

# Connecting Through Summer Camp: Youth With Visual Impairments Find a Sense of Community

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The social meaning of a one-week residential summer sports camp to young people with visual impairments is described. The experiences of 13 youths (7 females and 6 males) with visual impairments (3 B1, 1 B2, and 9 B3) between 9 and 15 years of age were gathered using the phenomenological methods of focus groups, conversational interviews, and field notes. The thematic analysis revealed three themes: connected, reaching out, and resisting and acquiescing. Experiences of group membership and shared emotional connection to others with visual impairments surfaced in a supportive sport context although resistance to others' assumptions of ability was evident. The theory of psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chivas, 1986) provided the conceptual framework for interpreting the findings.

Disability physical activity, recreation, and sport contexts have been recognized as a landscape where persons with disabilities can resist social stigma related to physical performance and appearance and where transformative understanding of self-perceptions can occur (e.g., Blinde & McClung, 1997; Goodwin, Fitzpatrick, Thurmeier, & Hall, 2006; Goodwin & Staples, 2005; Taub, Blinde, & Greer, 1999). The impact of disability-only or segregated summer programs has captured the attention of numerous researchers in recent years. In a story by Dealwis (2005) on the reflections of five teenage girls with physical disabilities spent at camp 15 years later, the participants' memories of acceptance and self-awareness remained vivid, "You felt your camp friends knew you and understood you. There was an acceptance" (p. 29), "We learned a lot about ourselves" (p. 30).

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Goodwin and Staples (2005) reported the meaning of a summer camp to nine youth (14–19 years of age) with physical disabilities. The camp provided a reprieve from perceptions of disability isolation often felt in their home communities as they experienced increased self-reliance, independence, and new understandings of their physical potential reflected through the themes of not alone, independence, and a chance to discover. For the participants of this study, the segregated summer camp provided a therapeutic landscape as campers moved beyond their previously understood limits through personal agency, identifying with others, and finding a sense of community (Goodwin & Staples, 2005). Summer camps can be therapeutic landscapes when they possess physical, individual, and social qualities that are restorative (Gesler, 1992).

A further study reported on a 4-week summer outdoor low ropes adventure program for 40 children with autism, 5–12 years of age (Kress & Lavay, 2006). The program was an extended summer version of a university Perceptual Motor Development Program for children and provided hands-on practicum experiences for university students taking a credited adapted physical activity course. Although direct outcome measures were not taken, the perceived benefits of the camp as observed by the staff and students were the increased ability to focus on activities, promotion of the campers' self-esteem and problem solving, and learning how to work together to accomplish a task.

Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson, Autry, and Hanson (2001) reported the experiences of 15 participants on a two-day instructional disability sports camp for adults with physical disabilities, with recently acquired disabilities, or who were physically inactive. The participants relayed that they faced surveillance in their everyday interactions with able-bodied people that resulted in exclusion from social spaces. The stereotypes of vulnerability and dependence that were imposed by the objectification they sensed were confronted and resisted through the sense of entitlement to sport they felt as it promoted physical strength and provided the "motivation and self-confidence to engage in the world again" (p. 109).

Sense of community may be a lens through which the meaningfulness of segregated summer programs for youth with impairments becomes apparent. Sense of community became an influential construct in sociology when McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined it as "... a feeling that members have a belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). There are four dimensions in the sense of community model: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (Pretty, 1990). *Membership* refers to the feeling of belonging and emotional safety created by being a member of an integrated whole that has group boundaries (those inside and those outside) and emotional security. *Influence* refers to the bidirectional need for the group to exert influence on its members and also for members to feel they have some control and influence within the community as well as the influence of the community compared with other communities.

*Fulfillment of needs* refers to the common needs, goals, beliefs, and values that meet both the individual and collective needs. *Shared emotional connection* refers to the bonds that develop over time through positive interaction, shared experiences, and collective history of the group. It is not essential that the group members played a part in its history to share it but, rather, that they identify with it.

Although the literature related to segregated camp experiences for persons with learning and physical disabilities appears to be positive, little is known about the subjective summer camp experiences of youth with visual impairments. The debatable transferability of research findings from youth with physical and learning impairments suggests that a study specific to youth with visual impairments is warranted (Wendell, 1996).

Delays in motor development, tendencies toward physical inactivity, and deficits in the socialization of children with visual impairments highlight the need for landscapes that are affirming, restorative, and nurturing (Lieberman & McHugh, 2001; Lieberman, Stuart, Hand, & Robinson 2006). Irrespective of the etiology (i.e., congenital or adventitious vision loss) or the degree of vision, early-onset vision loss predictably causes developmental motor delays that can also be concomitant with delays in social development (Brambring, 2001, 2006; Celeste, 2006). Lack of visual input, low levels of physical activity, and decreased perceived competence has been demonstrated to place children at risk for being isolated from their peers (Gold, 2002; Shapiro, Moffett, Lieberman, & Dummer, 2005). Children and youth with visual impairments are reported to have fewer social interactions and friendships (Celeste, 2006, 2007; Hatlin, 2004; Kef, 2002; Leyser & Heinze, 2001). Kef (1997) found that boys, younger children, and children with less vision had fewer friends than did girls, older adolescents, and those with more vision. Moreover, what are termed friendships by children with visual impairments is often deemed to be more superficial relationships by their sighted peers (Nikolaraizi & De Reybekiel, 2001). Limited social relationships may be related to perceptions that children with visual impairments are passive learners (Sacks, Wolffe, & Tierney, 1998) and less independent than their sighted peers (Lewis & Iselin, 2002). Intervention programs that have been effective in enhancing the social acceptance have attributed success to status raising through athleticism, academic standing, developing self-help skills, self-advocacy, and assertiveness education (George & Duquette, 2006; Jindal-Snape, Kato, & Maekawa, 1998; Kim, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to describe the social meaning of a summer residential sport camp to children and youth with visual impairments. Psychological sense of community provided a heuristic framework for interpreting the findings of the study.

## Method

A qualitative approach that was descriptive, reflective, and interpretive in nature, and that used phenomenological methods, was undertaken to describe underlying structures (themes) in meanings of day-to-day experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997). The appeal of a phenomenological perspective in instructional settings rests with the pedagogical reflections that are elicited by the kind of listening, seeing, and responding necessary to understand the realities of young people with visual impairments in an instructional sport setting.

## Participants

An opportunistic sampling strategy was undertaken, meaning that all participants were drawn from the pool of attendees at the same residential summer sports camp

(Creswell, 2006). A letter of invitation was mailed to all 50 registered families. Thirteen families confirmed their interest by completing signed consent forms. The youth participants also signed assent forms before the commencement of data collection. Research ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta certifying that the study met national standards for research involving human participants.

Thirteen youth (1 African American, 1 Asian American, 10 Euro American, and 1 Mexican American) with visual impairments (7 females and 6 males) between 9 and 15 years of age, who attended regular school programs, volunteered to share their stories of camp. For programming purposes, the campers' vision was described in accordance with International Paralympic Committee (2008) sport standards.<sup>1</sup> Nine campers had B3 levels of vision, one had B2, and three had B1. There were no other comorbidities that influenced full participation in the study. Eight participants attended camp for the first time, two for the second, one for the fourth, one for the fifth, and two for the sixth time and found out about the camp from parents, vision teachers or other vision specialist, the internet, or another camper. Twelve of the campers were from within state with one family traveling from out of state. The range of former sport experience of the participants varied. Some campers were only involved in physical education through schools, while others were also involved in family recreation and physical activity pursuits.

## Camp Context

This study was conducted at a week-long residential sports camp for children and youth with visual impairments, aged 9–19. The camp was located in a university town in northwestern New York State. The families represented various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Each camper was called an “athlete” and received one-on-one support from a “coach.” The volunteer coaches were undergraduate students from various university programs (e.g., special education, physical education, adapted physical education) who were receiving adapted physical activity practicum course credit. The coaches participated in a two-day orientation before the athletes arrived that included information on visual impairment, guiding techniques, sport specific activities, and their roles and responsibilities. The coaches' duties included overall camp supervision, instructional support, and guiding assistance. The daily sports schedule included track and field, tandem cycling, judo, beep baseball, swimming, goalball and gymnastics. Program instruction was provided by sport specialists, including Paralympians for goalball, track and field, and judo. Athlete progress was tracked daily on a large board outside of the dining hall, in the daily camp newsletter, and through an open forum at breakfast and dinner. Evening activities provided choices of canoeing, horseback riding, kayaking, rollerblading, showdown, basketball, or fishing. The camp activities were rounded out with a talent show, social activities, and opening and closing ceremonies. One hour each day was set aside as a rest period, which provided a much needed midday break.

## Data Collection

The primary data source was semistructured focus group interviews with the athletes. The athletes also participated in one-on-one conversational interviews. The athletes were divided into four groups being sensitive to the age and sex: (a) group 1–4 girls (ages 12–14), 1 B1 and 3 B3 level of vision; (b) group 2–3 girls (all age

9), 1 B1 and 2 B2; (c) group 3–3 boys (ages 10–15), 1 B1, 1 B2, and 1 B3; and (d) group 4–3 boys (age 14–15), 3 B3. Small groupings provided ample opportunity for each participant to have input, enabling the athletes to elaborate on ideas generated by others (Vaughn, Shay Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) and minimized the athletes' time away from the camp. Open-ended questions were used to increase the breadth of responses (Fontana & Frey, 1994) and included such as experiential questions such as "What is it like to be with others who have visual impairments?" "What did you learn about yourself and others at camp?" "Tell me about a moment you will never forget." The existing literature on summer camp experiences helped form the development of the interview guide. Each group met with a focus group moderator (3rd and 4th coinvestigators) for 60–90 min during an afternoon rest period. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The full interview guide is available from the lead author.

Each group met with a focus group moderator for 60–90 min during an afternoon rest period, on either the third or fourth day of camp, giving time for camp experiences to have accumulated. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. To augment the focus group information (i.e., triangulate), 13 of the participants also agreed to participate in 10–30 min individual conversational interviews at various times throughout the camp to probe further into the questions addressed during the group interviews and gather additional stories that may not have been shared in the group setting (van Manen, 1997). The conversational interviews were transcribed verbatim and added to the focus group interview data.

Field notes were recorded after each interview and contained reflections about what was said that day, ideas for further probing, dynamics of the group, and preliminary thoughts about emerging shared experiences. The field notes also contained notations about the fatigue level of the athletes during the interview process and the impact of the tremendously warm weather on the athletes' response and camp experiences. These notes permitted the investigators to conceptually return to the setting during the data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

## Data Analysis

To identify common threads that extended throughout the data (i.e., focus group and conversational interviews), an inductive line-by-line thematic analysis was completed. Each member of the research team read the transcripts and notes numerous times (van Manen, 1997). Particularly revealing phrases were highlighted, coded, and assigned meaningful labels (e.g., shared experiences of visual impairment, over protectiveness, goal setting). The research team then discussed the interpretative codes, and variances in the labels were reviewed until an understanding of the relational knowledge of the data was reached and agreed upon. In the event there were discrepancies in a code or its placement in a theme, a discussion ensued until a common understanding was reached. The data analysis continued by constantly comparing labels and phrases to determine whether they should be classified separately or whether they belonged to an existing code (Wolcott, 2001). The essential or invariant themes, those that gave fundamental meaning to the experiences as identified by their pattern regularities, were then determined (van Manen, 1997). Particular attention was paid to potential differences in the stories by age, gender, or levels of vision. Although unique themes were not found, within themes sensitivities were noted and highlighted in the descriptions of the results.

## Trustworthiness

To capture the complexity of the athletes' experiences, bring plausibility to the essences assembled, and provide authenticity to the findings, the data were triangulated (Patton, 2001) as different data sources (e.g., athletes and classification of visual impairment) were reported. The authenticity of the findings, or the degree to which there is little reason to doubt the truth of the findings, was further supported as data saturation was reached (e.g., similar phrases were used, similar experiences were shared), whereby repetition of the information and confirmation of previously collected data across the 13 participants was observed during data analysis (i.e., focus group and conversational interviews; Meadows & Morse, 2001). Finally, the themes are supported by the words of the athletes.

The plausibility of the findings was enhanced through investigator triangulation (Creswell, 2006). The coauthors comprised the research team and possessed backgrounds in adapted physical activity as well as expertise and experience in qualitative interview techniques, data analysis, and knowledge of visual impairment. In addition, member checks were completed. The focus group moderators were known to the campers as they were also camp volunteers for the week but did not assume coach or formalize supervisory duties.

The athletes received a confidential description of the themes when they returned to camp the following year and were asked to indicate if they were represented in the descriptions. The athletes were reassured that their responses would only be read by members of the research team and would not be accessible to the coaches. Seven of the 13 participants responded (6 were unavailable as 4 attended different camps, 1 moved out of state, and 1 left camp early due to illness). Four athletes indicated that they clearly saw their experiences described in the themes. Three athletes (2 athletes with B3 and 1 with B1 levels of vision) added comments saying that there were a few occurrences of overprotective coaches, but this was rare, and coaches, if they were overprotective, said it was for their "own good." The references to the support of coaches were reviewed to ensure the theme descriptions were reflective of the athletes' feedback. Finally, all members of the research team participated in data analysis. Predilections were acknowledged and kept in check by debriefing across the coinvestigators throughout the research process.

## Results

The thematic analysis revealed three themes: (a) connected, (b) reaching out, and (c) resisting and acquiescing. Pseudonyms have been used to present the athletes' voices, and their levels of vision are indicated the first time their voices are heard.

### Connected

The theme *connected* describes the shared emotional connection among the athletes as they bonded with others with visual impairments. By becoming a member of an interdependent and synergistic group, their inner worlds that could be marked by alienation and anonymity transformed into a sense of belonging to a community.

The feelings of belonging at camp were contrasted by the social isolation and physical activity void of home. Kate (B3) and Tracy (B3), both first time attendees, stated, "I came because I was excited to be around people that have my same

problems and they know what I'm going through" and "It's [like] you aren't feeling left out and you've forgotten that you can't see that well." Alice (B1), also a 1st time attendee, expressed how limited her social sphere was: "At home, I don't really meet anyone. I just stay at home with mom and dad. . . . I don't know any other kids with visual impairments except ones that I'm working with now." Ann (B3), a 2nd time attendee, concurred: "In my school, I'm the only one with a visual impairment so it's hard to make friends. I wanted to come here to get to know new people who have the same problem as me."

The notion of a shared experience with others with visual impairments was salient for all of the participants. In addition to friendships and social belonging, the athletes received the added opportunity of learning about their visual impairments from older athletes. The older athletes also saw themselves in younger athletes and therefore brought empathy and understanding to their interactions. Ben (B2), a six time attendee explained:

One cool thing for me this year is Brad came and we have the same exact visual impairment and its one in 33,000 and that's a lot of people. It's really neat to be able to see me when I was his age and for him to have someone that he can ask questions of. You know, "What's going to happen when I get older with my visual impairment? How are things going to improve?"

Jake (B1), a first time attendee, was philosophical in his expression of connectedness:

It's actually kind of neat 'cause you can reflect on yourself— who you are to what you feel like. You meet people who are literally learning, doing, hearing, talking, and who are personable, friendly. It's almost like you're talking to your conscience but someone is physically there, you know, and they are going through the same problems and having the same accomplishments as you are.

The camp provided an emotionally level playing field where the campers did not have to defend themselves against reproaches by those who were sighted. Mark (B3), a fifth time attendee, spoke to the alienation and isolation that was absent in the camp context:

I personally feel like I'm on the same playing field. It feels good to know they won't make fun of you or discriminate against you for being blind, which is one less thing I've got to worry about. And I don't have to put up with the bullies like I do sometimes.

Les (B3) who returned to camp for the fourth time stated, "I have to agree with Mark on that one 'cause like he said, we're all on an even playing field, so no one can complain and nobody can harass you because we're, you know, blind."

Friendships and feelings of belonging were heard through the stories of emotional safety that accompanied being a member of a distinct group, irrespective of level of vision. Kate remarked, "I could do activities and I wouldn't be scared that somebody's going to make fun of me 'cause I don't do it exactly the way that everybody else does it like at school." Tracy added, "You're not left out. If you mess up, it's fine." Les who returned for the fourth time added, "For me, this is practically the only time of the year where I can actually come in contact with and do sports and things with people who are blind like myself."

The degree to which the athletes developed strong emotional connections with one another as they interacted socially and created a collective camp history became apparent when they spoke of returning home. Mark, a five time returnee, stated, "I swear that when I go back home, I'll start crying, because I leave all my friends behind and I won't be able to see them for over a year, which kind of makes me sad." Ben said he would miss

... the whole atmosphere, the experience. I'm going to be well, dropped on my butt again. You know? I mean, there won't be the interaction with the other people won't be the interaction of sports, won't be the structure. Like hey, what do I do? There's going to be nothing to do.

## Reaching Out

The camp created a landscape that made reaching out to explore one's thoughts, imagination, and personal limits possible. The restorative qualities of the sense of community experienced enabled the athletes to express ideas about their cultural group identity. The participants spoke of reaching out to discover a culture of common shared experiences, increased self-reliance through their athletic experiences, and an expanded understanding of their physical potential as athletes with visual impairments. They also spoke of the role that peers play in providing a sense of community identity. Mark's message of ability was grounded in the camp related sporting experiences; however, his message was intended for a much broader audience:

Camp has got to be one of the greatest experiences I've ever had. I'm with people who can relate to me, who are understanding of, I'm going to call it a condition, because I don't want to call it a disability, because we all know we can do anything sighted people can do. . . . People often say that blind people can't do certain things so I'm here to prove them that it's absolutely false. . . . I can't tell you how many times people felt less of us because of our visual impairment.

Les also commented on how camp fulfilled his need to be the author of his own identity. Although he indicated his desire to demonstrate his equality to those who were sighted, the camp provided a "safe" context to reach beyond his fears and take on new challenges.

I think that blind people don't give themselves enough credit. They don't try things new because everyone tells them that you're blind, so what's the point of doing this? So I'm basically here to show everyone that blind people can do the same things if not more than sighted people and that blind people don't have to be afraid when trying new things.

Although camp was an enjoyable and fun place to be in the summer, even at the athletes' relatively young age, the depth of their experiences was not lost to them. The experiences of camp would be carried into other contexts and serve them well at other times. Jake stated,

You won't be canoeing; you won't be kayaking, or tandem biking, or running often. But one of these days we are going to do this once again, maybe not all of



the skills jam packed like we do here, but one-by-one they are going to appear again. And instead of you know all of us wimping out per say — sorry that's what we'd be doing if we weren't here — and chickening out, we will be able to finally take what we have learned and say, "oh yeah, I learned that at camp."

New and returning campers expressed an appreciation of the reciprocal relationships that developed among them as they shared their knowledge and experience. Ben spoke of the fulfillment he received from supporting younger athletes. He valued the interdependence of the group and described his most memorable time at camp as being influential by providing instrumental help to others while in turn receiving the affective benefits of supporting others: "Mine would be to help other athletes, to work with other athletes or help them do something they've never done before." Kate completed the circle of understanding by stating, "I like it 'cause they [older athletes] can teach me stuff that I don't know."

The athletes expressed elation with their ability to perform beyond their own expectations. The girls tended to express this through concrete performance improvements such as increasing the number of laps run around the track each day. Kate noted, "I think I probably learned that I can do more than I thought.... Like I'm getting farther than I thought, even in running."

The boys' accomplishments did not seem to rest with improvements in the number of laps completed but the psychological outcomes of reaching out and beyond their current limits. Ben stated, "I've learned that I can take on more responsibility, gain more independence, and build self-esteem." Brad (B3) learned, "you can work harder every day and you're better. . . . You're eventually going to get like really good at this. You're learning that your body can handle all the activities." Zach (B3), even as a sixth time returnee, said he learned the following about himself: "I've actually found that I can accomplish anything I put my mind to." Mark stated it best when he was asked if other youth with visual impairments should consider attending the camp, ". . . they can learn a lot about the person that is inside of them. They can learn a lot about other people. They can just basically learn a lot and they can learn to be better people, learn to be stronger."

## Resisting and Acquiescing

The interplay of the world of the athletes and coaches was complex. The coaches were appreciated for being instrumental in providing a success oriented, safe environment for the athletes to excel but were also criticized for being patronizing and limiting the athletes' opportunities to be independent. The coaches fell in and out of favor with the athletes, depending upon whether they were perceived to be supportive and facilitated involvement or intrusive and underestimated the athletes abilities.

Before discussing the athletes' resistance to coach behavior, it is important to acknowledge their significant contribution to the camp experience. Optimal spatial and structural program delivery parameters were provided (e.g., track and field guide ropes and guide runners), adaptations to sport equipment occurred (e.g., auditory equipment for baseball), and culturally relevant activities were included (e.g., goal ball). The athletes with B1 levels of vision indicated that the coaches played an instrumental role in enhancing their ability to traverse the camp and were indispensable to their physical independence and safety. Jake commented on having one-on-one coach support:

[It is] a very, very good idea so that you can still be independent, but yet not get hurt or in trouble. You can be safe. The coach in a way stands for everything that you temporarily left for a week; otherwise it's kind of mentally draining.

Coach expectations and task specific feedback was also credited for motivating the athletes and increasing their performances, something that was not typically found in the other physical activity settings they encountered. Alice stated, "If you can't see what you're doing, they can tell you or help you with the activity. In judo if you can't see how they throw you, the coach can show you the steps." Kate spoke of her experiences in track: "[Previously] I would just step on the edge and then jump, but they showed us how we could take a step and then run up and jump. It makes you go a lot farther and faster." Les added, "They give their thoughts on what you're doing wrong or how you could improve. They really motivated us to do our best, which is awesome in a way."

The athletes also spoke about how their newly acquired and honed skills would enhance family recreational pursuits. Clare (B1) said, "Now I can go and swim with my family." Jake highlighted his newly acquired kayaking skills saying, "My parents got a kayak secondhand. Last night I learned how to row correctly for the first time."

The athletes were not without their criticisms of the coaches and not all coaches performed equally well in the campers eyes. Kate stated,

I like having the coach, but sometimes I just need a break, like I want to be off on my own. But they're like always protective. You know, like parents . . . that's why I came to camp, so I'd have a little more of a break, and then there's camp people.

Athletes with B2 and B3 level vision spoke of how the coaches didn't always acknowledge the campers' existing skill levels. It was not clear if the coaches' behaviors were guided by camp policy, safety concerns, or lack of program time to complete ecological skill assessments. Mike and Les shared their respective resulting frustrations:

I wanted to ride on a single bike, not a tandem, [but] this person was just like, 'oh you probably can't do it,' and I told him over and over I can ride my bike apparently for like 5 years.

I think that we should be able to . . . really do something all on our own. We should be able to show our coach that we can actually do it so that they have a basis to you know whether they tell us that we can do or not.

A further striking example of lack of understanding of the campers' skill levels was shared by Tracy when she relayed, "walking up the stairs and you can see them and they (coaches) are like 'step up, step up, step up.'" Jake added, "Yah, teaching us how to get into a pool, I think everybody knows that."

The respective roles of instructor and less able learner were clearly distinguishable at times. This may have promoted the perception that the coaches were acting in a benevolent way. Jake questioned the sincerity of the coaches in some instances: "They put on that fake, cheesy smile, trying to be cheerful. . . . You don't see them out there running with us." Due to the actions of some of the coaches, their sincerity was questioned.

It was of interest to note that the athletes were “good campers” as they acquiesced to the camp structure and coach behavior. They did not overtly complain, and when the interviewers probed as to whether the campers told their coaches when they were not acknowledging their needs, they replied “No” (Tracy). This acquiescence may have been tied to the positives of the camp over balancing the negatives, particularly with the context of their school year experiences. Respect for the ongoing support of their parents was also a consideration. Kate also indicated that even if her experience was negative, she would not tell her parents out of respect for their time alone and efforts to get her to camp:

I'd tell them I had a great time here, even if it wasn't the best time in the world, just so they felt better, 'cause I'm sure they'd want us to have a really good time when we're at camp. . . . But let's just say I was having a bad time. I would still just tell them I was having a good time just so they didn't feel bad.

## Discussion

Although on the surface, a residential summer camp for young people with visual impairments is similar to those for campers with physical disabilities, or even young people without disabilities, distinctive advantages were apparent. These advantages enabled the athletes to exceed previous levels of participation and acquire new skills while discarding ableistic stereotypes. The camp experiences assisted the athletes in mapping out their potential, something that is not perhaps easily accomplished or practiced in day-to-day tasks in the sighted world. The experience of sport enabled the athletes to test individual physical limits and set new self-defined standards and capabilities, a finding also reported by Ashton-Shaeffer et al. (2001) and Groff and Kleiber (2001).

### Connectedness

In addition to providing a once-a-year opportunity to explore their abilities within a renewing landscape (Goodwin & Staples, 2005), a psychological sense of community was created through reciprocal relationships with others with visual impairments (Goodwin et al., 2009; Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994). The theme of *connected* reflected membership acquired through a sense of belonging based on positive social interactions. Friendships were made and rekindled, younger athletes were mentored by other athletes, and emotional connections were formed as experiences of living as a person with a visual impairment were shared.

The sense of place represented by the sports camp was bound up in the athletes' personal and cultural identity with others with visual impairments and the personal and social affiliations afforded (Hatlin, 2004). Within this segregated environment, the athletes experienced a form of *segregated inclusion* emerging from affirming group membership that supported inclusion through positive identity development, shared and safe emotional connections, and fulfillment of needs within a disability only or segregated setting (Kef, 1997, 2002; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Place and Hodge (2001) coined the term *segregated inclusion* in a study of three students with disabilities in a grade 8 physical education program that experienced group membership when they were separated from their classmates without disabilities

by proximity and engaged in activities within their own group. Although the camp context is distinct from an inclusive physical education setting, the parallels of inclusion or community membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) is compelling. Whereby *segregated inclusion* carries a negative connotation (i.e., exclusion) because of the educational ideology of inclusion, outside of the educational setting, *segregation* physical activity context may promote a sense of community and well-being for those who identify with the group (Prezza & Costantini, 1998).

The findings of this study support the work of Goodwin and colleagues who described participants' experiences of segregated physical activity settings in a series of qualitative contexts, including dance, disability sport, and a segregated summer camp (Goodwin, Krohn, & Kuhnle, 2004; Goodwin, Fitzpatrick, Thurmeier, & Hall, 2006; Goodwin & Staples, 2005). The tenets of sense of community reflected in the current study were also reflected in previously published themes of membership, fulfillment of shared needs, influence, and shared emotional experiences and were reflected in previous work as mirrored in the research themes of unconditional acceptance, finding the fit, thoughtful instruction, and a chance to discover. It could be suggested that segregated physical activity contexts possess a sense of community that is founded on a sense of belonging, shared emotional connections, and membership founded in identifiable group boundaries.

## Reaching Out

The theme of *reaching out* reflected the fulfillment of needs based on common beliefs and collective history generated by the athletes, reflecting a shared group culture. While summer camp was a place, it was also a process—both being dynamic in interpretation and meaning (Gesler, 1992). Summer camp as a place possesses external symbolic expressions (e.g., trails, swimming pools, dining hall food, residences) that define its physical presence. Summer camp as a process is where internal triumphs and disappointments are played out—such as testing personal limits and experiencing interdependent social interactions, while also being exposed to over protectiveness. The older athletes influenced the younger athletes by being positive role models and mentors, thereby passing along the cultural relevant information specific to visual impairment. This is similar to findings by Standal and Jespersen (2008), who described the peer learning that took place in a rehabilitation context as participants with disabilities improved their wheelchair skills in addition to mentoring one another about the various life situations encountered as wheelchair users.

The athletes valued independence (not being overprotected), authentic social interactions (not obligatory ones), respect for their existing skills (not assumptions that everyone was entering at the same skill level), and sensitive instructional pedagogy (not assumptions about impact of vision loss on performance). At times, the coaches' behaviors reflected their lack of experience with youth with visual impairments. When the athlete values were overlooked or disregarded, emotional protests emerged, albeit they may not have been overtly expressed to the coaches. The external landscape of the camp reflected best practices of adapted physical activity pedagogy (e.g., individualized, modified activities, recording of progress, task specific informational instruction). The complexities of the internal landscape (i.e., experiences of the athletes) were more difficult to ascertain but nonetheless important.

## Resistance and Acquiescence

The theme *resistance and acquiescence* reflected the complexity of the bilateral social influence of the group on its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The one outcome that was achieved least successfully from the standpoint of sense of community was that of *influence* on those who oversaw the camp experiences. The athletes perceived gatekeepers who mediated their experiences toward common directions. At times, the instructors and coaches provided the instructional support with or without sensitivity to athletes' existing skill levels or degree of functional vision, and the schedule was provided by the camp administrators; all campers participated in all activities on a daily rotating schedule whether the activities were preferred or not. Athlete stories capped independence, disingenuous social relationships with coaches, and potential dualism of *us* and *them* can undermine the intended positive outcomes established for a camp environment. Lack of fit between administrative needs of a camp structure and desired behavioral needs and the expectations of the athletes can result in the emergence of a hidden curriculum, with athletes potentially taking home mixed memories of their camp experiences (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993).

## Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. The data were collected toward the end of the week and because of the camp program, the focus groups were held during the campers' afternoon rest periods. These two reasons, in addition to significant changes in activity levels for some athletes, changes in diet, overall noise levels, and the extreme summer heat, culminated in athlete fatigue, which may have impacted their engagement in the interviews. A comprehensive member check procedure could not be implemented. The amount of time that transpired between the focus group interviews and the following year's camp affected the numbers of available athletes for member checking. The researchers were also cognizant that the athletes were "expected" to have an enjoyable time and question the degree to which this may have influenced their responses. Athletes acknowledged their parents' investment of time and expense in getting them to camp and the respite their camp attendance provided. The athletes also recognized the commitment of the staff and coaches to provide a week-long camp with one-on-one support to ensure their safety, involvement, and enjoyment. The researchers wondered the extent to which the athletes' stories were flavored by these social influences. And yet, at the end of their focus group interview, Ann and Kate respectively stated, "It felt so good when we talked about it." "Yeah, letting out our feelings felt so great."

## Future Directions

The findings of this study are not meant to be generalized to other residential camp settings. Transferability of the findings beyond this study rests with the degree to which two contexts are similar and there is recognizable congruence with other settings, ages, and abilities of campers (Creswell, 2006). To do justice to the experiences of these athletes, however, our aim was to find common denominators for dialogue between those who wish to live meaningful lives and those who wish to advocate on their behalf.

The results of this study are preliminary and descriptive. Further inquiry into the complex interactions that occur between the athletes, camp staff, and volunteers is required. The congruence between the outcomes of the camp from the perspective of camp administrators, the instructors and the coaches, and the messages and impressions taken away by the athletes is worthy of further investigation. This information would also be of interest in the investigation of the efficacy of staff training; the content of the training and the pedagogical foundations of its delivery are also worthy of further exploration.

## End Note

<sup>1</sup>According to the International Paralympic Committee, B1 refers to "total absence of perception of the light in both eyes, or some perception of the light but with inability to recognize the form of a hand at any distance and in any direction," B2 is described as the range from "the ability to recognize the form of a hand to a visual acuity of 2/60 and/or a visual field of less than 5 degrees," and B3 refers to "a visual acuity of above 2/60 to a visual acuity of 6/60 and/or a visual field of more than 5 degrees and less than 20 degrees."

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