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'Just Another Outing in a Boat': Findings from the Evaluation of the Mixed Ability Sport Development Programme

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Abstract: Article 30 (5a) of the UNCRPD states that participation in mainstream sport should be a right for all individuals. However, many disabled people still face barriers to participation, and provision remains segregated and/or determined, at least in part, by the nature and degree of impairment. This paper explores the Mixed Ability (MA) model as an innovative approach to facilitating disabled people's participation in, and engagement with, mainstream sport. It outlines findings from an evaluation of the Sport England-funded Mixed Ability Sport Development Programme, which saw the MA model trialed in a variety of sports. A participatory research design was employed to generate data with key stakeholder groups involved in the design and delivery of programme activities, as well as with MA participants. Analysis of the data identified three core themes: (i) defining MA sport; (ii) the impacts of MA sport; and (iii) challenges and enablers of MA sport. In discussing these, it is argued that the MA model can be a powerful approach to inclusion and help to shape meaningful change. Indeed, the data suggest that the impacts of MA activities can extend beyond the individual level and influence shifts in both sports club culture and wider perceptions around disability. The paper closes by considering the implications of the research and outlines recommendations for future practice in this area.



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1. Introduction

The intersection of sport and disability has been described as a 'troubled and troublesome one' [1], and an extensive (and growing) body of literature has identified inclusion in sport and physical activity (PA) as a continuing challenge for many disabled individuals [2,3] (please note that while we are aware of broader conventions, we use language representative of the social model of disability in this paper, as favoured by our research participants [4]). There remain ongoing disparities, with disabled people's participation in sport often being low compared to the broader population [3,5,6], and research repeatedly shows differences in patterns of sport/PA participation between disabled and non-disabled people – with disabled people being less likely to access team sports and competitive training environments, for example – highlighting ongoing inequalities in this respect [2,7,8]. Moreover, research continues to identify sport/PA contexts as being spaces that disabled people cannot easily access and as sites in which they feel they do not belong [5,8]. The recent COVID-19 pandemic only served to exacerbate this situation in many contexts [6].

While progress has been made regarding increasing opportunities for disabled people's participation in sport [7,9], a number of challenges remain. For example, practical barriers to access may include a lack of accessible facilities, information, resources and opportunities [10–12]. Perhaps more profoundly, barriers to belonging can be seen to reflect social perceptions of ability and impairment, with ability expectations subsequently shaping (perceived and actual) opportunities [5,13]. For example, some authors have noted how

disabled people have historically been positioned 'on the margins' in society, which has led to longstanding assumptions that being disabled will restrict participation—including in sport [1,14]. Though such views are being re-evaluated and rearticulated, there remains a tendency to assume that participation in sport/PA for disabled people is more difficult [5]. While we can perhaps view the Paralympics as, at least in part, a force for good in this regard [15], others assert that such a focus on elite performance does not represent the lived reality of the vast majority of disabled people [16] and may foster unrealistic expectations [17]. It also remains the case that while elite-level disability sport is relatively well-resourced, grassroots opportunities are often more ad hoc and transient [9,18].

These challenges facing disabled participants in sport/PA are of concern, not least because of the significant body of evidence that espouses the physical and mental well-being impacts that can accrue from participation. For example, studies point to the potential of sport/PA participation in benefiting cardiovascular health, bone strength, blood pressure and range of movement, as well as helping to manage stress and anxiety-related conditions [19,20]. Moreover, literature continues to identify the powerful social impacts of sport/PA participation, noting that such activities offer valuable opportunities for collaboration, communication, and connection [21,22]. This can be clearly seen in the case of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where sport and leisure activities were highlighted as playing a potentially significant role in supporting the physical, social and mental health of populations [23,24]. It is noteworthy, therefore, that sport participation levels for disabled people dropped significantly during this period, largely due to shielding, lockdown measures and additional restrictions on activities. Indeed, Sport England's Active Lives survey reported an increase in the number of inactive disabled adults within the first three months of the pandemic, with those with more severe needs noting the biggest drop in perceived opportunities for sport/physical activity participation [6]. Such findings are worrying and reflect broader concerns that COVID-19 will have significant impacts on disabled people's opportunities to access sport/PA and, as a consequence, their health and well-being [14].

Whilst it is important that these discrepancies in participation are addressed, the way they are addressed is also of key concern here. Article 30 (5a) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) [25] states that participation in mainstream sport should be a right for all individuals, yet it remains the case that for many disabled people, sport provision is still segregated and/or determined, at least in part, by the nature and degree of impairment [3]. Again, the situation here is complex. Dedicated disability sport provision may suit some participants and lead to increased participation, creating a space in which disabled people can participate on their own terms and can clearly state their own needs. However, as Fitzgerald has argued, segregated sport provision also 'reinforces a status quo that normalises the separation of disabled people within society' [12] (p. 177). Further, segregated provision overlooks the potential of sport as a vehicle for challenging such norms, aligning with broader disability rights movements and calling for a more inclusive society. Indeed, research into initiatives that promote interaction between diverse groups via sporting activities often highlights the social benefits of such participation and the capacity for individuals to learn with and from others [21,26,27].

Fitzgerald suggests that dismantling the distinction between disability and mainstream sport requires 'a significant change in mind-set' as well as revisiting and revising a sport infrastructure that promotes and encourages separation rather than inclusion [12] (p. 179). She highlights that there is still 'a number of enduring issues' that thwart progress to everyone accessing sport. These include 'committed guardians' that maintain the exclusive nature of sport, the 'prominence of a normative non-disabled body' and the very infrastructure of sport, which promotes separation [12] (p. 176). Thus, questions remain about how best to facilitate disabled people's access to and engagement with mainstream sport/PA. One approach that has gained momentum in recent years is the Mixed Ability (MA) model, which forms the central focus of this paper. The following section profiles the MA approach and the Sport England-funded Mixed Ability Sport Development Programme (MASDP) in which it was trialed.

The MA model, which has been developed and championed by International Mixed Ability Sport (IMAS), combines sport, education and advocacy to promote the inclusion and integration of players, regardless of dis/ability, into mainstream sport settings [26]. It was first developed in the context of rugby, where it grew organically from a lack of provision for disabled people to play the full-contact version of the game [28]. IMAS recognised that the practical sporting element, alongside peer education, was a powerful way to advocate for inclusion in grassroots sports clubs and therefore facilitate disabled people's participation in and engagement with mainstream sports. The MA sport ethos emphasises the importance of sustainable provision, self-determination, full club membership and opportunities for social interaction. It also seeks to facilitate sports participation via reasonable adjustments to practice and not through adapted rules or distinct provision [26,27]. In these respects, it differs notably from other approaches that promote a separate and/or adapted approach to participation, such as Unified Sport [29], and seeks to promote a more organic approach to meaningful inclusion of disabled participants in a mainstream environment. Alongside practical sports provision, peer education is provided by IMAS Trainers (all MA participants themselves with lived experience of disability) to support clubs in offering MA sport. In rugby, the model has been shown to have positive impacts at the individual through to the community level [26].

Research into MA rugby highlighted that a welcoming and supportive mainstream setting, regular and sustained provision, equal membership and promotion of self-determination were key for maximising positive impacts such as shifting perceptions around dis/ability, developing friendships and encouraging personal development [26]. After securing Sport England funding, IMAS began the Mixed Ability Sport Development Programme (MASDP) to trial the MA model in a number of new sports beyond rugby (rowing, cricket, boxing, tennis, golf, exercise, movement and dance (EMD) and bowls) across the north of England. In the first year of the programme (November 2016–November 2017), activities were concentrated in the Bradford area but then extended to Leeds, York, Liverpool and South Yorkshire in the remaining programme period (November 2017–January 2019). While the MA model is relevant to all age groups, the MASDP was specifically targeted at participants over the age of 17 years. Over the course of the MASDP, IMAS delivered 9 open days and 47 presentations to grassroots clubs, NGBs, regional sports organisations, schools, colleges, support organisations and members, as well as healthcare professionals. In total, they reached over 1200 participants. Given the innovative and evolving nature of the model and the lack of evidence in sports beyond rugby, IMAS commissioned a formal research process for the MASDP to track the outcomes of MA sport in different contexts. The aim of this research was to evaluate the impact of the MASDP in different sport contexts. The research objectives developed to address this aim were:

- To investigate different stakeholder motivations/perceptions and attitudes towards the MA model.
- To explore enablers and challenges in implementing MA sport.
- To analyse the impacts of the MASDP on participants, clubs and the broader community.

It is an overview of the research findings that we present within this paper, and, as such, this study can be seen to contribute to a growing body of research concerned with enhancing inclusive sporting opportunities for disabled individuals and supporting the development of policy and practice in this area.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

As noted, the research outlined here was generated through the evaluation of the MASDP, undertaken by the authors between November 2016 and January 2019. Drawing upon our collective expertise—both first-hand experience of the Mixed Ability movement (first author) and knowledge of the sport for development/sport pedagogy fields (second author)—we used a participatory research design, underpinned by principles of interpretivism, and therefore employed a range of qualitative methods to generate data with key

stakeholder groups involved in the design and delivery of programme activities. We worked closely with IMAS representatives to ensure that we included all key stakeholders (e.g., coaches, club managers, leaders of MA sessions, representatives of National Governing Bodies), as well as MA participants (both disabled and non-disabled) engaging in those activities within and across a number of contexts.

A flexible approach to data collection facilitated accessibility and helped to ensure that all participant voices could be heard [27]. In shaping the research design, we took inspiration from creative research frameworks and specifically the Mosaic Approach [30,31], which collects data in different formats (e.g., speech, drawing, writing, photographs), and then works with research participants to reflect on how these can/should be interpreted to create meaning. Originally developed within the social sciences to facilitate the inclusion of young children's voices in research focused on multi-agency services for families, the Mosaic Approach [30] sought to offer a flexible means of authentic research engagement for those whose voices were considered 'harder to reach'. Allowing different methods to be used as appropriate in specific contexts, this approach enables researchers to generate data in the form of individual 'tiles', which are then pieced together to form a more complete picture through shared reflection and discussion. Although predominantly used with young children, the flexible nature of the Mosaic Approach—alongside its recognition that participants are the 'experts' on their lived experiences—has also rendered it suitable for broader application. Indeed, it is acknowledged as a complex and multifaceted process of engaging with research participants and, as such, has been used more widely to gather and promote marginalised voices, e.g., [32,33]. In this case, the approach allowed the research to be sensitively shaped to accommodate the communication styles and preferences of respondents. For example, a range of activity-based tasks such as timelines, mind-mapping, photo elicitation and observation were used alongside, and incorporated into, interviews, group interviews and focus groups to create a more inclusive approach [34,35]. In this way, the evaluation aligned with growing calls for researchers to make space for participants' voices, particularly in those studies where there is potential for findings to shape further programme design/delivery [36–38]. In this respect, it is also important to note the iterative nature of the evaluation, with findings shared and discussed via three multi-stakeholder workshops across the period of the project [28].

2.2. Data Collection

Core data collection methods employed across the project are grouped into three broad categories.

2.2.1. Active Participation and/or Participant Observation in MA Sports and Events

Between November 2017 and January 2019, we participated in and/or observed ~85 MA sport sessions, including boxing, tennis, bowls, golf, rowing, cricket, swimming, Kin-Ball and EMD. We also attended other relevant events associated with the MASDP, including IMAS-led taster days, IMAS training sessions at sports clubs and the launch event for the IMAS Accreditation scheme ($n = 8$). At each of these events, we used a field diary to systematically note key points, for example, structure of the session; number of participants (noting composition in terms of whether participants identify as disabled/non-disabled and whether new or regular attendees); relevant quotes/comments and researcher perspectives on interactions. After each event, we also reflected on how participation had impacted us and noted this in the same field diary.

2.2.2. Formal, In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

Formal, in-depth individual, small group ($n = 2$ or 3 participants) interviews and one larger group discussion ($n = 7$) incorporating creative qualitative methods, such as timelines, mind mapping, sticky notes and transect walks, were carried out with a range of stakeholders, including MA participants, family, coaches, club representatives, IMAS representatives and national governing bodies of sport ($n = 41$). The majority of discussions

were held in sports clubs before or after MA sessions and were recorded where consent was given. Questions largely focused on motivations to be involved with MA, understanding of the MA model, impacts and experiences of being involved and challenges and opportunities in their sport/activity context.

2.2.3. Multi-Stakeholder Workshops

Over the course of the evaluation, three multi-stakeholder workshops were held with attendees representing the sports, disability, education and healthcare sectors, from local through to national level ($n = 81$ participants across the three workshops). These workshops were held in January and November 2017, and November 2018. Workshop one was attended by those directly involved in the MASDP and explored motivations for being involved, attitudes, perceptions, challenges, opportunities and aspirations for the programme. Workshop two was attended by a range of existing stakeholders and those new to the MASDP as it extended beyond Bradford. Findings from the first year of research were shared, and discussions particularly focused on how to define MA and how it differed across the different sporting contexts. The final workshop was attended by those directly involved in the MASDP, as well as broader stakeholders from, e.g., NGBs, and showcased the experiences of a variety of clubs, individuals and organisations involved in the programme. The role of MA education, and how to embed that within the MA model, was discussed as an emerging issue for taking MA forward.

2.2.4. A Case Study Approach

As data collection progressed, we developed case studies, using the most appropriate combination of the methods above to track the development of e.g., specific MA sports and journeys of individual participants and particular clubs. It has been noted that case studies are particularly useful in generating rich understandings of experiences and behaviours as they unfold in practice [39], as well as allowing researchers to pay attention to local understandings and knowledge [40]. Adopting this approach in the evaluation allowed the nature and structure of each MA context to be explored in more relevant and meaningful ways. For example, at the rowing club, by introducing an MA offering as part of the MASDP, we were able to track the process from the start. As such, we carried out an initial focus group (May 2017) with seven committee members to better understand their motivations for starting MA rowing, their understanding of the MA model and their hopes and concerns for the endeavor. Between May 2017 and July 2018, we attended three MA rowing sessions, observing and noting activities and interactions within the MA rowing squad and between MA rowers and other club members. During these visits, we also interviewed 10 members of the club, including the club president, who had been instrumental in setting up MA rowing, to better understand their experiences of MA rowing and impacts it has had on them and the club. We then attended an IMAS training event in Jan 2019, where club members reflected on their experiences of MA rowing, and discussed challenges faced with IMAS trainers. This allowed us to gather a rich data set, grounded in a thorough understanding of the context, to explore the dynamics of MA rowing in this club.

2.3. Data Analysis

Raw data generated throughout the research activities (e.g., observation notes, interview transcripts, sticky notes, flip charts, etc.) were collated and analysed through coding and the mapping of themes, following a general inductive approach [41]. This involved reading and re-reading the data, highlighting relevant ideas and concepts via codes, then exploring and comparing these between contexts to understand the nuances around them. Key themes identified via this process aligned with the evaluation objectives and were broadly concerned with the challenge of defining MA sport, examining its varied impact on individuals and organisations, and identifying enabling and constraining factors that facilitated its implementation in different contexts. For example, codes such as a 'welcoming club culture', an 'openness to MA' and an 'awareness of sport being exclusive' were

collated around ideas of ‘champions of MA’ and the ‘role of MA education’ to ultimately coalesce around the core theme of ‘enablers and challenges to MA sport’. It was notable that while these themes were evident across all contexts, they were not always observed to the same extent or in the same ways. This was because key elements and components of the MA approach often ‘played out’ differently in different contexts, identifying complexities and nuance, as outlined in further detail below.

The research was granted full ethical clearance by the University of Leeds AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Ref: AREA 16-077) and the research team observed ethical principles related to best practice guidelines throughout [42]. Written consent was obtained where appropriate and possible. In other contexts, for example, when the researcher was observing and/or participating, the research was clearly explained, and opportunities for questions were given. In the discussion that follows, all organisations and individuals are allocated pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

3. Results

This section presents a discussion relating to each of the three core themes identified through the analysis process, namely (i) the challenges of defining MA sport; (ii) the impacts of MA sport and (iii) the challenges and enablers of MA sport. As such, this section serves to provide a foundation for the concluding section of the paper, in which findings are drawn together to consider the capacity of MA sport to ‘shift’ (or not) perceptions of dis/ability and a means by which we might better enable positive impacts from future MA sport practices.

3.1. Defining MA Sport

It was evident from the data that there was some difficulty among participants in understanding and articulating exactly what MA sport is. For example, there was variation in how MA sport was referred to, with some participants identifying it as a ‘sport programme’ or an ‘intervention’, while others defined it as an ‘idea’ or a ‘philosophy’. Thus, MA sport meant different things to different people. Moreover, the model was ‘picked up’ and applied differently (and to varying degrees) within the MASDP sport contexts, with these diverse interpretations of the model leading to variation in practical provision. For example, within MA rowing, engagement with MA sport created a shift in thinking and practice at all levels of the club, whereas with MA bowls, it was perceived more as an ‘add on’ and distinct from broader club activities.

A particularly common misperception among participants—primarily non-disabled participants—saw MA sport being aligned with disability sport, with assumptions of segregated provision and adaptations to mainstream formats. Within the bowls club, for example, non-disabled people saw themselves as ‘volunteers’ playing a supporting role to disabled participants rather than as equal participants in the sport. This meant that they stood beside the disabled bowlers and walked with them from one end of the rink to the other as they bowled, without participating themselves, even though that would have been entirely possible. In a further context, when trying to get MA tennis established at a local club, IMAS representatives struggled to convince the coach that he should be coaching mainstream tennis to a range of abilities rather than short tennis or formats used with visually impaired players. Similarly, representatives of a boxing gym, who attended one of the workshops, described their MA offering, which was only for disabled boxers, despite hearing stories of MA rugby from IMAS trainers. Some difficulties here perhaps reflect dominant societal perceptions around ‘sport’ and ‘disability’ and serve to demonstrate the complexity of the issues under consideration (further explored in Section 3.3.4 below). One IMAS representative explained that this was a common challenge for the organisation:

‘There was a guy [at the presentation] yesterday who said ‘but we already have sessions every Tuesday for the disabled kids from the local SEN [special educational needs] college’. We need to be very clear from the outset that Mixed Ability sport is very different from that.’

Developing a clear understanding of MA is evidently important if it is to be more widely promoted, as individuals and organisations need to know what the parameters and expectations are. Moreover, within the context of the research, we also found it helpful to consider how MA could be best understood, as a means of framing the study and evaluating what was/was not working and why. A key output from the research, therefore, was to look across the contexts and determine what the *essential elements* of MA sport are—i.e., those elements that are *necessary* for the principle of MA to be achieved. It was also then possible to identify, from the data, aspects which might lead to increased impact and then ascertain what might constitute an *ideal scenario*. Our ideas around these developed first from research activities and were then discussed and co-produced in workshops two and three, consolidating finally into Figure 1 below:

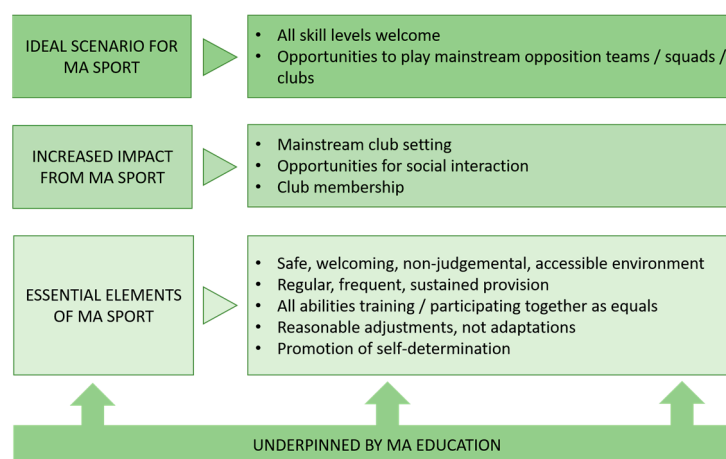


Figure 1. The essential elements, increased impacts and ideal scenario for MA sport.

The *essential elements* of MA sport are those that must be present to align with the MA ethos and to set MA sport apart from, for example, segregated disability sport, Special Olympics and Paralympic-style provision. From the data, it was clear that these are not necessarily related to the physical activity aspect of sport. Rather, the environment that is created through MA sport was reported by participants as critical and must be safe, welcoming, non-judgmental and accessible. For example, MA rowing sessions start with a coffee and catch-up, where participants decide together on the session format in terms of whether they might like to train indoors, go for a longer row or work on a particular aspect of training. This was reported by participants to make the sessions more relaxed and accessible to a variety of abilities, as well as encouraging participants to input into decision-making. MA boxing participants also frequently reported that they would not feel able to enter a ‘mainstream’ boxing gym but were happy to join the MA group because they knew there would be people of varying abilities there. One MA boxing participant said this made them feel safe because they knew they ‘weren’t going to be the worst person there’. Others said that they felt safe because of the welcome they were given and that they were asked by the MA coach about how they could best be supported on arrival. One MA boxing participant, Martin, was a power-chair user and came with his mum. She also reported that she felt the environment was safe enough to not worry about leaving him:

‘I never felt as though I had to stop with him either. From the word go. Normally it’s like ‘do you want me to stop [stay here]?’ or I’ll ask or hang around but I just felt so confident [with this group].’

The data showed that it is also important that MA sport provision be regular, frequent, and sustained over time. This differs markedly from most disability provision and reportedly means that a sense of belonging is more easily developed. For example, leaders of MA sport sessions reported that they noticed changes in participants and the way they interacted as the weeks went by. The MA swimming coach stated that she could

see improvement in swimming ability but also confidence in the familiar setting in one participant in particular. Through sustained participation in the MA boxing group over the course of a year, the lead author of the paper also experienced a notable sense of belonging in the group and enjoyed the ‘banter’ reported by many other participants.

For MA sport to adhere to the IMAS ethos, it is also critical that all participants train together as equals—that might be training individually or in pairs in the same space (e.g., MA boxing or swimming), or it might be playing collectively in the same team (e.g., MA rugby or cricket). The MA bowls example above, where non-disabled bowlers were only accompanying the disabled bowlers, therefore, does not meet this criterion and is more aligned with disability-specific provision.

To *increase impacts from MA sport*, further elements were shown to be helpful. For example, the data show that opportunities for social interaction, alongside an MA activity, will encourage perception shifts around dis/ability and further break down barriers to participation. This was evidenced particularly through MA rowing, where MA participants engaged with, and were included in, all aspects of club life—from weekly training sessions to social activities in the bar and celebratory events such as regattas. This, as one non-disabled club member put it, was important for ‘the hearts and minds thing’ and as a means of embedding MA rowing into the ethos of the club. Such views contrast with the more compartmentalised engagements of MA participants in other sport. In these contexts, participants still gained some benefit from social interaction during the activity sessions, but the broader societal impacts of club membership were not realised. Certainly, this appeared to be the case in MA swimming—which was held in a school pool with no area for socialising—and MA bowls—located in a mainstream bowls club but somewhat marginalised within the context. Indeed, the perception that the disabled bowlers were somehow ‘different’ resulted in challenges in meaningfully (and fully) integrating them into the club. For example, on the first research visit, it was not immediately clear where the MA bowls were taking place, with the activities being notably separate and being described by a club member in the bar area as ‘for the handicapped people’.

Finally, the *ideal scenario* for creating positive impacts through MA sport is if participants of all skill levels can be supported to engage with relevant activities from the start, though this may need to be a staged process, as it would with any beginner. With MA tennis and rowing, for example, a certain skill level had to be reached for new participants to be able to join in with more experienced club members. The MA rowing squad met on a Tuesday morning for a year to develop their skills before they were able to join other rowers on a Sunday morning. While this session was still highly regarded by participants, it was felt that real shifts in perception and belonging within the club happened when the rowers could join in at busier times and impacts would have been quicker if this had been possible from day one. One MA rower commented:

‘The Sunday morning sessions are starting to feel like it’s just another outing in a boat and it just happens to be with one of the Mixed Ability participants.’

Supporting MA participants’ development in this way can encourage more meaningful participation within the broader club context and encourage shifts in perceptions of disability within the wider club membership. Sports in which teams, squads or individuals can play mainstream opposition are equally impactful in spreading the MA ethos. There were few examples of this from the MASDP given the early stages of many of the sports, but this has been seen in MA rugby in previous research where MA teams play community opposition and go ‘on tour’ [26].

3.2. The Impacts of MA Sport

The data showed the many positive impacts of involvement in MA sport. These were evident across types of sports for both disabled and non-disabled participants and were identified as being at the individual, club and societal levels.

At an *individual level*, physical health improvements were reported by many participants. For example, one boxing participant who identified as non-disabled reported that

he would not have wanted to go to a boxing gym, or indeed any gym, as he finds them ‘a bit daunting’. However, he joined the MA boxing session because he wanted to ‘improve fitness, lose weight and learn some new skills’. After attending regularly, he was pleased to report that he had, indeed, lost weight and was also using his asthma inhaler less. A further tetraplegic power-chair user reported that attending MA boxing on a weekly basis had improved his arm mobility, strength and coordination quite dramatically. One of the MA rowers reported increased core strength, which was helping with balance on a day-to-day basis and especially in his ability to play rugby, and an MA swimming coach said she could see the difference in mobility and lung capacity in some participants.

For some participants, mental well-being was also perceived to be improved through being involved in MA sport. For example, the boxers above both reported increased confidence. More specifically, Martin explained that this extended beyond boxing, commenting that he was no longer so anxious about trying new things more generally. In addition, Martin’s mum said his involvement had impacted the whole family in a positive way because Martin was often unable to do things his siblings could, and MA boxing was a welcome departure from that dynamic. A sense of belonging is relevant again here, and this was often obvious to observe in sessions with fieldnotes documenting that participants were ‘notably comfortable with each other’s company’, and the word ‘banter’ was used frequently to describe what was fun about MA sessions. Similarly, following an observation of Edward, one of the MA rowers, fieldnotes recorded that his behavior, actions and interactions made it obvious he was seen as an equal member and very much ‘belonged’. For example, other rowers asked questions about upcoming plans they knew of and joked about incidents on the water in addition to teasing Edward about the amount of sugar he put in the coffee he had made himself at the bar.

At a club level, impacts included shifts in club culture towards being more inclusive, with clubs better representing their local communities and coaches being more comfortable with a diverse range of participants. Shifts in club culture were evident through, for example, an openness about members’ struggles with mental health, conversations about alternative and more accessible membership models, as well as more accessible infrastructure. For example, in the context of MA rowing, one (non-disabled) member approached the committee about paying membership fees weekly, adopting the same pricing model the MA participants used, as they found the annual membership hard to afford. Also, within MA boxing, the sports club it was hosted in acted quickly to widen a doorframe when it came to light that it was preventing access to electric wheelchair users.

Some managers of clubs involved with the MASDP felt they were more aware of how to better represent their local community and were attracting new, more diverse members through offering MA sport. The data also suggest that club coaches were impacted by clubs engaging with MA sport. When interviewed, some coaches commented that they had been ‘nervous’ before coaching disabled participants as part of the MA sport and had not felt prepared for these activities. However, upon reflection, involvement was seen as largely positive.

Across MA sports, coaches also reported increased reflecting on practice and improved communication skills. For example, MA rowing coaches commented that being involved in MA sport had encouraged them to ‘revisit and review’ their communication style and skills. Similarly, MA bowls coaches noted that they had become more creative in their approaches, and one MA boxing coach suggested he had become ‘more alert to people’s moods and body language’. Furthermore, an MA tennis coach mentioned that she had developed a more flexible and adaptable approach to reflect the broader range of skills and experience in an MA session. After coaching MA sessions, a common response was that coaches felt they were largely able to approach MA coaching in the same way that they would do for other sessions. As one MA tennis coach commented:

‘I was nervous to start with and thought I’d have to go on all these courses and do all these different things when actually you don’t have to do anything different at all. It’s about finding out from people how best they want you to coach them.’

At a *societal level*, impacts included a raised awareness of barriers faced by different people to participating in sport and society more broadly, as well as reported shifts in perceptions around dis/ability and social difference (explored further below). However, it was evident that this was not always a comfortable, smooth or linear process, and the data generated around the challenges people faced in this respect strongly reflected engrained societal perceptions around disability and sport. Those involved with rowing, in particular, had much to say about how MA rowing had made them reflect more broadly on their own understandings and biases. For example, one club member candidly explained the difficulties he had when one of the MA rowers was acting, in his mind, inappropriately, and how he has since reflected on the situation:

'You know at the regatta he was shouting quite a lot and we've got visitors but actually you look around and everyone either was or became comfortable with it very quickly. So, did it cause any problems? Not any at all. Do I think the club is enriched by them being here? Yes, I think it is actually and I think the amount of people volunteering shows how much people are responding to that . . . but I've realised I've got a journey to do and it's something I'm just not experienced with.'

Being involved in MA sport tended to allay non-disabled participants' fears around communication difficulties with people they perceived as 'different'. In some cases, this was reported to extend beyond those individuals they met through MA. For example, an MA rower stated:

'I did feel [a bit uncomfortable] but once I started becoming personally involved and being in a boat with [the MA participants], all that went away . . . And I just thought "It's done me some good really, being part of this training session" . . . For me it has made it easier to be around people when I don't understand what they're saying.'

A further MA rowing participant reflected emotionally on the relevance of the MA model for his family:

'One of my grand-daughters has extra needs and so, over the past few years, I've had direct experience of being with her and encouraging her. It's great to see something where people are actually involved in a community activity and not separated off all the time.'

Another reflected on how his perceptions had been challenged:

'People do not know how to categorise and understand 'Mixed Ability' or 'different ability' and they're frightened of it. I think there's a fear factor there. And I think it comes back to this point that there isn't a homogenous description or category that describes everybody. I think the barrier is realising that that is the same with any other level of oarsman whether that's someone learning at the age of 50 or someone learning at the age of 15-there are mixed abilities there . . . It's interesting and challenging. It is actually quite challenging because it challenges your own perceptions of what a person is or is not capable of.'

3.3. Enablers and Challenges to MA Sport

While the positive impacts of MA sport are encouraging, some factors were identified from the MASDP research as better enabling or, indeed, inhibiting them. Enablers included having MA 'champions' who advocate for the development of MA sport in a given context including those within NGBs; clubs that are already aspiring to be inclusive and an education piece running alongside MA sport activities. Conversely, the main challenge to MA sport was the engrained dominant societal perceptions of dis/ability that emerged through the data.

3.3.1. The Role of MA 'Champions'

The role of 'champions' in driving MA sport was clear. These are people who, supported by IMAS, take forward the MA agenda in a club, in an organisation or even independently. Champions often have personal experience of disability and/or are facing

barriers to participation in sport and are passionate about removing them for others. Many examples were evident in the data. For example, Mia was driving the development of MA boxing after a chronic health condition prevented her from training and competing at the level she wanted to. In addition, Carol established MA swimming after she attended an IMAS presentation at the Multiple Sclerosis Society, and Heather was championing MA rowing within the club having just taken on the club presidency. The latter example, perhaps, also highlighted how getting someone into a leadership position at a club facilitated progress. In contrast, there was no evident champion for MA tennis, and there were some false starts before the club managed to attract a viable number of participants and a keen coach. Likewise, MA cricket activities stalled because no champion was identified within that sport. Such findings resonate with the views of IMAS staff regarding the 'pivotal role' of MA Champions and the need, where possible, to work with clubs and organisations that had already expressed an interest in the concept of MA sport.

At a national level, the theme of champions and drivers of MA sport played out through the relevant NGBs. As noted by the IMAS representatives, if they were able to identify an individual within an NGB that understood and saw the value in MA sport, it was far more likely that it would be supported. As an example, a senior representative from England Boxing stated that the MA model 'works well for the sport' and that they would rather promote MA boxing than disability-specific boxing. However, they explained that there was a need for interactive resources and workshops to start promoting MA boxing and allow it to reach a wider audience. In a similar vein, a representative of British Rowing commented that, although NGBs would like to be more inclusive, they are working within a historical framework of elite sport. They suggested that for MA sport to be supported, clubs would need to 'get something from it' and would perhaps need to be 'rewarded' in some way for inclusionary outcomes as well as winning.

3.3.2. Clubs That Aspire to Be Inclusive

Our data showed that 'welcoming' community sports clubs that genuinely want to better represent their local community, increase participation in sport and demonstrate an openness to the possibility of removing participation barriers are more likely to be places where MA activities will thrive. However, many of these 'welcoming' clubs assumed that they were already inclusive and were not aware of the barriers that were, often unintentionally, preventing others from joining. For example, in MA rowing, the club president highlighted that while the club was 'welcoming', the 'elite and highly competitive image of rowing' and the long history of male domination in the sport could put people off approaching them. Similarly, with MA tennis, the manager spoke of the 'traditional' image of the tennis and squash club and the impact being a 'member's club' has on its 'community image and appeal'. Indeed, a coach at the club recalled in an interview the first time she spoke about introducing MA sport and the reception it received:

'When we first mentioned the words 'Mixed Ability' and 'disability' it was like [sharp intake of breath] just because it's a very traditional club, it was a members-only club so the fact that non-members would be coming in, it's 'well this is a tennis and squash club, you can't start doing boxing and dance.' But now, [the members have] seen the effect it's had on people and the fact that these participants go and socialise upstairs, and they've met them, and they've got involved themselves, it's massively changed and they're all 'we want more Mixed Ability sports, we want more classes on'.

While this club saw themselves as 'welcoming', the quote reflects a range of embedded norms around, for example, the 'types' of sport that are acceptable—i.e., tennis and squash rather than boxing and dance—and the jarring nature of non-members in a members' club. These embedded norms will likely discourage people from approaching the club and/or feeling welcome when they get there. The research highlighted that clubs may need to think more critically about existing barriers and challenges to being truly inclusive.

3.3.3. The Educational Component of the MA Model

The educational component of the MA model—where IMAS Trainers go into clubs and discuss their lived experience of disability—was somewhat limited within the MASDP. This was due to a range of factors including a lack of funding at the club level to pay for IMAS training and a lack of understanding of the role of (or need for) education in facilitating the sustainability of MA sport. Data showed that where the educational component was present, it complemented the MA sport offer incredibly well. For example, the MA rowing context had an initial presentation with IMAS in December 2016 before starting MA activities, and it was notable that this helped to engender a good understanding of the MA ethos among club members. Indeed, in one focus group discussion, a rowing club committee member stated:

'The Model that was described to us [in the IMAS presentation] ... made clear that people with disabilities wanted to take part in the club properly. They wanted to take part in the social life of the club ... rather than being in their own kind of ghetto or their own enclave. So, the whole point was participation in the wider club.'

While we acknowledge that the choice of terms used by the participant in this quote is somewhat problematic, it encourages important reflection on broader perceptions around disability. This understanding of the ethos of MA sport contrasted starkly with the bowls club, where it was notable that the understanding of the MA model was somewhat patchy, perhaps because financial support had not been available at the time of the research for IMAS trainers to present to members. This was evident even in the language used, some of which leaned towards a charitable view of disability and certainly towards segregated disability provision. For example, one of the session leaders stated:

'I am sure we could double our disabled group overnight if we could get more people interested in helping our less fortunate guys.'

Further training was held at the rowing club in January 2019 to reflect on the progress made with MA rowing. This session highlighted that club members had begun to reflect on many of the challenges and enablers discussed here and were then able to ask for advice and support from IMAS in supporting further developments. In this context, many individuals supported the idea of a peer network to share ideas, challenges and achievements around MA sport and IMAS encouraged them to see themselves as experts in MA rowing—taking this expertise and sharing it with others. In this way, clubs involved in the MASPD could become part of this expanding MA education programme. Certainly, it would seem that the MA education piece needs to be more deeply embedded (see Figure 1) in order to accrue more positive impacts.

3.3.4. Dominant Societal Perceptions

In contrast to the enablers identified above, the key challenge to positive impacts from MA sport was the dominant societal perceptions of dis/ability that emerged through the data. Most commonly, perceptions aligned with the 'othering' of disabled participants and a more charitable model of disability. For example, non-disabled players often perceived themselves as 'volunteers' rather than equal participants. This was demonstrated clearly in the MA bowls context through the language used and the fact that people who identified as non-disabled did not take part but instead 'supported' the visually impaired bowlers. This perception interacted with, and was perhaps exacerbated by, an assumption that the skill level of disabled participants would be 'lower', and they would be slower to improve. This represented a conflation of 'skill' with 'ability' and often failed to reflect the reality of the situation. For example, in the MA boxing sessions, a participant with learning difficulties was by far the most skillful member of the group and the most interested in progressing to contact boxing.

This perception still resulted in many potential participants who identify as non-disabled being reluctant to be involved in MA sport activities. The reluctance was often underpinned by an assumption that they would not have a 'challenging' sporting experi-

ence in an MA scenario. For example, an interviewee spoke of how MA bowls would only really be feasible for people ‘who enjoyed social bowls rather than competitive bowls’, and some rowing club members felt that other rowing clubs in the area would not be open to the idea of MA rowing because they were ‘more focused on competition’. Similarly, MA tennis participants, while stressing the welcoming and social nature of their group, queried whether all sessions at the club would be as suitable for MA participants:

‘We know what our [MA] group’s about on a Friday and we’re perfectly happy to encompass that. Now whether you would be if you wanted to take it to a higher level then I don’t know. If you seriously wanted coaching and you wanted to improve, you know, we’re there for social tennis really.’

That said, shifts in these perceptions were evident as the MASDP project progressed. One context in which this was particularly evident was MA rowing. Within the club, non-disabled rowers started by perceiving themselves as volunteers, while the MA rowers who were new to the sport were learning the basics. However, as the MA rowers improved and were able to join in with regular Sunday morning sessions, where more club members were present, the ‘volunteers’ started to perceive themselves more as equal participants. As one individual noted, it began to ‘feel like it’s just another outing in a boat’. Club members also expressed some surprise with regard to the ability of the MA rowers:

‘I’ll be honest and say I was expecting [the MA rowers] to be slower to get to this level. One thing I wasn’t sure about was how good their coordination and balance would be (but) their balance is superb, which makes a huge difference.’

In other contexts, too, MA participants who identify as non-disabled perceived themselves as equal participants, who were benefiting from being involved themselves. This was evident in the earlier case study of Harry and MA boxing, where Harry had clearly benefited from the activity and had also enjoyed the supportive nature of the group. This situation is better aligned with the MA ethos where participants are equal, and those who identify as non-disabled do not perceive themselves as ‘volunteers’.

Further aligning with perceptions of disability, it was interesting to see that data generated through the study indicated how some non-disabled people often distanced themselves from disability despite, for example, having age-related mobility issues or hearing aids. When the word ‘disability’ was used, it was clear that some images were most prominent. For some, disability brought images of ‘wheelchairs’ (e.g., ‘When I thought of disability, I straightaway just thought about someone that was in a wheelchair’) whereas, for others, there was a difference between ‘physical’ and ‘learning’ disability and the level of familiarity or dis/comfort they brought with them (‘I’ll lay my cards on the table and say I think I’d find it very difficult to coach someone with learning difficulties’). Many also used ‘othering’ language, which included the dichotomy of ‘normal’ (us) and ‘them’ (MA participants). Again, the data showed that being involved in MA often encouraged reflection on these perceptions, and many interviewees reported changes in the way they thought about dis/ability and difference more broadly. This aligns with IMAS’ emphasis on experiential learning and their views that sport is a valuable vehicle for this, given the practical aspect of MA and the space to reflect after the activity on perceptions.

4. Discussion

The findings outlined above indicate that the MA model can indeed facilitate disabled people’s participation in, and engagement with, mainstream sports. In doing so, they reinforce previous work on the MA model [26,27,43] and add to a growing body of literature that speaks to the importance of authentic inclusion of disabled people in sport/PA [5,7,14]. Indeed, the data suggest that the impacts of MA sport/PA can extend beyond the individual level and influence shifts in both sports club culture and wider perceptions around disability. Given that the culture of sports clubs often reflects broader socio-cultural norms—including those around disability—the MA model could prove to be a powerful approach to inclusion and help to shape meaningful change.

Defining the key tenets of MA sport allows us to unpack what makes it different from, for example, dedicated disability sports provision. The emphasis, in MA sport, on disabled and non-disabled participants playing or training together in the same environment is key here. Fitzgerald would see this model of provision as harnessing the potential of sport to challenge norms around separating disabled people in society and aligning with broader disability rights movements [12]. This model of provision means that MA sport aligns with Article 30 of the UNCRPD in enabling disabled people ‘to participate on an equal basis with others in recreational, leisure and sporting activities’ and Article 31 in ‘encouraging and promoting the participation, to the fullest extent possible, of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels’. Moreover, as our data indicate, it goes at least some way towards addressing Article 8 [1a–c] in looking to ‘foster respect for the rights and dignity of’, ‘combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to’ and ‘promote awareness of the capabilities and contributions of persons with disabilities’ [25].

Fitzgerald’s assertions that ‘dismantling the distinction between disability and mainstream sports requires a significant change in mind-set’ and that ‘revisiting and revising a sports infrastructure that promotes and encourages separation rather than inclusion’ is necessary is borne out through our data [12] (p. 179). Aligning with broader research about practical barriers to sport/PA access for disabled people [10–12] a variety of aspects of ‘sports infrastructure’ emerged as important for inclusion through our evaluation of MA sport. These can perhaps be separated into factors related to logistics, and then those related to the culture of sport. Logistic factors included, for example, inaccessible facilities (e.g., buildings without lifts, doorframes too narrow to allow an electric wheelchair through) and restrictive membership models (requiring large annual payments). To an extent, such things can be remedied, and indeed, our research demonstrated that MA sport was valuable in raising awareness around them for MA participants.

Cultural factors are harder to address. Our research highlighted, for example, the embedded biases in some sports clubs towards acceptable types of sport and what a ‘traditional’, ‘members-only’ club should be, as well as a recognition of the ‘historical framework of elite sport’. These ideas can be preserved in the very fabric of sport by what Fitzgerald describes as ‘committed guardians of sport’—coaches, teachers, parents and players—who seek to retain sport in its current form [12]. MA sport challenges these embedded norms and disrupts the system. Interestingly, many of the coaches involved in MA sport responded positively to being challenged, so perhaps these committed guardians can be swayed if made aware of the alternatives.

The dominant perceptions of the interaction between disability and sport as part of the cultural infrastructure were also prevalent in the data and align with previous research around perceptions of ability and ability expectations [5,13]. With the body being so central to practice in sport/PA, these contexts have often been cited as problematic for those whose bodies do not ‘fit’ the social norm—such as disabled people [9,44]. Ableist perspectives—which positively value able-bodiedness and render disability as somewhat ‘less’—have been shown to shape dominant understandings of what particular bodies are able—and not able—to do [45]. Such views were evident within our research via the assumptions made regarding MA participants’ skill levels or the perceived ‘slow’ speed of progression. Similarly, the emphasis on non-disabled MA participants positioning themselves, at least initially, as ‘volunteers’ rather than ‘equal participants’ is perhaps reflective of the tendency to see disability—and therefore disabled participants—as somehow ‘other’ [13].

MA does a lot to challenge these perceptions, and interaction between disabled and non-disabled participants both in the sporting context and socially is key here. Our research aligns with previous studies finding that interaction between diverse groups via sporting activities can bring many benefits around inclusion [1,26]. Moreover, the focus on equal membership and participation with/alongside others in all aspects of club life (training, competitive activities and social events) can be seen to position MA sport as facilitating opportunities for individuals to build positive self-identities and gain a sense of belonging—something seen as central to positive sporting experiences [1,45].

Given the challenges explored here, it is likely that the educational element of the MA model will be an important complement to practical sporting activities. MA education could begin to highlight this by, for example, critiquing the difference between being welcoming and being inclusive, and drawing on participants' lived experiences to help illustrate best practices [27]. Broader research has also pointed to the importance of embedding an education element within disability-focused programmes, noting that this can create valuable opportunities for challenging normative ideas through critical debate and discussion [1].

Our data certainly suggest that IMAS training introducing and explaining the key aspects of MA sport, the potential impacts and the challenges and enablers would be useful when MA sport is introduced into a club and then repeated after the activity has been running for some time, as was the case with MA rowing. This ongoing and experiential educational process could encourage reflection and prompt discussion around perceptions and fears. It would also be useful for those involved at a club level—across sports—to establish a peer network to share experiences and challenges as they come up. Drawing on principles such as communities of practice [46] and informal education [47], such networks could help to establish productive learning communities that draw on everyday experiences of MA sport to enhance learning for all.

Limitations and Further Research

This evaluation was, by nature, context-bound and shaped by the interactions of those involved in delivering and experiencing activities specific to the MASDP. As noted in Section 2, Materials and Methods, our flexible approach to data collection had benefits in terms of facilitating meaningful engagements and generating rich depth in the data. However, we acknowledge that this approach also limits the capacity to compare across studies and generalise to broader contexts.

The MA model has continued to evolve since the MASDP. Further research to track ongoing impacts in existing and new contexts would be valuable to continue to supplement our findings here. As the role of MA education is more formalised and embedded into the MA model, research around the impacts of this experiential and peer-led component could add valuable insights into the potential of this to shift perceptions around disability.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the evaluation of the MASDP showed that while it was not always plain sailing, the MA model did help to facilitate disabled people's authentic participation in, and engagement with, mainstream sport. The model of disabled and non-disabled participants training together in a mainstream environment aligns with Article 30 of the UNCRPD [25] and shows potential for positive impacts (from the individual to community level). That said, our research also highlights the challenges that can be faced by individuals and organisations when seeking to promote the MA model. Indeed, there remains much work to be done in dismantling current practical (e.g., access to facilities) and cultural (social norms and perceptions) sports infrastructure, both of which perpetuate, at times, the separation of disabled participants from their non-disabled peers in sporting contexts. However, findings from our research also show that fundamental perception shifts around dis/ability can take place when disabled participants are fully integrated into mainstream sports clubs. For these positive impacts to be achieved, an educational component must be embedded alongside practical activities in order to ensure 'authentic' MA provision and provide support/guidance to all involved. Thus, while there is undoubtedly still some way to go with regard to securing disabled participants' equal participation alongside others within sporting contexts, the MA model does seem to offer a constructive framework for guiding inclusive practice to the benefit of all.

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