola, 2015).

Finally, there are social benefits attached to leisure activities. These include visiting friends and relatives (Moradian & Moradian, 2013), spending time on social networks (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009) and volunteering (Greenbank, 2015). According to Barnett (2011), these activities provide rewarding interactions and novel and challenging experiences. Having rewarding interactions in leisure activities is part of the social leisure satisfaction domains that Liu and Yu (2015) have noted. These include the psychological, educational, social, relaxation, physiological and aesthetic domains. The rewards that accrue from leisure activities are acknowledged by students who have disabilities as well as those who don't (Gilson & Dymond, 2012; Jessup, Cornell, & Bundy, 2010). Conceptualizing the meaning-making of leisure experiences is important as it can give students an identity, freedom and power (Lundberg, Taniguchi, McCormick, & Tibbs, 2011; Porter, Iwasaki, & Shank, 2010). In the case of eight young Australian adults in their late teens and early 20s who have a visual impairment, participants of the study of Jessup et al. (2010), they noted that participating in leisure activities enhanced their identity and increased their sense of freedom and power as they developed their confidence. It also enabled them to overcome their fear, keep their physical and mental health and it enabled them to resist prejudice, presumptions and stigma (Jessup et al., 2010). Stigma is still encountered by students with disabilities in leisure activities and it remains a barrier to inclusion (Devine, 2016) Devine notes that stigma has the effect of decreasing the possibility of being accepted and included by students' non-disabled peers (Devine, 2013).

University staff's knowledge of students with disabilities

Research has been conducted on the attitudes and perceptions of university staff toward students with disabilities (Knott & Taylor, 2014; Mayat & Amosun, 2011; Murray, Lombardi, & Wren, 2011), on staff's knowledge of legal requirements (Dalun Zhang et al., 2010) and on disability issues (Bruder & Mogro-Wilson, 2016). Disability issues such as the provision of reasonable accommodations has been explored by researchers (Reinschmiedt, Sprong, Dallas, Buono, & Upton, 2013; Zhang et al., 2010), but knowledge on the needs of students with disabilities in leisure activities has not been explored and is needed in order to create a more inclusive environment. The development and maintaining of an inclusive environment in a university is a complex undertaking. Huger (2011) declared that the social integration of students with disabilities is the responsibility of all members of the university

community. To understand from a theoretical standpoint how the social integration of students with disabilities may be facilitated, the social and medical model of disability will be examined.

Conceptual frameworks: social and medical model

Conceptualizing disability is complex because there are multiple definitions of disability and ways of viewing disability. According to the World Health Organisation (2016), disability covers impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. When people with disabilities participate in life activities, they may experience social oppression because of the restrictions they encounter. For instance, a person using a wheelchair may not have the same opportunity of entering a museum as a person not using a wheelchair because it is not wheelchair accessible. This example demonstrates that the museum should adapt its building to enable the person using the wheelchair to access it. This represents the social model of disability where society is responsible for altering its buildings and enabling all people with disabilities to have equal access as people without disabilities. According to Shakespeare (2013), the social model describes disability as oppression. The social model of disability first appeared in Britain in 1971. The initiator of this model was the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). The UPIAS was made of activists with disabilities. The UPIAS describes disability as being socially constructed:

'In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society' (UPIAS, 1976, p. 3).

The isolation and exclusion of people with physical impairments are barriers which prevent them from full participation in society. For this British movement, the social model was crucial as it identified a political strategy namely the barrier removal (Shakespeare, 2006). According to the social model, society needs to abolish barriers (environmental and attitudinal), establish anti-discrimination laws by enabling people with disabilities to have equal access in education, in employment and in leisure activities, promote independent living which reduces the amount of people with disabilities living in restricted environments and help to resolve social oppression (Shakespeare, 2013). The social model approach emphasizes the shift from individuals and their impairment to the actions of society in including or excluding them (Shakespeare, 2006), it highlights the lack of opportunity for people with disabilities and drives legislation to protect the rights of people with disabilities (Martin, 2013). For instance, the Irish Equal Status Act 2000–2012 stipulates the prohibition of discriminating the access of students to any facility (Irish Status Book, 2016). Although the social model approach

has many advantages, it has its shortcomings. Firstly, making a barrier-free environment may be hard to achieve. For instance, an architect may develop plans and omit to consider all physical disabilities. Secondly, the social model tends to neglect the role of the person's impairment (Shakespeare, 2006). A person's impairment is an inescapable aspect of an individual's existence and experience (Couser, 2013, p. 456).

Considering that impairment is an inherent part of the individual's life, the medical model of disability cannot be ignored as a person with a disability does not forget his/her condition. According to the medical model, disability is an attribute of the human body needing medical intervention (Siebers, 2013). The medical model advanced thinking in its time in that it aimed to promote individuals' well-being but also had the effect of pathologizing the difference (Linton, 1998). Medical intervention was viewed as being needed for a person with a disability but the question of the person being seen as different was not addressed in the medical model. The medical model therefore discounts sociological and psychological aspects (Brisenden, 1986) and neglects the notion of social identity (Falvo, 2014).

The social identity of people with disabilities is crucial as they are people with a health condition that is separated from their personality. The social model of disability does not focus on the disability of the person, but on the role of society as to how people with disabilities can experience inclusion in every life's domains and provide a space where society can reflect upon how it enables or disables people.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of students with physical disabilities in leisure activities in one Irish university through the lens of the social model of disability. The social model of disability was used to guide this study as students with physical disabilities are situated in an academic community which is an inherent part of society.

The aim of the study was to answer the following question: What are the factors that influence the participation of students with physical disabilities in leisure activities in an Irish university? The objectives were threefold:

(1) To identify any barrier that students with physical disabilities encountered preventing them from participating in on-campus leisure activities.
(2) To identify the facilitating factors helping them to participate in on-campus leisure activities.
(3) To explore the awareness of the university staff members about students with physical disabilities in their leisure activities.

In order to explore the factors which influenced the participation of students with physical disabilities in leisure activities, a qualitative methodology was used. The study aimed to acquire a thorough understanding of the participants' thoughts on leisure experiences. O'Day and Killeen (2002) noted the importance of using qualitative methods to capture the complexities of people with disabilities. Since the first author of the paper, who has a physical disability, experienced the benefits of participating in leisure activities in an Irish university, she wanted to learn about the experiences of students with physical disabilities in leisure activities. Moreover, since research had been carried out in the Republic of Ireland about people with an intellectual disability in academia (O'Connor, Kubiak, Espiner, & O'Brien, 2012; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2010), it was important to investigate people with disabilities other than intellectual disability in the same setting of order to bring new meanings and perceptions and add new data to the existing literature on Irish people with disabilities.

Design

This descriptive qualitative study consisted of two focus groups. Gathering groups that share comparable demographic characteristics (Morgan, 1998) is essential as participants will feel at ease with others who they see like themselves (Koppelman & Bourjolly, 2001). Thus, one focus group included students with disabilities and the other included university staff members. For the focus groups, two related semi-structured interview schedules were constructed to act as catalysts for the discussions. The literature guided the writing of the questions for the interviews of both focus groups. For instance, one of the questions for the staff members was taken from a participant of the study of Lord and Patterson (2008) who mentioned needing a volunteer companion in her physical leisure activities. As for the questions concerning students with physical disabilities, Stephens, Neil and Smith (2012) mentioned that few studies investigated the experiences and barriers of people with disabilities in their participation in leisure activities; this led to the inclusion of a question on this topic in the interview guide.

Sampling

The research was first approved by the ethics committee of the Irish university where the participants were recruited. Purposive sampling was used to recruit staff members and students with physical disabilities. The recruitment of students was done through the database of the Disability Services who first approved the research according to their research guidelines. The researcher met the Disability Officer to determine the students appropriate for the study. Choosing students with different physical disabilities may influence the quality

of the focus groups because the variety of disabilities represents individual differences (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Students were chosen according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. The first inclusion criterion was to have students with physical disabilities, with significant ongoing illness and with neurological conditions (Disability Access Route to Education, 2016). The second criterion was to have students who have had their disability for at least 5 years as they have some experience of living with a disability (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The third criterion was to have undergraduate and postgraduate students. For the first exclusion criteria, first-year undergraduate and postgraduate students were omitted because they may have little experience in leisure activities since starting university. In total, 113 students with physical disabilities, 10 students with ongoing illnesses and 8 students with neurological conditions received an email to participate in the study. The students wishing to participate contacted the researcher. In total, 4 students participated in the focus group discussion (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics of students).

Staff members were recruited from various departments of the university. The inclusion criteria were to have staff from different departments. According to Anfara and Mertz (2006), recruiting the ideal participants is important as their personal features affect what is said. The Development Manager of the Sports Centre was contacted and agreed to send an email to the 23 employees of the Sports Centre. Other departments from the university also received an email. Altogether, five staff members participated in the focus group discussion (see Table 2 for demographic characteristics of staff members).

The data collection process

The focus groups' discussions took place in an accessible classroom of the university where the participants were recruited. The students received a detailed sheet of the student counselling service in case psychological support

Table 1. Students with physical disabilities.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Course	Undergrad/Postgrad	Impairment
Justine	30	Female	Health and Economic Policy	Postgrad	Cerebral palsy
Peter	18	Male	Political Sciences and Economics	Undergrad	Muscular dystrophy
Sheila	56	Female	Social work	Undergrad	Physical disability
Mary	23	Female	Irish studies	Undergrad	Dysplasia

Table 2. Faculty members.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Title	Months/years working at the university
Gary	41	Male	Officer	8 years
John	31	Male	Manager	8 years
Una	34	Female	Officer	7 years
Aoife	32	Female	Employee	6 months
Teresa	30	Female	Manager	4 months

was needed due to discomfort (Lavigne, 2016). All participants were fully informed regarding the nature of the study and signed a consent form before the focus group discussion started. A DM-650 digital voice recorder was used to record the discussions. The discussions were audiotaped as it would have been more difficult to recruit participants for a videotaped focus group discussion because of privacy issues. During the focus group discussions, the researcher ensured that contextual, perceptual, demographic and theoretical information (Dale Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) was gathered from the participants to answer the research question. The discussion with staff members lasted 68 min and 90 min with the students. An experienced moderator conducted the focus group discussions and the first author acted as the assistant moderator taking notes. A debriefing period occurred with the participants afterwards. The recorded data was subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis

A general inductive approach, according to the steps of Burnard (1991), was used to analyse the qualitative data. This involves sequential reading of the transcripts, identification of codes and categories and subsequent grouping of these.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, member checking and peer reviewing was used. For member checking, the researcher emailed one participant from each focus group to check the analysed data. One participant approved the data and the other did not give any feedback. Creswell and Miller (2000) stated that member checking was useful to establish credibility of the findings and the narrative description. While transcribing, the researcher wrote notes and comments on the focus groups and after the transcription was done, a fellow postgraduate student was asked to review and check the analysed data of the two focus groups. These steps were part of the audit trail demonstrating transparency of the research process and this supported the trustworthiness of the research. Also, to protect the participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used.

Findings

Two themes encapsulate the thoughts of students with physical disabilities and staff members: [1] Leisure experiences and barriers [2] On-campus support.

Leisure experiences and barriers

Students had positive leisure experiences when interacting with people. When Justine first answered what she liked most apart from studying, she answered smiling:

> Just relaxing really and just hanging out with friends, or meeting up for coffee or something like that. Leisure is all, like a reward as well, like it's that element where you can just do some work, but then you know, oh well, I'm going meeting a friend or, I'm going to the cinema, or you know, or to the pub or whatever like.

Leisure seemed to motivate her to work as she rewarded herself after academic work. Meeting people whether at a coffee shop or in a pub appeared to be the most important leisure as she mentioned the word 'friends' twice. Sheila, who was the oldest student, mentioned: 'When I'm not studying, I enjoy the theatre and meeting up with friends. I enjoy going to any good shows, anything even here on campus if there's time'. Sheila's passion was the theatre as she: 'was involved in youth theatre for 15 years'. Mary said: 'I like going to gigs and just generally having the craic (fun) and going out and meeting people'. She was not studying at the point she participated in the focus group discussion as she had taken a year out.

Volunteering was another leisure activity of students. Getting involved in societies on campus or in organizations outside of campus enabled students to increase their social interactions. Peter said: 'I'm involved with the Labour Party (an Irish political party) . . . we've a Labour group on campus and there's a Labour group nationally as well, so I'm involved in those two groups'. Mary volunteered in other activities. She mentioned: 'I'm active . . ., I do the youth activities, and my experience with them has been overwhelmingly positive. They're just a great organisation, and I'm in a society as well within college'. Sheila mentioned:

> I volunteer every second Saturday with the homeless and I work with a group of young women in the centre and that really recharges me because it makes me realise like, what I'm actually doing the social work degree for, cause sometimes I think, oh, what am I doing here you know. I was doing alright before I decided to do this degree.

Justine was the only one who did not volunteer. She stated: 'I keep meaning to volunteer but I never seem to find the time or the right sort of organisation that I feel I can'.

In sports, students had fewer opportunities to engage because of their disability. Peter, who has muscular dystrophy, preferred watching sports on television. He said: 'more obviously, watching than taking part. But you know, kind of anything really, any sport, once it's on. I'll have an interest, by the end of it be an expert'. Unlike engaging in sports, the television enabled him to watch any kind of sports. For Justine, who has cerebral palsy, swimming was an activity she enjoyed although she did not go swimming on a regular basis. She said:

> I can't really swim in lanes because you know, I have power in one hand and not in the other ... it's all, so many lane swimming times and very few like, just open swims. I have to go at this specific time, at this specific day. That was another reason why I got a bit lazy with the swimming.

The experiences in leisure activities were positive. Justine mentioned: 'for me, I'm very passionate in my coffees, so even just going out for a coffee and just enjoying that, cause with my PhD, (although) it's at a quiet point of time at the minute'. Leisure took a different meaning for Sheila as she mentioned:

> Last year like I had an operation on my shoulder and I got very stressed out, it was my first year in college and I was so hung up about study and catching up and everything I was nearly thinking of giving up. Then I said to myself, you've got to do something else other than study. So what I do now for leisure is, although it's kind of sad in a way, I look up what other events is on campus and I try and go to some ... there's some very good talks and chats that gives me a bit of a spark you know.

Justine stressed the importance of having leisure as she mentioned: 'I think that's really important for people with a disability as well, like particularly if you have a physical disability, because it can be quite isolated'. Peter agreed with Justine's statement:

> Yeah, no I agree with that, I mean, when I came to university last year, only one other person from my school that I knew came up with me to university. I think there was two other people as well just in Dublin in general if you get to know someone in college. I remember I went out to a house in Terenure (suburb of the city) I think it was. I didn't know where Terenure was at the time. But I'd only known the city centre, and that small area. So you get to know more of town as well. It does help you to kind of settle in when you're comfortable going out to different places.

Thus, the leisure experiences of each student differed but had similarities.

Although students had positive leisure experiences, they encountered barriers. Accessibility to buildings was one of the main aspects they considered because of their reduced mobility. Justine said: 'When things are scheduled in inaccessible places, I've come across it once or twice where they've knowingly gone into a room that is inaccessible. It is a little bit frustrating'. Peter encountered a barrier when accessing the theatre:

> The 'Irish Theatre' (pseudonym used) (which is on the campus of the university) has a, kind of a wonderfully Irish solution for an Irish problem, because there's a lift, and they have a security key so everyone's not using it. There's one key in the entire college. There's one key and it's kind of like 'The Hunt for Red October'. I was there once and I got up and someone had the key, and in the time I got up, and the time I wanted to leave, the key went. I don't know if it went on strike or it just went missing.

A place may be accessible but when problems arise, it becomes questionable to what extent the university is working on eliminating barriers for students so they can participate without having any complications. Peter also mentioned:

> There are difficulties, I mean, if you look at like the 'Remembrance building' (pseudonym used), which is, you can get into, but then to go up to. Yeah, yeah, it's a lovely building, but you can get in ok, but the society room for the 'history' (pseudonym used) is upstairs, so a lot of the things go on in the society room, so it's just little difficulties like that.

Universities have regulations which may interfere with a barrier-free participation in on-campus activities. Peter understood that old historical buildings are not necessarily refurbished because of the laws keeping certain buildings intact or when they can be refurbished; there are planning regulations to consider. Then making an old building accessible becomes complex. However, it could be argued that a theatre as with most places of entertainment should be easily accessible. Despite encountering barriers, the students still managed to participate in leisure activities.

On-campus support

Students with physical disabilities may need accommodations from the staff members to enable them to fully participate in the university's leisure activities. Gary mentioned that: 'needs assessment is done with students with disabilities and sometimes they are asked about their leisure interests'. To receive academic support from the disability services, students must disclose their disability as it is a governmental regulation. We must remember that the first mandate of academic institutions is to impart knowledge so students graduate with a diploma. Gary noted:

> Solving students' potential problems of engaging in leisure pursuits was less pressing than solving academic issues. It's very hard to know how to identify a need in advance of something that's kind of take it or leave it approach of leisure activity.

Identifying their leisure needs can start by having statistics on the number of students participating in leisure activities. John who works at the gym said: 'I haven't got that figure here. I've only got the ones, the visual people that we see coming and going on a regular basis'. Knowing the number of students with physical disabilities who go to the gym and knowing their experience would inform the staff on what to improve, whether it be improving the accessibility of the building or equipment or adapting exercises classes according to the support needed by students. Despite not having statistical data on students with physical disabilities in leisure activities, the university worked on the inclusion of students with disabilities. Una mentioned: 'They are piloting a program with the college ... they go to the sports centre every week and societies volunteer to run an activity'. Although the university is working on behalf of its students with disabilities, there will always be complex issues which demand consideration as to whether there should be change. Having a perfect physical environment for students with physical disabilities may be

impossible. As Una said: 'Things should be designed like … as accessible as possible'. And Gary added:

> A lot of the physical barriers would have to do with the more subtle things people wouldn't generally think which would be things like the height of door handle, which way the door swings in, how wide the doors are, how heavy the doors are, the width of lift doors, whether the lifts are big enough to turn the wheelchair into or voices, with the voice activated buttons or buttons which they tell you which floor you're on. In theory something can be accessible, but practically, unusable.

Even when buildings are built according to the accessibility standards, students with physical disabilities may still express their difficulties in getting around the physical environment. There are laws that regulate the accessibility of buildings, sanitary facilities and other facilities (Government of Ireland, 2016). From a human rights' perspective, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of the United Nations stipulates the right to access buildings (article 9) and the right to participate in recreation, leisure and sport (article 30) (United Nations, 2016). Although Ireland signed the convention on 30 March 2007, it has not ratified it (Doyle & Flynn, 2013). Laws and regulations exist for the well-being of all, but the implementation of them depends on the authority which, in this case, is the university. However, ratifying the CRPD might pressure the university to take access more seriously.

In the meantime, while laws and regulations are implemented, students may need to ask for supports from the staff members of campus recreation and athletics department in order to enjoy fully their leisure activity. Gary said:

> Not everyone with a physical disability would be obvious and they might not have a reason to make it known … if they're more obliged to disclose in one area, that disclosure doesn't necessarily follow through to every other area in college.

Students should not need to disclose their disability to all departments in college, for instance, to the athletic and recreation departments, in order to receive leisure accommodations. Several leisure accommodations can be provided to students. For instance, providing a leisure companion to students with physical disabilities may help. When asked for his opinion on the provision of a leisure companion, Gary said:

> I imagine most people who practice sports, who go to the sports centre, go on their own because it is leisure time. It's not as if you would be used to go(ing) with somebody else. Then, it's pretty much pre-arranged and now it's not leisure time anymore. You know, you're potentially letting somebody down. They cannot show up or change their mind. So, you've got the additional issue, first of all disclosing that you have a disability, stating that you have a specific need which is the need of a companion and then hooking up with this volunteer who has to show up. I'm not saying it's a bad idea or it shouldn't happen but I can't see a way of how it can be organised without a lot of planning, forethought, a lot of structure and support in place.

Aoife stated:

> It'd be nice to have the support from like another person. Like you were saying earlier on with the groups and societies and clubs that if there was somebody designated within the club … not to take care but (to) make sure the needs of the person are met so they can be involved. So that would be the same situation if there was a buddy system. (So) you did want to come to the gym together.

Una agreed and said: 'it could be a good idea'. However, Theresa said: 'People with disabilities want to be treated the same as well. Like, why did they need a minder or somebody to come with them (they could) be a just friend'. For students with physical disabilities, having a leisure companion may be a solution for those needing more assistance in an activity but may be unnecessary for those who are independent. As for whether students should disclose their disability in order to obtain assistance in the area of leisure, Gary said:

> And the key issue: we have a specific disability like a physical disability is why would they want to disclose? My understanding is that a lot of students would only disclose if they felt there was a really good need to.

Universities should be inclusive in leisure activities by providing on-campus supports for students with disabilities. Solving academic issues may be more urgent than solving leisure pursuit problems. However, the results demonstrate a link between academic persistence and leisure. Leisure is a means to build student's resiliency as it was shown by Sheila who persevered in her studies as a result of on-campus leisure activities.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the leisure experiences and barriers of students with physical disabilities and the knowledge of university staff members about leisure activities of students with physical disabilities. Because few studies explored this subject, the researcher wanted to fill the gap and bring new data as the Irish literature did not explore this subject. The ultimate reason for conducting this study was to inform the academic community about the necessity for the inclusion of students with physical disabilities in on-campus leisure activities.

The main model used for this study was the social model of disability. This model emphasized how society (in this case the academic community) has a role to play in the inclusion of people with disabilities (students with disabilities). To capture the detailed meaning of the experiences of students with physical disabilities and the knowledge of university staff members of these students, focus groups were used. The most important result was the physical barrier students experienced in accessing buildings to participate in on-campus leisure activities. Students with physical disabilities encountered physical barriers in going in and going out of a building which resulted in experiencing negative feelings. These physical barriers were acknowledged

by one university staff member who noted the subtlety of some physical barriers in the university. One of the ways to overcome physical barriers and to facilitate participation in on-campus activities would be to provide a leisure companion in which this person helps the student in his/her activity. When asked about the provision of a leisure companion, the opinions of university staff members were divided between being a good and a bad idea. Despite having divided opinions on this, it remains nonetheless a facilitating factor which can be useful for the students wishing one. On the one hand, if the university provides a leisure companion, it fulfils its mandate according to the social model of disability. On the other hand, students with physical disabilities can be offended if they are offered a leisure companion. Not only students can be offended, but one university staff member compared a leisure companion to a minder as if students were still children. Thus, university staff members were aware of the physical barriers of students and the complexity of how to remove or ameliorate the impact of these barriers.

Most of the leisure activities of students with physical disabilities took place in a social context. Socializing enabled the students to feel part of the university community similarly to the students of the study of Warner and Dixon (2013) who experienced a sense of community through their common interests and through volunteering. The data from this study supported Warner and Dixon's finding in that students volunteered. As mentioned by several studies (Eubank & DeVita, 2015; Greenbank, 2015; Moradian & Moradian, 2013), students with disabilities have many of the same interests as students without disabilities. However, few of the students in this study engaged in physical activities. The students in this study seemed to have a sedentary lifestyle, for example, watching sports on television instead of engaging in physical activities. Stress was reduced by social activities instead of physical activities, an interesting finding in the light of the work of Monica (2014) who noted the importance of physical activity to fight stress and sedentary lifestyles. The sedentary lifestyle of students was due to multiple factors such as the disability and timing constraint. While the literature and the participants discussed how barriers include factors such as disability and the lack of time, what is apparent is that these barriers can become internalized. In the case of Justine, while she clearly reveals the systemic and physical barriers to participation, she concludes that she does not participate as a result of being lazy. Hence, this study reveals that students preferred passive leisure instead of active leisure for quite complex reasons.

In order for students to be active in participating in physical activities, Devine's (2013) study found that these activities needed to be appropriate to students with disabilities. Braga, Tracy and Taliaferro (2015) stated the importance for physical activity instructors to think about ways to provide appropriate adjustments and accommodations to students with disabilities without

altering the nature of specific sports so their experiences are positive. In the light of the findings of this study, it is important to reflect on how adjustments and accommodations can be provided to students with disabilities to encourage and enable them to engage in physical activities for the sake of their health and well-being as well as for the positive impact it might have on their sense of who they are.

Hence, students with and without disabilities and the university staff members should strive for a campus community that allows for independence and inclusion of students with disabilities as much as possible. Supporting students with disabilities to engage in their preferred on-campus leisure activities is both good for the students' sense of well-being and good for the university.

Limitations of the study

While illuminating an area of higher educational practice, this study has obvious limitations. Since the findings come only from two focus groups, the depth of understanding that the findings offer is limited. A second factor is that the university in which the study took place consisted primarily of old buildings which by their nature are likely to be difficult to render accessible. As a result of these two factors, the findings of the study may be difficult to generalize to other third-level educational establishments.

Recommendations

This study demonstrates how accessibility is crucial in order to enable students to participate in leisure activities without encountering physical barriers. The study recommends that in order to promote the participation of students with physical disabilities in on-campus leisure activities, one option is to offer them the opportunity of having a leisure companion. The role of the leisure companion would be not only to join with the student who has a disability in their chosen activity but also to act as a co-advocate along with the student with a disability to be agents of change within the university.

Further research would be beneficial in the area of leisure companions for students with physical disabilities to add to the existing literature on 'Personal Assistant Support for Students with Severe Physical Disabilities in Postsecondary Education' (Stumbo, Martin, & Hedrick, 2009). Further research is also needed on the facilitators that help students' participation in on-campus leisure activities. It would be beneficial to know what facilitators can do to help students with physical disabilities to participate more in sports. In addition, building on this study with a larger survey of students in order to understand why and how a person's disability prevents him or her in engaging

in sports and leisure pursuits would be beneficial for higher education institutions in developing their student supports. Lastly, it would be interesting to compare results of this small Irish study to other European research to examine if students with physical disabilities encounter environmental and personal barriers and in what circumstances they have positive leisure experiences.

Conclusion

This study has examined some of the issues that confront students who have a disability who study in third-level education. The study has examined students' lifestyles as well as the context in which they study and take part in leisure activities. This was a small exploratory study that opens up an aspect of university life that has hitherto been largely unexplored. The authors hope that it may serve as a catalyst to induce reflection and change in practice in both the university in which the study took place and more widely in third-level education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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