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Understanding Para Athlete Development: An Examination of Para Swimming

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Kinesiology

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Abstract

Most competitively spirited individuals who engage in sport, we call them athletes, are striving to be the best they can be at their chosen discipline. To help athletes achieve their goals, several athlete development models (Côté, 1999, Gulbin et al., 2013, Higgs et al., 2019) have been produced to help coaches and sport administrators best support, and guide an athlete to achieve their optimum performance. While it has been recognized that there is contextual uniqueness to the para athlete development experience (Huetzler et al., 2016) and that there are nuances to the para athlete development experience that need to be considered in the development of a para athlete development model (Lemez et al., 2020) no such model currently exists. Some research has been done to address para athlete development from the perspective of other stakeholders such as coaches and administrators (Patatas et al., 2020) or involved athletes through quantitative methods (Lemez et al., 2020, Dehghansai et al., 2017, Dehghansai & Baker, 2020), but there is a paucity when it comes to representations of the voice of para athletes. Therefore, my dissertation research examined the athlete development experiences of para swimmers through qualitative methodologies. I conducted three studies. The first study examined the development experiences of para swimmers at various stages of development from the perspective of para swimmers and parents of para swimmers and asked the question, how do para swimming participants (athletes and parents) reflect on their sport development experiences? Utilizing an interpretative phenomenological analysis, themes relating to para swimmer development experiences were developed. The second study involved para swimmers in the latter stages of development and focused on identifying the contextual factors that impacted para swimmer development experiences. To consider how para swimmers' development experiences reflected the

framework of Long-Term Development model, for the third study, I re-examined the data from the second study to compare the development experiences of para swimmers to the key system factors of the Long-Term Development model (Higgs et al., 2019). Through the comparative analysis, systematic gaps in the para swimmer development pathway were identified. Adding the perspective of para swimmers to the conversation on athlete development will assist sport administrators in addressing the current gaps in the para sport system and help to inform the production of a para athlete development model.

Keywords

athlete development, para sport, experience, contextual factors, systems

Lay Summary

Over the past three decades there has been a growing interest in the development of athletes. At the same time the recognition and prestige of para sport (sport for athletes with impairments) has also grown, however, research into the development of para athletes continues to be limited. The research that has been done in the area of para athlete development has not given a voice to para athletes. Therefore, my research focused on investigating the para athlete development experiences of para swimmers from the perspective of para swimmers and parents of para swimmers who are intimately involved in the athletic development of their children. I conducted two studies, using semi-structured interviews for data collection. The first study focused on the development experiences of para swimmers at all different stages of development who were from a single province in Canada. Parents of para swimmers were also included in the sample. The second study considered the development experiences of elite para swimmers in the latter stages of athlete development from across Canada who had been selected to their first international multi-sport event. Findings from the two studies show areas of significance within the para swimmer development pathway including fundamental skill development, personal connections, coaches, classification and being with others who have similar experienced, social and organizational contextual factors and gaps within the current system of para swimmer development. By learning more about the development experiences of para swimmers, sport managers and administrators can begin to develop programs that enhance and support the development of future para swimmers.

Co-Authorship Statement

The research presented in this dissertation was conducted as part of the requirements necessary to complete my doctoral program of study. The information put forth in this document is my own original work. However, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Laura Misener, my supervisor and Dr. David Howe and Dr. Craig Hall, members of my advisory committee, as well as Dr. Alison Doherty who provided me with valuable feedback and encouragement throughout the doctoral program. My name may appear on this document; however, it would not have been possible without the edits, discussions, and support of those around me.

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“Two are better than one, for they help each other succeed.” - Ecclesiastes 4:9

While I may have done the studying, researching, and writing to meet the requirements of this doctoral program I most certainly did not make it through on my own. It was due to the ongoing support, encouragement, and love of many people that I was able to complete this mighty challenge.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Laura Misener for her guidance and encouragement throughout the doctoral process. Through discussion and support, she was able to transform my otherwise overly practical thinking into a doctoral project that will be the jumping off point for my ongoing work within the realm of para athlete development.

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. David Howe and Dr Craig Hall. Thank you for being supportive of my research and for sharing your expertise and time with me. I would also like to thank Dr. Alison Doherty for taking the time to provide me with support throughout the doctoral process. You provided feedback in a manner that was matter of fact without being cutting. I greatly appreciated it.

To my friends, thank you for supporting me from the very beginning with a smile and a listening ear, even though I'm sure you were thinking I was a bit mad to be taking on this project (I probably was). Your willingness to read and provide feedback on my work was invaluable.

To my children, Dezmin-Peter, Quinlyn and Maclyn, one reason I took on this project was to show you that the world is full of adventures and life will take you to the places you least expect

but by faith, support from others, and hard work you can accomplish anything you put your mind to. I love you more than all the water in the sea and all the air in the sky.

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List of Abbreviations, Symbols, Nomenclature

ADHP.....	Associate Director of High Performance and Para Swimming National Coach
DMSP	Developmental Model of Sport Participation
DSO	Disability Sport Organization
FSDP	Fundamental Skill Development Program
FTEM.....	Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery
IF.....	International Sports Federation
IPA.....	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
IPC	International Paralympic Committee
LTAD	Long-Term Athlete Development
LTD.....	Long-Term Development
MSO	Multi-Sport Service Organization
NAC.....	No Accidental Champions
NSO	National Sport Organization
PSO	Provincial Sport Organization
SWAD	Swimmer With A Disability
The Games	2019 Para Pan Am Games
The Team	Canadian 2019 Para Pan Am Games Para Swimming Team

WPSWorld Para Swimming

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Chapter 1

1 Understanding Para Athlete Development: An Examination of Para Swimming

1.1 Introduction

There is a saying that if you do what you love you will never work a day in your life. When it came to my sporting career, I would have to agree. Having been an elite level para athlete for almost twenty years, my world revolved around sport, training, competition, travel, highs and lows. Sport privileged so much of my life and yet I was constantly in a world that I felt did not fully see or accept my differences, which I saw as strengths. Once my elite sporting career came to an end, I wanted to find a way to make the experience of para athlete development better for the next generation. While that may seem cliché, it was also the motivation for the pursuit of the current line of thought and research. I was also led by the idea that you can't change what you don't know, and therefore, we must take the time to examine the current situation when it comes to para athlete development. While there is a significant amount of research into the area of mainstream athlete development from a variety of angles, there is a paucity of literature regarding para athlete development, leaving the current practice and expectation to be that the athlete development models and systems that are used in the management of mainstream athlete development are applicable to the para athlete experience as well. Driven by my personal experience but leaving space for the opportunity for new and differing experiences to be revealed, I sought to better understand the development experience of the current generation of para athletes.

Therefore, the research I conducted for my dissertation examined the athlete development experiences of para swimmers. My research focused on investigating the experiences of those that are most intimately involved in the development process, the para athletes themselves. In wanted to get a fuller look at the various stages of athlete development, I conducted two studies. The first focused on the experiences of para swimmers at varying stages of development and parents of para swimmers, who are instrumental in the initial athlete development stages and continue to be involved throughout the athlete development experience (Côté, 1999; Laurer, 2011). The second study focused exclusively on those at the latter stages of the development pathway, para swimmers who had been selected to their first international multi-sport games team. By examining the development experiences of para swimmers, I wanted to identify the contextual factors that had an impact on that experience and how the athletes made meaning of those contextual factors. The data from the second study was then deductively analyzed to consider the experiences of the para swimmers in the latter stages of their development relating to the Long-Term Development framework (Sport for Life, 2019). I sought to challenge the ableist view of athlete development and to identify gaps in the current sport system in regard to the development of para swimmers.

Through my research and life work, it is my hope that more para athletes will have the opportunity to love what they do and never work a day in their lives.

1.2 Positionality of the Researcher: Me and My Why

The subjectivity of the researcher impacts the data collection and analysis of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Due to this, I want to offer some perspective on my own positionally and subjectivity (fore structure in hermeneutic terms) (Crotty, 1998). I identify as female in my

late thirties with a physical impairment (right above knee amputation), which was the result of a farm accident at the age of two. My involvement in swimming began at the age of nine when a physical therapist suggested I try swimming lessons which were offered at the children's rehabilitation center in my hometown. A few months later, a Therapeutic Recreation Specialist asked me if I would like to try competitive swimming. It was the first time in my life that someone had directly asked me if I wanted to engage in a competitive sport. For the most part, I was left to sit on the sidelines during recess and gym class by my classmates and teachers. It was also a time in my life where I was beginning to become very aware of my bodily difference and how it impacted my ability to engage with my peers. The Therapeutic Recreation Specialist worked with my mother and other parents of children utilizing the services of the children's treatment center to establish a swim team for children with disabilities called the Red Hots. We trained out of the therapeutic pool which was fifteen meters in length and was kept at a constant warm temperature. We were coached by lifeguards who volunteered their time and most of whom were teenagers with limited swimming experience. Through sheer will and determination, while training with the Red Hots, I qualified for regional, provincial, and national championships. After competing at my first national championships, I realized that I needed to train in a more challenging and knowledgeable environment if I was going to reach my ultimate goal of representing Canada at the Paralympic Games. I tried out with the local age group swim club, however, the head coach did not speak to me at any point during my try out and took no notice of the fact that I was a national level swimmer and I knew this was not an environment that I was welcome. My mother reached out to Swim Ontario to ask for help. For several months, the executive director of Swim Ontario wrote workouts for me and emailed them to my mom who would take me to the local YMCA during open swim and did her best to coach me.

Eventually, I met the coach of the local Masters (adult) swim team who was willing to work with me. From the age of fifteen to eighteen, I trained part time on my own at the YMCA doing workouts that my coach had written and part time with the Masters team. Within this program, I qualified for my first Paralympic Games. When I moved to London, ON to complete an undergraduate program at Western University, I tried training with the Western varsity swim team, however, at that time the Western program was not the competitive program it is now and the athletes on the team were not training at the competitive level that I needed. So, I joined the London Aquatic Club which had a history of working with para swimmers as well as having the National SWAD (swimmer with a disability) coach on staff. I remained a member of the London Aquatic Club for most of my time as a member of the national team. I was a member of the Canadian national para swimming team from 2000 to 2010, during which time I represented Canada at three Paralympic Games, winning a gold and silver medal on the medley relay and at two World Championships, winning a gold and silver medal on relay teams and two bronze medals in individual events. After my swimming career ended due to injury, I began playing wheelchair basketball as a form of recreation. In 2012, my speed on the court, resulting from my upper body strength gained through my swimming career, caught the attention of the coaches of the national program and I was invited to try out for the Canadian national wheelchair basketball team. I did not make the national team the first time I tried out; however, I did gain valuable coaching advice from the national program coaches. I spent the next year training mostly on my own, pushing on the sponge floor of the gym at my church, following practice plans that I put together for myself based on ideas I had gained from attending the national team try out. I was selected to be a member of the National wheelchair basketball team from 2014 to 2017. Among these two sports, I represented my country at four Paralympic Games, three World

Championships and two Para Pan Am Games. I am also dual sport World Champion (swimming 2002, wheelchair basketball 2014). I have been a swim coach to both para and mainstream athletes for the past fifteen years and am an Age Group certified coach through the National Coaching Certification Program. I got involved in coaching when I took a year off from training to complete a post graduate certification in therapeutic recreation in Orillia, Ontario and the coach of the local swim club asked me to coach one of the younger groups within the club. Even though I had never considered coaching previously, I tried it and found that I enjoyed working with kids and helping them to improve their swimming ability. I am also a technical classifier, a position I sought out after retiring from swimming as my past experiences impressed upon me the importance of the position in the lives of para athletes. To become a classifier, I reached out to the National Para Swimming Coach to ask how I could get involved. At that time, there was an online classifier course that was offered by the International Paralympic Committee, which I took. However, I did not hear from the National Para Swimming Coach after completing the course. Several years later, when a new National Coach was in place, I reached out again and was put in contact with the National Classification Lead who helped me through the new classifier learning process. It is due to my background as a para athlete and having gone through the development system in not one but two sports that motivates me to want to investigate the athlete development experience from the perspective of para athletes. In everything that I do, I am committed to making the pathway a bit smoother for the next generation, which was my motivation for focusing my PhD research on para sport development in the first place as I recognized that there was a lack of knowledge in this area. As it is my desire that my research has impact and is practically applicable, I take an applied approach to my research.

Due to my extensive and varied background within the para sport community (athlete, coach, classifier), I possessed the background knowledge necessary to move seamlessly within the community. The first study was initiated by my engagement with the Ontario Parasport Collective as members of the collective were interested in learning more about the development experiences of para athletes in Ontario. With the connections that I had with Swim Ontario I was able to connect with participants and complete the project for the Ontario Parasport Collective. The second study arose out of a connection I made with the Associate Director of High Performance & Para Swimming National Coach (ADHP) at Swimming Canada, who requested a meeting with me after learning about the first study. Upon discussing the state of para swimmer development in Canada, the ADHP expressed interest in supporting future research. After I had reflected on the findings from the first study, I determined that it would be valuable to conduct a study that investigated the development experiences of para swimmers in the latter stages of their development from a variety of geographical locations in Canada. The ADHP was able to help facilitate my access to potential participants in the study by appointing me as a team manager for the 2019 Para Pan Am Games Canadian Swimming Team. At that point in time, I had limited prior interaction with the participants although all the participants were aware of my background as an elite para swimmer.

While I have an extensive background within the community that I studied, I am aware of the bias I hold due to my experience as both an individual with an impairment and as an elite para athlete. I adhere to a realist ontology and a constructionist epistemology as I believe that “what is real is not dependent on us, but the exact meaning and nature of reality is” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 107). How we come to understand and place meaning on our realities is based on a transaction between the knower and the knowable, a transaction that is influenced by “the knower’s prior

experience and knowledge, by political and social status, by gender, by race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, by personal and cultural values, and the knower's interpretation (construction) of the contextual surround" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 40). I would also add functional ability to the list of influences on the transaction between the knower and the knowable. Having a constructionist epistemology enables me to give space for the experiences of others as I recognize that my experiences and therefore my understanding of reality will differ from the next person as our perspectives are impacted by the context in which we live and experience phenomena. At the same time, adhering to a constructionist epistemology allows me to recognize my role in the co-creation of knowledge throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2013)

1.3 Influential Philosophical Frameworks, Models & Concepts

Connected to the idea of providing my positionality, I would like to outline the philosophical framework, models and concepts that impacted my thinking throughout the research process. I followed a phenomenology theoretical framework that focuses on "understanding and interpreting how human beings experience and make sense of the world" (Braun & Clark, 2020, p. 41). Phenomenological research attempts to reveal the nature of the phenomena through the experiences of those who lived through the phenomena, while taking into consideration the context in which the phenomena took place and the personal meaning those that experienced the phenomena gave to the experience (Grace & Ajjawi, 2010). Phenomenology is built upon the foundation "that experiences and their significance to individuals are valid sources of knowledge" (Grace & Ajjawi, 2010, p. 197). Specifically, I sought to adhere to hermeneutic phenomenology which puts an emphasis on the interpretation of the experience. I was influenced by Heidegger's hermeneutic stances as stated by Crotty (1998) in which hermeneutics

“seeks to unfold that pre-understanding, make explicit which is implicit and grasp the meaning of Being itself” (p.97). According to Crotty, Heidegger described his hermeneutical phenomenology as a circular process. In Heidegger’s hermeneutic cycle, we begin as we are with a preconceived notion of Being (fore structure), interpretation and examination of those preconceived notions lead us to understanding the “structures of being that make human existence and behaviour possible” (Crotty, 1998, p.98) (existentials) which enhances our understanding of Being and influences our interactions in the world. Through each cycle, we heighten our understanding of Being. Therefore, the knowledge of Being is continuously evolving. In adhering to Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology, I recognize that I and the research participants come into the research process with preconceived notions which are influenced by past experiences and these preconceived notions impact the research process. I acknowledge that while the findings of my research add to the body of knowledge of para athlete development, they are not the final conclusion on para athlete development as knowledge and understanding are continuously advancing.

In line with hermeneutic phenomenology, I followed interpretative phenomenological analysis which recognizes a double hermeneutic or two stage interpretation process in which the research participants are striving to make sense of their experiences and the researcher is striving to make sense of the participants attempting to make sense of their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2007). I discuss further how this process evolved in the context of this research in the Methodology section of this chapter.

As my research focuses on the experiences of para swimmers (swimmers with impairments), it was important to reflect upon my own thoughts on impairment/disability which are significantly

impacted by the interactional model presented by Tom Shakespeare (2013). In the interactional model, disability is the result of the interplay between intrinsic (impairment, motivation, personal attitudes, personality, etc.) and external (environments, support system, social context, culture, etc.) factors. “People are disabled by society and by their bodies” (Shakespeare, 2013, p. 75).

The interactional model may be seen as a combination of the medical and social models of disability. The diversity and range within the disability experiences are taken into consideration with the interactional model, recognising that there is a continuum of impairment, and the impact of impairment. The interactional model also broadens the discussion of disability to include many different factors that can be addressed to enhance the quality of life of those who experience impairment (personal, structural, contextual). Shakespeare (2013) identified that due to the variety of experiences of what it is to be disabled, it is important to take the time to recognize and acknowledge of the experiences of people with impairments. Recognizing the experiences of people with impairments ties into the phenomenological framework that I sought to adhere to.

My research was also influenced by the concept of ableism. Ableism is the system of thought connected to ability, where “the able-bodied experience is...constructed and disseminated as the impartial and natural “norm”, which becomes the standard reference for the right and good way of being human” (Silva & Howe, 2019, p.3) Ableism can be manifested through discriminatory behaviours and prejudicial attitudes in relation to the rights and benefits of what one deems as “normal” and “abnormal”. Ableism is also connected to the idea of power with the group with the power (in this case those without impairment) dictating that is considered “normal” and what is not (Brittain et al., 2020). In sport and physical activity, ableism can be seen in the prioritisation of those without impairment and non-impaired bodies which in turn devalues sport

and physical activity for individuals with impairment, resulting in the limitation of opportunities for full participation of individuals with impairment (Brittain et al., 2020). As para swimming in Canada takes place in an integrated sport system, those with impairments are being fit into a system was initially set up by and for the societal norm of individuals without impairments, therefore ableist thought, action and attitudes play a role in the para swimmer development experience.

1.4 Athlete Development Frameworks & Para Athlete Development

The topic of athlete development has been prevalent in sport literature (predominately in sport psychology) for over three decades with a variety of athlete development models having been proposed. One of the most foundational athlete development models derives from the work of Bloom (1985) which outlined three key stages, early years (initiation), middle years (development), and late years (perfection). As an athlete moves through the stages, they become more knowledgeable about their training and competition and the chosen sport begins to dominate all areas of their lives (Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). Bloom's work has since had great influence on many of the athlete development models that have been proposed (Bruner et al., 2009). In a study that sought to identify the most influential (i.e. most cited) pieces of literature in athlete development, Bloom's (1985) *Developing Talent in Young People* was cited more than any other text (Bruner et al., 2009).

Since Bloom's work, the number of proposed athlete development models has grown. In a citation analysis of the literature of athlete development models, Bruner et al. (2010) identified seven models and categorized them into two factions, one faction which consisted of two

models, focused on career transition (Stambulova, 1994, Wylleman et al., 2004) and the other faction with five models (Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Abbott & Collins, 2004; Bailey & Morley, 2006, Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006) utilized an expertise or talent, staged based perspective to talent development. Other athlete development models have been proposed such as Gulbin and colleague's (2013) FTEM (Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery) and Balyi's Long-Term Athlete Development model (Balyi et al., 2013). Both the FTEM and LTAD present a talent, stage-based perspective.

The LTAD has been adopted as the athlete development model of choice by Sport Canada and has gone through two subsequent updates and is now called Long-Term Development (LTD) in recognition of the model's utilization in realms outside of sport (Higgs et al., 2019). Originally, the LTAD was stated to address necessary changes to sport systems to "meet the developmental needs of participants" and was geared to assist sport organizations and sport managers in making those changes (Balyi, et al., 2013, p.vii)

The LTD "is a framework for the development of every child, youth, and adult to enable optimal participation in sport and physical activity" (Higgs et al., 2019, p.6). It is science based and draws from the areas of exercise physiology, pediatric exercise science, psychomotor learning, neuroscience, sport psychology, sport sociology, and nutrition (Higgs et al., 2019). All NSOs in Canada have used the LTD as a framework to development their own sport specific frameworks as it is a requirement to receive funding as specified in the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework (Sport Canada, 2011).

The LTD is built upon twenty-two key factors which operate on three level; seven Personal Factors (such as physical literacy, quality environments, developmental age, sensitive periods, predisposition, etc.), eight Organizational Factors (appropriate specialization, periodization,

competition, transitions, etc.) and seven System Factors (collaboration, system alignment, diversification, etc.). The LTD consists of two pre-stages (Awareness and First Involvement), and seven stages (Active Start, Fundamentals, Learn to Train, Train to Train, Train to Compete, Train to Win and Active for Life). The first three stages focus on physical literacy with stages four thru six identified as the podium pathway. While the LTD is staged (as most athlete development models are) in the 3rd edition, the model addresses that each person's sport journey is considered unique and there is great variation in pathways that participants will take (Higgs et al., 2019).

The LTD is the only athlete development model that addresses the application of the model to athletes with impairment. In the 2nd edition of the model, Awareness and First Involvement stages was added to the beginning of the model as these areas were deemed as necessary for the engagement of athletes with impairments (Balyi et al., 2016). In the 3rd and current edition of the model, Awareness and First Involvement are identified as pre-stages and are recognized as applicable to all individuals, although specific mention is made to underservices groups including individuals with disabilities (Higgs, et al., 2019). Outside of the two pre-stages, there is no further specific mention as to how the LTD is to be implemented for use with individuals with impairments.

Currently, no para athlete specific development model has been proposed, and the practice of applying a mainstream athlete development model to para athletes has been questioned due to the different cultural, environmental and individual challenges that individuals with impairments face (Hutzler et al., 2016) and the diverse trajectories of expertise attainment (Lemez et al., 2020). Over the past five to seven years, research into the development of para athletes has begun to gain attention. In 2016, Hutzler and colleagues identified that there had been little

research done to identify para athlete development pathways, stakeholders' roles and systems (Hutzler et al., 2016). Since then, research has been conducted into the influences on para athlete development (Dehghansai et al., 2017a), identifying the policy differences between mainstream and para sport (Patatas et al., 2018), the contextual factors that impact para sport and development pathways (Patatas et al., 2019), para athlete development from a stakeholder perspective (coaches, administrators, high performance directors, academics and classifiers; Paradis & Misener, 2018; Patatas et al., 2020; Patatas et al., 2022), and the transition out of elite para sport (Bundon et al., 2018). Focusing on a single para sport, Lemez and colleagues (2020) investigated the development experiences of wheelchair basketball players and identified a wide age range of first sport participation and a large variation in other sports engagement. According to Lemez and colleagues (2020), due to the diverse constraints and development trajectories that para athletes experience the application of mainstream athlete development models is not appropriate.

Only a few studies have included the voices of para athletes, even though the inclusion of the para athlete perspective has been identified critical to the refinement of a development model (Turnnidge et al., 2012; Allan et al., 2018; Patatas, et al., 2018; Patatas et al., 2022). Most studies that include athletes have done so through quantitative methods (cf. Allan et al., 2019; Dehghansai et al., 2018; Dehghansai et al., 2019; Dehghansai et al., 2020; Lemez et al., 2020; Dehghansai, Allan, et al., 2021, Dehghansai, Pinder, et al., 2021) or have engaged in a mixed method approach (cf. Bundon et al., 2018) and included other stakeholders in the sample (cf. Peake, 2019). One study looked at para athlete development utilizing a qualitative narrative approach, however, the study was focused more on para sport participation than on para sport development (Allan et al., 2018).

Most recently, Patatas and colleagues (2022) looked at how para athlete development pathways are developed and identified impairment-specific characteristics that were influential at the various stages of athlete development. Stakeholders such as coaches, sport administrators, classifiers and sport managers were included in the sample and six developmental phases were identified (attraction, retention, competition, talent identification & development, elite, retirement), with classification significantly influencing the transition between stages. Impairment type was identified to be influential throughout the development pathway.

While research into para athlete development continues to evolve the voice of the para athlete continues to be left out. Therefore, motivated by the limited research into para athlete development, particularly through the use of qualitative methods, I decided to focus my research on gaining an understanding of the development experiences of para swimmers as the most salient stakeholder in the athlete development process.

Freeman (2005) identifies that a stakeholder is “any group or individual that can affect or is affected by the achievement of a corporation’s purpose” (Freeman, 2005, p. 420). Due to the impact a stakeholder can have on an organization and/or vice versa, a strategy is necessary for dealing with stakeholders, both current and future (Freeman, 2005). Based on Freeman’s definition of a stakeholder it is clear that para athletes are stakeholders of organizations throughout the hierarchy of the sport system from community/municipal programming, clubs, PSOs, NSOs, IFs, and the IPC. Para athletes can affect the success of the organizations throughout the sport system as without the athletes there would be no sport and these organizations would not be needed. Often the success of athletes has a direct impact on the success and continuation of the organizations, which can be seen in the current sport funding models employed in Canada (e.g. Own the Podium, 2021). At the same time, the decisions,

policies, procedures, and programs of sport organizations have a significant effect on the success of athletes; their ability to train, compete, develop and advance through the competitive levels as well as on their mental health (Poucher et al. 2021). Therefore, organizations need to know more about para athletes, their backgrounds, experiences and contexts to be able to effectively develop structures, processes and strategic plans that take para athletes and their needs/wants into account, including the development of para athlete development models or frameworks.

Within the broader sense of research on para sport, my research will provide an interpretation of the development experiences of two groups of para swimmers. By doing so, some of the nuances and challenges of para swimmer development will be brought to light and will add to the discussion on how sport leaders can work to enhance the para swimmer development experience. As well as my work will add to the literature which will influence the progress towards a para athlete development model.

1.5 Methodology

As my aim was to highlight the experiences of para swimmers and parents of para swimmers, a phenomenological methodology was selected as it seeks to explore the phenomenon from the viewpoint of individuals with personal experience (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015, Allen-Collinson, 2016). The phenomenon that I explored was the athlete development experiences of para swimmers. Phenomenology, in line with Husserl's philosophical approach, "aims to produce an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). Specifically, I utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to guide the design, data collection and analysis of the studies. IPA was selected as it is in line with a realist ontology and a constructionist

epistemology which I adhere to as a researcher (Larkin et al., 2006). Additionally, IPA is grounded in the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre as presented by Tuffour (2017) who together argued “that we are embedded in the world of language and social relationships and that we cannot escape the historical accuracy of all understanding” (p. 3). According to Horrigan et al. (2016) Heidegger argued that as humans we interpret everything that we experience as this is an unavoidable fundamental component of ‘being in the world’. Tuffour (2017) emphasized that Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) work influences IPA as Merleau-Ponty put forth the idea of embodiment and the important role that the body plays in how we know the world. The concept of the body impacting how we understand the world is important in my research process as I focused on the experiences of para swimmers, all of whom experience bodily difference which would impact how the participants interacts with and make sense of their world. Importantly, my own experience and understanding of living with bodily difference influences the way I see and view the world, including how I make sense of the para swimmer experience. Tuffour (2017) described Sartre’s (1956/1943) contribution to IPA of being the importance of context and that there are situations that require an individual’s life, biographical history, and social situation to be considered. In IPA, the researcher is recognized as having an active role in the research process. While the participant is seen as the expert of their experiences, the IPA researcher and the participant work together in a double hermeneutic as the researcher is attempting to make sense of how the participants are making sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic research identifies that pre-understanding is integrated into the research findings and is valuable to the research process as it is impossible for the researcher to transcend their prior knowledge or understanding (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015; Koch 1995). IPA is also idiographic in that it looks to examine the experiences of each

participant independently before attempting to make more general claims (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Due to the idiographic nature of IPA, it is most appropriate for use with a small homogenous sample size (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

Due to the desire to allow the experiences of the participants to dictate the direction of the studies, in recognition of my background within the community, and my role as the researcher, along with the paucity of literature on para athlete development, an IPA approach was taken. The goal of this research was to highlight the development experiences of para swimmers as too often other stakeholders within para sport (coaches, sport administrators, officials, etc.) are the dominant voices (Patatas et al., 2019).

For the second analysis of the data collected through the phenomenological process in study two, I chose to further interrogate the data using a deductive process to consider the experiences of the participants in relation to guidelines of the LTD. While this process deviates somewhat from traditional understandings of IPA, the use of the twenty-two key factors of the LTD reflected superordinate themes that enabled interpretive reflection on how the experiences within the context of implementation for para swimmers. As the LTD was built upon the experiences of mainstream athletes, the implementation of the model for para swimmers may reflect ableist understandings of athlete development. Use of the LTD for para athletes is evolving with each iteration of the LTD, but the foundation of the model remains firmly rooted in an able bodied experience of sport. Therefore, I wanted to identify how the participants of the second study were experiencing the implementation of the LTD in their development, reflecting upon ableist tendencies that might be apparent within their experiences. My goal is to point out both areas of strength and areas which require further research and evolution of thought in the application of the LTD to para swimmers.

1.6 Research Support

The studies were supported by different organizations. The first study was conducted at the commission of Ontario Parasport Collective and was supported by Swim Ontario, who assisted in the recruitment of participants by disseminating letters of information to member clubs with registered para swimmers. The Ontario Parasport Collective (OPC) is a collaboration of twenty-four para sport and ally organizations who came together to enhance para sport in the province of Ontario. The OPC is a legacy of the 2015 Para Pan Am Games. One pillar of the OPC looks at the development pathway of para athletes. To support pillar development around the para-athletes experience as they move through their development, I was brought in to conduct a study on para athlete development. Para swimming was selected as the sport of focus as Swim Ontario was a founding member of the OPC and prior initiatives aimed at supporting para athlete development had also focused on para swimming so it was a natural extension of the prior work that had been done. The OPC was involved in identifying the sport and provided financial support for the study. Upon the completion of the project, a summary of findings were presented to the OPC and documentation of the findings were provided.

During my work on the first study, the Associate Director of High Performance and Para Swimming National Coach (ADHP) at Swimming Canada heard contacted me to discuss the findings and the possibility of Swimming Canada supporting further research. From the meeting, the second and third studies were initiated as a means to focus on the experiences of those in later stages of their development, whose experiences would span most of the development pathway and could provide us with a glimpse of the context in which para swimmer development is occurring. Swimming Canada has an interest in refining the LTD, and thus current athletes' experiences with the existing framework might be influential for future thinking on programs

and services. The ADHP supported access to para swimmers in the later stages of their development and I served as a Team Manager of the 2019 Para Pan Am Games Canadian swim team.

As it was only by having access to the para swimmers and parents of para swimmers that either of these studies was possible, both Swim Ontario and Swimming Canada played an important role in the conduction of these studies.

1.7 Layout of Dissertation

I chose an integrated article format for my dissertation. As the focus of my research is practical in nature with an eye to systems change, I chose this approach to also emphasize key areas in the data that could have an impact on practice. The three articles included in the dissertation are a representation of the original research conducted during my Doctoral studies. There are five chapters to my dissertation. Chapter One provides an overview of my research and provides an outline of the rest of the document. The research objectives and research questions are presented. As I followed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach for the studies which recognizes the impact of the researcher on the data collection and analysis process, my positionality as a researcher will be discussed.

Chapters Two, Three and Four are comprised of the articles overviewed in Chapter One. Due to the integrated article approach, there is potential for there to be some repetition within the three articles. Chapter Two is titled Para Sport Development Experiences: Perspectives of Para Swimmers and Parents has been published in the journal *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* (Sales & Misener, 2021). Chapter Three is titled Views from the Wet Side of the Pool: Contextual Factors of the Para Swimmer Development Experience will be submitted to the

journal *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* and Chapter Four is titled *Hearing One Thing, Experiencing Another: A Comparative Analysis of the Experience of Elite Para Swimmers and the Key Factors of the Long-Term Development Model* is a sport management focused paper. The final chapter (five), focuses on bringing together the findings and implications of chapters two, three and four as I discuss the theoretical implications and significance of the research findings, the practical implications, and provide concluding thoughts.

1.8 Research Objective and Questions

The objective of my research was to provide an outlet for the experiences of developing para swimmers within the Canadian sport context. It is the experiences and perspectives of the para swimmers that were fore fronted as much as possible, although the perspective of parents of para swimmers was also included in the first study given the key role they play their child's development, particularly in the initial stages of development (Côté, 1999). The motivation to present the experiences of para swimmers was also influenced by the current paucity of literature on the developmental experiences of para athletes, particularly from the perspective of the para athletes themselves. As discussed earlier, I was motivated to conduct this research based on my background as an athlete, a coach and classifier, and my desire to enhance the para athlete development experience for generations to come. The primary research question throughout all three studies was: How do para swimmers experience their athletic development pathway?

The first study was initiated at the request of the OPC and focused on the experiences of para swimmer development in a specific province, regardless of level of competition, from the perspective of para swimmers and parents of para swimmers. The first study provided me with an initial look at the areas of importance to para swimmers who are currently engaged in the

athlete development process. The second study was initiated through discussions with the ADHP at Swimming Canada and focused on the experiences of para swimmers at the later stages of their development for the purpose of identifying the factors that lead to ongoing para swimmer succession through the levels of competition. Through the data collection and analysis process, the three research questions below correspond to chapters two, three and four of my dissertation.

1. How do para-swimming participants (athletes and parents) reflect on their sport development experiences?
2. What are the contextual factors that impact the para swimmer development experience?
3. How do para swimmers' development experiences compare to the guidelines of the Long-Term Development model?

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Chapter Two

2 Para Sport Development Experiences: Perspectives of Para Swimmers and Parents

2.1 Abstract

This study examines para swimmers' athlete development experiences from the perspectives and reflections of athletes, and parents of athletes. Guided by interpretive phenomenological analysis, twelve participants engaged in the interview process (seven parents and five athletes). Five areas of convergence were identified: fundamental skill development, personal connection, coaching, classification, and connecting with others "like me". Through a discussion of the differences of development experiences between the participants in this study and the current literature on athlete development, we highlight areas of concern in applying a non-para specific athlete development model to para swimmers. This study identifies several areas of consideration in the future design of a para athlete development framework or model.

Keywords: para athletes, awareness, classification, talent development, coaches

2.2 Introduction

Over the past few decades there has been significant attention given to the sport development of non-disabled athletes, which has led to the design of multiple developmental frameworks, such as the Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery (FTEM) framework (Gulbin et al., 2013), the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014), and the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) (Sport for Life, 2015). In Canada, the LTAD has been in use for almost the past two decades as a systematic guide to the development of athletes. National Sport Organizations (NSOs) have also developed their own sport specific version of the LTAD (Sport for Life, 2016). Sport for Life, the organization that oversees and continues to evolve athlete development guidelines in Canada, published the No Accidental Champions (NAC) document to assist in the application of the LTAD to athletes with an impairment (referred to in this paper as para athletes) (Sport for Life, 2013). The NAC,

describes some of the opportunities and challenges that face persons with permanent disabilities in pursuing sport and physical activity, and how the Canadian sport system can best accommodate their needs for increased activity and greater achievement through Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD). (Sport for Life, 2013, p. 5)

The NAC asserts that para athletes are athletes first and having an impairment second, therefore, “almost all of the principles behind Canada’s LTAD model for able-bodied athletes are applicable to athletes with disabilities” (Sport for Life, 2013, p. 5). However, the life of a para athlete involves unique individual, environmental, and cultural challenges and complexities, which calls into question whether athlete development pathways designed for non-disabled athletes can be adequately applied to para athletes (Hutzler et al., 2016; Paradis & Misener,

2018; Patatas et al., 2018). For instance, physical literacy is “the life-long development of fundamental movement skills and fundamental sport skills in a wide variety of environments” (Sport for Life, 2019, p. 43) and is a focus during the early stages of development in several athlete development frameworks (e.g., LTAD & DMSP). Due to social, physical, attitudinal, and architectural constraints in accessing community physical activity opportunities (Kehn & Kroll, 2009; Rimmer, 2005; Wiart et al., 2015), an individual with an impairment’s development of physical literacy may be impacted negatively. Lower physical literacy would pose unique considerations in the early stages of development compared to those described in the current athlete development frameworks or models (Côté, 1999; Sport for Life, 2019). Despite some alterations made to development models for use with para sports, there remain significant questions about the value in this adapted approach. Little is understood about how individuals with an impairment engage with the developmental models designed for nondisabled athletes and experience these approaches. To begin to understand this phenomenon, we decided to explore the development experiences of para athletes in a sport that utilizes an athlete development model based on the Canadian LTAD.

Understanding the developmental experience of para athletes remains limited, in part due to a general lack of research into para sport (Jaarsma et al., 2014). Dehghansai et al., (2017) conducted a systematic review of the literature related to the development of para athletes showing only four articles focused on long term development frameworks. Mann et al. (2017) discussed advancements in talent identification including the increased interest in the talent identification of para athletes. Talent identification is an important component of development of any athlete (para or otherwise) as once an athlete has been recognized as having potential in a sport, they begin to receive additional supports and opportunities, which assists them in reaching

elite levels of competition. Mann et al. (2017) observed that there is a lack of resources and funding for para sport initiatives which impacts the talent identification and development programs of para athletes because the demand for resources and quality training opportunities increases as an athlete progresses through their development (Balyi et al., 2013; Côté, 1999; Gulbin et al., 2013). Howe (2008) argued that in para sport it is the classification system and an athlete's assigned sport class that influences an athlete's potential and advancement towards elite para sport. Whether identification comes through talent identification or sport class assignment, once a para athlete has been identified as having potential, their access to resources, training and competitive opportunities increases.

The perspective of para sport athletes on their own development experiences has been identified as an area that requires further inquiry. In a study investigating the policy factors and stakeholder influence of the para athlete development pathways, in which 32 stakeholders (coaches, classifiers, high-performance directors, managers and policy makers) were interviewed, Patatas et al. (2019) found that coach education and provision were the most impactful sport policy factors throughout the development pathway of a para athlete. The inclusion of para athletes would have offered insights into perceived barriers and challenges to para sport development that other stakeholders may not recognize (Patatas et al., 2019). Additionally, Turnnidge et al. (2012) also cited the importance of the para athlete perspective in identifying the contextual processes of sport experiences. Finally, while researching what constituted a quality participation experience in para sport, Allan et al. (2018) interviewed former and current para athletes about their para sport experiences and examined the meaning that para athletes placed on their para sport participation. They found that para sport participants ascribed to one of five narratives when describing their para sport participation demonstrating that there are varying methods of deriving

meaning and experiencing quality in para sport participation and advancement along the developmental pathway.

Parents have a profound impact on the development of athletes throughout the stages of the development pathway (Côté, 1999; Lauer et al., 2010; Wuerth et al., 2004), with research suggesting they have the greatest influence on the development of athletes (Côté et al., 2003).

Parental involvement changes as an athlete moves through the development process, starting out being highly involved in tangible and supportive ways in the early and middle stages of development (Lauer et al., 2010). In addition to the perspectives of athletes, the perspective of parents on their child's athlete development experience is an important component to take into consideration due to their high level of involvement in their children's early experiences.

Considering the aforementioned discussion, we focused our research on one sport, swimming, exploring para-swimmers' experiences and parents' perspectives of their child's experiences regarding development pathways and system structures. This does not negate the other critical influencers in development such as coaches, however, we chose to focus on the athlete and parent perspective of the development pathway. The view of coaches in para sport has been addressed elsewhere (e.g. Cregan et al., 2007; Duarte et al., 2018; McMaster et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). Para swimming was selected as the sport of focus because swimming was the first para sport in Canada to be integrated with its non-disabled counterpart at the NSO level (Swimming Canada, n.d.b) and was an early adopter of the use of a sport development model (Misener et al., 2019). Therefore, we felt para swimming was the appropriate sport to use in this initial investigation into the development experiences of para athletes.

We focused on exploring the following question: how do para swimmers and parents of para swimmers reflect on their or their child's sport development experiences? By establishing a

clearer understanding of the development experiences of para swimmers, we can begin to recognize the nuances and considerations that are needed in better supporting para athletes now and in the future.

2.3 Methods

In this study, we adopted an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to understand the experiences of para swimmers (Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA emphasizes interpretivist philosophical assumptions based on a relativist ontological perspective and constructivist epistemological approach (Stansen & Chambers, 2019). IPA is focused on the examination of personal experiences, the meaning given to these experiences and how each individual makes sense of those experiences (Smith, 2011). In IPA, the participants are seen as the experts with the researcher and the participant working together to make sense of the experience, and using idiographic descriptions to illustrate the meaning found in the experience (Smith, 2011). As the dynamic role of the researcher is recognized to impact the researcher's ability to access the participant's experience and the ability to make sense of the participant's experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), it should be noted that the lead researcher is a multi-game Paralympian and coach and is well known in the para swimming community in which the research took place.

The IPA approach is appropriate for use when investigating “complexity, process, or novelty” (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Athlete development meets this criteria as it is considered to be a systematic (Balyi et al., 2013), complex process (Sport for Life, 2019), and the concept of para athlete development is still in this infancy (Dehghansai et al., 2017). IPA allowed us to focus on

a small number of participants, and provide a voice for the participants, through the inclusion of specific statements from the para athletes and parents (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

2.3.1 Data Collection

Due to the small and specific group of individuals that would meet the criteria for our study, purposive sampling was employed (Smith & Osborn, 2003). To be considered for inclusion in the study, participants had to be a current or former competitive para swimmer or be the parent of a current or former competitive para swimmer. In addition, participants had to currently be or previously have been a member of a provincially registered swim club for a minimum of two years and live in the selected province. As swimming is a sport that athletes typically begin their participation at a young age, both para swimmers and parents of para swimmers were included in the sample as it was felt that parents' recollections of their child's developmental experience would be equally valuable. To reach the target group, the provincial sports organization (PSO) was contacted, provided with the details of the study along with a letter of information to review, and given the opportunity to ask any questions. The PSO was requested to send an email to coaches or administrators of all swim clubs with an identified para swimmer, which they did. The email provided information about the study, the letter of information and the contact information of the lead researcher. Interested athletes and/or parents contacted the lead researcher. Snowball sampling also took place as participants were asked to pass on the letter of information to anyone, they thought met the inclusion criteria and may be interested in participating. The lead researcher also attended a provincial level swim competition and passed the letter of information out to coaches of para swimmers.

Interviews with participants who reached out to the lead researcher were arranged and conducted either in person (one interview) or over the telephone (ten interviews). One participant asked to receive the interview questions before engaging in the interview and then provided their answers in writing, instead of engaging in an interview. Providing multiple options for participants to engage in the study in whatever method they were most comfortable offered a greater level of accessibility to the research – a core value of this approach. A semi-structured interview guide was developed through discussions between the lead and second researchers and informed by literature on non-disabled athlete development attentive to the phenomenological approach. Questions focused on assisting the participants in telling their stories regarding their or their child's athlete development experiences. Sample questions included "please tell me how you or your child got involved in swimming and what supports were most helpful in the progression of your or your child's swimming career." Interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 15 and 45 minutes in length. The variation in length of interviews was attributed to the level of development of the participant or their child, the personality of the participant, and the semi-structured research design. Regardless of length of the interview, participants engaged in detailed discussion regarding their experience with para swimmer development and the information was deemed valuable for analysis. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and uploaded to NVivo.

The participant group included five para swimmers (4 female, 1 male) and seven parents of para swimmers (6 mothers, 1 father representing 2 female and 5 male athletes). All athletes were a minimum of sixteen years of age and all parents had children who were under the age of sixteen. The age range of the athletes represented in the study ranged from ten to twenty-three years of age. Of the athletes represented, either by themselves or their parents engaging in the study, ten reported identifying with congenital impairment and two reported identifying with acquired

impairment. As swimming tends to be an early entry sport, it is understandable that most of the participants identified as having congenital impairments. In fact, of the two athletes who identified as having an acquired impairment that were represented, both acquired their impairment before the age of two. The years of involvement in para-swimming (being a registered member of a swim team) ranged from three to eleven years. The highest level of competition achieved ranged from local meets to international competitions. Of the twelve development experiences that were represented in the sample, eight experiences took place in integrated training environments (para swimmers training in predominantly mainstream swim clubs) and four experiences took place in specialized training environments (swim clubs designed for swimmers with an impairment that also encourage mainstream siblings to participate). An array of classifications were represented, from S3 to S11, with two athletes represented who had not yet been through a comprehensive classification process. Classification in swimming is based on the functional ability of the athlete and for those with a physical impairment sport classes range from S1, which is the most limited functional ability to S10 (the highest functioning ability included in para swimming), S11 to S13 for those with visual impairments (S11 having the least level of sight and S13 having the most while still meeting the inclusion criteria) and S14 for those with an intellectual impairment. To protect the privacy of participants, the impairment and classification of participants' or participants' children are not included in this report and pseudonyms were used when discussing individual participants and their quotations.

2.3.2 Data Analysis

We employed the IPA analysis process as laid out by Smith and Osborn (2003), which included following the idiographic approach, with each interview first being analyzed independently. The

first step in analysis involved the lead researcher developing familiarity with each participant's account by reading and rereading each transcript thoroughly. On the first reading, general notes on points of interest, similarities, and contrasts were made. On the second reading, theme titles were assigned. Examples of codes at this phase included learning to swim, entry to a swim team, connectedness, and benefits. The next step in the analysis was to review the themes and make clusters whenever possible. The themes from the first transcript were used to inform the analysis of subsequent transcripts while also maintaining awareness of new themes as identified by the researchers. Once all transcripts were analyzed, all themes were reviewed and further clustered where appropriate (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The strategies of critical friend and member reflection were utilized to determine trustworthiness of the findings. The second researcher, who was not involved in the data collection, acted as a critical friend (Smith & McGannon, 2018) discussing the initial codes brought forth in the process. The lead and second researcher discussed the themes and resolved any discrepancies throughout the coding process. A form of member reflection was used to allow participants the space and opportunity to provide elaboration or additional information regarding their experiences (Tracy, 2010). Once the interviews were transcribed, participants were sent a copy of their transcription with an invitation to review and provide clarification or additions either via email communication or an additional conversation with the lead researcher. Only one participant provided clarification on two incidences they had described and on the correct spelling of a name. Otherwise, no further reflections were drawn from the participants, allowing the authors to have confidence in the trustworthiness of the representation of participant experiences (Tracy, 2010).

2.4 Findings

By taking steps to understand the para athlete and parent perspective we can begin to identify areas that are most impacted by decisions made regarding the para athlete development experience. Therefore, our study was guided by the desire to begin to understand the para swimmer and parent perspective of the athletic development experience. From the data, five themes of impact on the developmental experience of the para swimmers in this study were identified: fundamental skill development, personal connection, coaching, classification, and connecting with others “like me”. We structured the themes in the order the participants first experienced them during their development, except for the theme of connecting with others “like me” as participants identified it as being important throughout the development experience.

2.4.1 Fundamental Skill Development

In any sport, athletes begin by learning the fundamental skills necessary for engagement. For para swimming, the first step is to learn how to swim. Several participants indicated that the motivation for learning to swim was as a means of rehabilitation or physical therapy. These participants were looking for a form of exercise that would aid in increasing or maintaining mobility or reducing pain or discomfort. To start the learn to swim process, all para swimmers or their parents looked into taking community swimming lessons due to the perceived benefits. For the majority of participants, enrolling in community swimming lessons was not a positive experience. Many participants indicated that their experience was hindered by a lack of knowledge of the instructors on how to teach an individual with an impairment how to swim. Josie, a parent, put it this way, “The kids that teach swimming lessons are young and they didn’t know how to adapt it for her.” Cheryl, a para swimmer, had a similar experience when her

mother signed her up for swimming lessons, “the problem was no swim instructor was ever properly training or exposed to teach children with (specific diagnosis) how to swim.” Among those who were satisfied with their experiences with community swimming lessons, either the para swimmer received one on one attention from an instructor or the para swimmer would be considered to experience minimal functional impairment. Attending a specialized program for swimmers with an impairment that provided one on one instruction from instructors trained in adapting the lessons to the swimmers’ individual needs was deemed to be optimal for learning the fundamental skills of swimming by both parents and athletes. In explaining her learn to swim experience, Betty, a para swimmer, stated

In swimming lessons I kind of learned the basics but I was so not comfortable being in the water by myself. So, I was practically a non-swimmer and then I just, my parents just completely put me into the (specialized) program and that’s really when I had the one-on-one opportunity to work with someone who understood disability and I was able to learn how to swim pretty quickly after that.

Therefore, para swimmers were able to obtain the fundamental skills required for swimming when engaged in a one-on-one learning environment, where the skill development methods were adapted to their individual needs. Once an athlete had learnt how to swim, the next step in development was to be connected with a competitive training opportunity.

2.4.2 Personal Connection

Before someone can engage in a sport, they must first know what opportunities are available to them. Our analysis showed that the majority of participants became aware of para swimming opportunities through being told about available programs by individuals with influence in their

lives, such as friends, family members, or medical professionals. As described by Valerie, a parent,

Actually, one of his friends was on the swim team in (hometown) and although I was aware of it, I hadn't really considered it as an option for him and then her mother mentioned that when she was filling out the registration form, there's actually a question about will this child be or is this child a para swimmer? So, she thought that was interesting and maybe I should look into it.

One participant described having had a chance encounter with a coach experienced in working with para swimmers, who encouraged them to get involved. Only one participant stated that they had learned of a competitive para swimming opportunity from personal inquiries at a swim club or city program. Thus, unlike traditional sport participation trajectories where newcomers to participation may come about through marketing and communications, individualized attention and personal invitations to join were key to early experiences in swimming participation.

2.4.3 Coaching

Once they were a member of a swim club, participants indicated that a coach's knowledge and experience with working with para swimmers was of utmost importance to their or their child's athletic development. As Melody, a para swimmer, put it "we need a club and a coach that understands that we are just like everyone else on the team but, we just do things differently and to the best of our abilities." However, our findings show that locating experienced coaches and/or educational resources was not easy. As Valerie, a parent, stated about the coaches working with her child, "they sort of taught themselves because none of our coaches had worked with a (specific diagnosis) swimmer before. They were sort of all learning as they went." The

lack of experienced para swimming coaches was noted as a challenge by all participants.

Participants who were involved in programs with experienced coaches and other para swimmers considered themselves as being fortunate as they recognized the difficulties that para athletes working with coaches without experience could face. Toni, a para swimmer, exemplified this when she stated,

I feel I was really lucky on that front but I feel like for other people who are the only para swimmer on their team. I feel like the coach knowing what to do if they have never dealt with a para swimmer before is very difficult.

Having a coach with the requisite knowledge about the individual needs of the para swimmer was also discussed as participants indicated the importance of having their or their child's training plans and practices adapted or individualized to the athlete's specific needs. When discussing his experiences with his coaches, Archie, a para swimmer, stated "...the coaches always made their own sets for me. It was customized and tailored to me so I would improve but it wasn't too challenging, but there was enough challenge to make me be successful." Other participants indicated that while it would be very helpful if individual adjustments were made to workouts to meet the needs of the athlete, coaches were not always doing so. As stated by Harper, a parent, "So that would be helpful just in practice for someone to kind of adjust the sets and everything for my daughter's needs so she's not behind everyone else all the time just swimming trying to catch up."

Participants felt that coaches with the appropriate targeted knowledge and skills to adapt workouts for para athletes was very important, although many coaches were lacking in these areas. Once para swimmers had found a competitive program, began to work with a coach, and

started attending competitions, the next significant step in their development was going through the classification process.

2.4.4 Classification

Classification refers to grouping para swimmers by the level of functioning of their bodies and is utilized to provide structure to para sport competition (International Paralympic Committee, 2020). In the Canadian system, there are three levels of classification, each with their own requirements and increasing level of direct involvement with the athlete. Level one involves the submission of documentation regarding the diagnosis of an impairment and level two and three involve the addition of a physical and technical examination conducted by trained classifiers (Swimming Canada, n.d.). From the perspective of the participants, classification determines an individual's inclusion and position within para sport. The majority of participants discussed how classification was significant to their engagement in the sport. As exemplified by Melody, a para swimmer, "Classifications, in my opinion, really determines one's future in the sport, in both positive and negative ways." Athletes in particular, focused on how classification gave them a place where they could be competitive. Betty, a para swimmer, was enthusiastic about the process, saying, "It's really cool how they're able to put everyone with so many different abilities and stuff and be able to put them into categories where we can compete on the same level". For those who had not been through the classification process yet, being classified was seen as the key entrance point into competition and being competitive in the sport, as exemplified by Ethel, a parent,

He thinks he would like to be classified but he also thinks that being classified will help him succeed. So, he thinks that being classified will allow him to enter more competitions and give him what he needs in order to get further competitively.

While participants acknowledged the importance of classification, they also expressed a lack of knowledge/understanding regarding the process and components of classification. The lack of knowledge/understanding led participants to be uncertain, nervous, and scared when going through the classification process. When discussing her child's first experience going through a classification process, Sabrina, a parent, remembered that,

...he was very emotional because he was kind of, "I don't know". He was hearing those numbers with people saying "Ok" or making movements for him with his body and they were saying "Ok 2, 1, 3, 4, 1"...Emotionally for him it was hard. It wasn't easy. I think he was afraid of when he heard the number.

Uncertainty around classification was also extended to the outcomes and ramifications of classification, with participants questioning the fairness of the categorizations or what could happen to their or their child's classification should their swim times change. Veronica, a parent mentioned,

...my understanding is that once he's classified if his times improve greatly or he starts to do significantly well, he could lose that classification or be moved, something like, he can move classifications or be bumped from a classification, which just blows my mind...

While classifications can be changed, these changes take place once a para swimmer has gone through another classification process and are due to changes in the functional ability of the para

swimmer or due to changes in the classification process which is reviewed periodically (International Paralympic Committee, 2018). Classifications are not changed due to a para swimmer improving their physical fitness, but this misinformation was clearly prevalent. For para swimmers in the highest classifications (or those with the highest functional ability) changes in classification can lead to them, while still having an impairment, to be deemed ineligible within the updated rules of para swimming. Despite classification being perceived as playing a key role in the development of a para swimmer, there is clearly a lack of knowledge and understanding of the processes and outcomes of classification. It is a rite of passage into the competitive environment that brings with it a lot of uncertainty, tension, and unease about continued participation.

2.4.5 Connecting with Others “Like Me”

The importance of and/or wanting to have more opportunities to interact with other para swimmers was a key finding, with some athletes stating that they felt more comfortable in an environment with others “like me”. Betty, a para swimmer, made this very clear when she mentioned,

I especially enjoyed just having other people with disabilities around because like in other parts of my life like school and stuff, I would be the only kid with a disability. So being able to walk on the pool deck and no one really cared about how I walked, or no one cared about the disability so that was fantastic.

Athletes also discussed how they enjoyed competitions where they were able to compete against other para-athletes and how it was important to them to be able to race someone with similar abilities. Interacting with other para swimmers was also extended to include the idea of having a

role model to assist with navigating the “para swimming world”, goal setting and learning about para swimming. Toni, a para swimmer, expressed the importance of a role model in stating,

I think you should talk to someone who kind of knows what to expect a little more and can like guide you into the first directions. I feel like there’s a lot of kind of trial and error and little things that you do that might not work for you and I think knowing someone who can kind of guide you through that can eliminate some of like the extra stuff that you don’t really need to deal with.

Parents also stated how they felt that it was important to develop a network with other parents or those that had been there before to provide each other with support and answer questions. Being in an accepting training environment and receiving social support from others is something both para swimmers and parents in this study were looking for, but not all were experiencing; one third of the participants indicated they did not feel accepted and supported.

2.5 Discussion

The findings of this research shed light on the experiences of para swimmer development, described above as the five themes found in this research. While there is not uniformity in these experiences and the findings are specific to the participants of this study, when discussed in relation to literature insights for supporting para swimmer development and the design of a para athlete specific development framework can be identified (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Each of the five themes identified in the results demonstrate the importance of considering how para swimmers and parents of para swimmers have framed their understanding of sport development. In some ways, their experiences map well onto what has been studied in some areas such as coaching and social support, but also demonstrates the importance of valuing the unique

experiences of para athlete development which has been undervalued in the sport development literature (Huetzler, et al., 2016).

A key issue that has been debated in the literature and remains a challenge for all sports, is attracting potential participants/athletes to suitable programs. For individuals with impairment, this is not always an easy task, and may require consideration beyond traditional marketing techniques. In looking at the barriers and facilitators to physical activity participation by children with impairments, Shields and Synnot (2016) identified a lack of appropriate communication and targeted advertising of programs as a barrier to participant engagement. Similar sentiments were expressed by the participants in the present study where most participants became engaged in sport because of referrals from those with whom they had a personal connection such as friends, family, and medical personnel. Jaarsma et al. (2020) found that word of mouth information dissemination from credible messengers, such as peers, professionals, and service providers, played an important role in physical activity information reaching individuals with an impairment. The need for the public to be made aware of sporting opportunities for individuals with an impairment has been recognized in the LTD (Sport for Life, 2019) and the stage of Awareness was added to the model in 2016 (Sport for Life, 2016). However, even with the inclusion of the Awareness stage to the LTAD, there remains a lack of appropriate marketing and awareness raising campaigns for para sport involvement (Peers et al., 2020). In an analysis of websites of Athletics organizations from across Canada (NSOs, PSOs, DSOs and mainstream clubs) for content on para sport, Peers et al. (2020) found an absence of para sport content on the majority of websites. If organizations that offer para sport programming are not advertising these opportunities, then awareness will continue to be a barrier to para sport participation.

At the fundamental skill development level, the participants in this study identified that there was a lack of knowledgeable instructors, and that one on one or individualized instruction was most appropriate to meet the needs of individuals with impairment. This has been acknowledged elsewhere in relation to providing developmentally appropriate instruction (Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al., 2018; Gelinias & Reid, 2000; Shields & Synnot, 2016). Several participants described their or their child's experience with mainstream swimming lessons as being insufficient to accommodate their needs. When investigating the applicability of the skills progression of standard learn to swim programs to children with an impairment, Gelinias and Reid (2000) found that most of the children did not follow the expected learn to swim progressions. They called for swim instructors to be educated in a variety of teaching methods, allowing the instructors to individualize their teaching approach to accommodate the movement choices of the children. Further Kraft and LeBlanc (2018) identified that during the training and certification process of instructors there needs to be a focus on how to adapt and teach the basic skills to those with varying means of functioning and learning styles. The current athlete development models identify that early in an athlete's development there needs to be a focus on the acquisition of the fundamental skills (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014; Gulbin et al., 2013; Sport for Life, 2019), and it is recommended that this is accomplished through early sampling or engagement in a variety of sports (Côté et al., 2009). However, for para athletes this step in their athletic development is extremely limited due to a lack of knowledge about available para sport opportunities and often limited knowledgeable instructors to ensure developmentally appropriate skill acquisition. Further, it is noted that the athletes in this study all entered swimming at an early age due to the onset of their impairment. Since many individuals acquire physical disabilities later in life, it is vital that fundamental skills development programs be available for individuals of all ages.

The theme of knowledge is also prevalent for participants' experiences with coaches. Due to a lack of educational opportunities and appropriate coaching resources, para sport coaches are often left on their own to gain the requisite disability and skill specific knowledge (McMaster et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2014). Coaches of para sport tend to use informal learning methods for enhancing their knowledge, such as discussions with their athletes (Cregan et al., 2007). However, placing the onus of educating their coach on the athlete is limiting, particularly in para swimming, as many athletes start their careers at a young age and may not necessarily be aware of the information that their coach may require to maximize their potential.

The participants of our study were not alone in desiring to work with a knowledgeable coach. In interviews with female Paralympians, Alexander et al. (2020) identified that para athletes valued coaches who had sport specific knowledge and who were open to being creative and making adaptations to meet the needs of the athlete. Both of these attributes of effective para sport coaches were also expressed by Burkett (2012) who stated that in working with para athletes, coaches must have a solid understanding of sport specific knowledge and a focus on what a para athlete can do. While there are many similarities in working with para and non para athletes, there are also differences that coaches need to be aware of (Duarte et al., 2018). Differences such as rule modifications, adaptive technologies (Burkett, 2012), impairment specifics (Burkett, 2012; Cregan et al., 2007), accessibility considerations, and the enhanced role of the parents or family (Cregan et al., 2007) all impact para athlete engagement, training, and performance. In our findings, each of these issues came forth to varying degrees depending on the stage of the development of the athlete. Scholars have argued that when coaches are better educated, this translates into more positive sport experiences (Conroy, & Coatsworth, 2006) and greater levels

of success in sport (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Therefore, more attention and research are needed to address the educational needs of coaches working with para athletes.

Another area that participants identified as having an impact on their development experience was classification. According to the International Paralympic Committee, “classification provides structure for competition” and is the system used to “minimize the impact of impairments on sport performance to ensure the success of an athlete is determined by skill, fitness, power, endurance, tactical ability and mental focus” (2015, p. 2). For participants in our study, going through the classification process was part of their entry into competitive para sport. Van Dornick and Spencer (2020) found similar sentiments when they looked specifically at the classification experiences of para swimmers in Canada. In our findings, even those that had not been through the process identified classification as key to their continued development and future competitive sporting career. At the same time, participants experienced great uncertainty about the classification process itself, what to expect, and what this process actually meant for their overall sport development. Some have attributed the uncertainty around the classification process as a lack of education of athletes and coaches regarding the classification process and outcomes (Molik et al., 2017; Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020). This uncertainty is exacerbated by the power imbalance in the classification system where the athlete must submit to the process and yet they have no control in the outcome (Peers, 2009). As identified by participants in this study, classification is a key point in athlete development and yet there is no recourse for the decisions that are made through the classification process (Peers, 2009).

Numerous tensions exist throughout the development process with classification being both a necessary part of development to move into competition, but ripe with power imbalances and mystery for the participants. When we turn to the literature on athlete development and the

current models which have been proposed to be adaptable to the para athlete experience, there is no mention or recognition of the key component of classification or where it may fit within the development experience. Classification may very well be the most significant difference between the para and non para athlete development experience as it is the entry point into and potentially the swift exit out of para sport. An athlete development model that is applicable to the para athlete development experience would be well served to recognize the influence of the classification process.

Another influential component of the para swimmer development experience is the social connections to others like themselves, also known as having a sense of belonging. Belonging includes feeling of connectedness, relatedness, and attachment (La Guardia et al., 2000; Ryan, 1995) and has been argued to be a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2008). When para swimmers in this study felt that they could be themselves and that they were socially connected with others with impairments, identified elsewhere as “coming home” (Gill, 1997), they reported a positive developmental experience. As individuals with an impairment have been found to develop fewer friendships (Wiener & Schneider, 2002) and have less opportunities to connect with others with impairment (Nyquist et al., 2020), ongoing para sport engagement presents the opportunity to fill a fundamental human need that might otherwise not be met. Feeling a sense of belonging has been found to be a facilitator to participation in both physical activity and sporting contexts (Allan et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018; Jaarsma et al., 2014), an inhibitor to athlete burnout (Luzio et al., 2020) and a key factor for sustained participation for athletes with an impairment (Morris et al., 2019). In the current athlete development models, the importance of social connectedness has been identified in the early stages of development (Sport for Life, 2019), however, is not emphasized in the latter stages of

development. Due to the limited opportunities for connection with other individuals with impairment and the impact a sense of belonging has on the ongoing participation of para athletes, our findings show that fostering social connections with similar others is important throughout the development pathway.

2.6 Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

While the findings certainly shed light on some of the opportunities and challenges of the para sport development experience, we must acknowledge some limitations of this study and suggest future research opportunities. First, due to the IPA methodology, the findings of this study are specific to these participants in the sport of para swimming, and are not meant to be generalized to a larger para sport population. However, the findings do provide the beginning steps towards an understanding of para swimmer development. In time with future work investigating the developmental experiences of para athletes in other sports, demographics (competitive para swimming tends to include a younger demographic), and sport dynamics (e.g., team sports, winter sports, etc.) more general claims may be made (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Second, this study focused on the developmental experience of para swimmers in a developed, wealthy country where para sport has been acknowledged since the 1960s (Canadian Paralympic Committee, 2021). Conducting a study on the development of para swimmers in a developing region or a country where para sport has been openly recognized for a shorter period of time would add an important alternative perspective of para athlete development experiences. Third, the methodological approach emphasized a retrospective perspective relying on the accuracy of participant's recollection of past events and experiences. Utilizing a participatory and longitudinal method of data collection such as ongoing observations or repeat interviews over the

course of a para athlete's sporting career has the potential to provide more complexity and depth to the interpretation of the data (Cobley & Till, 2017). Lastly, future study of the para athlete development experience should be conducted in a cross disciplinary manner that would allow for social, psychological, and physiological components of development to be examined.

2.7 Conclusion

In this study, we examined para swimmers experience of sport development from their own perspective and those of parents. Five components of the para swimmer development experience were identified; personal connections, classification, fundamental skill development, coaching and connecting with others "like me". The findings demonstrate a need to consider how athlete development models represent the unique experiences of para athletes. It is simply not adequate to adapt a non-disabled athlete framework for the para athlete. But further, the athlete experience extends beyond the over-simplified models of involvement in sport for an individual with an impairment. First, any discussion of sport development needs to start from before sport participation begins, with access to physical activity. Secondly, qualified and knowledgeable instructors and coaches are required to ensure positive sport experiences through the life course of involvement in sport. Thirdly, no athlete development framework reviewed thus far has addressed the challenges and importance of classification, including appropriately educating all involved in the process. Finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, our work points to the need to foster social connections in para sport to help enhance the development experience. The opportunity to train, compete, and connect with other para athletes is key to any framework. While frameworks for sport development continue to evolve, our study further demonstrates a need to consider unique development models for para athletes. Our findings suggest that it is not

simply a matter of adapting an existing framework, but rather grounding a framework in the nuanced and critical aspects of what it means to enter sport and develop as a para athlete.

2.8 References

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Chapter Three

3 Views from the Wet Side of the Pool: Contextual Factors of the Para Swimmer Development Experience

3.1 Abstract

This study sought to understand the experience of athletic development of para swimmers selected to compete at their inaugural international multi-sport games. In line with the researchers' constructive perspectives and through semi-structured interviews and inductive analysis, an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was taken. Nine para swimmers representing a variety of classifications and impairment groups, who reside in multiple and different provinces participated in the study. Through the analysis process, two overarching themes came to light: the social and the organizational. The social theme identified key interpersonal relationships that were impactful to the development experience (parents, coaches, teammates, and other para swimmers). The organizational theme identified key institutions and policies of influence (swim clubs, provincial and national sports organizations, and the classification process). Through a discussion of these themes and subthemes and their impact on the experience of athlete development, the intersectionality of social and organizational factors is recognized. Differences between the para swimmer's development experience and that of mainstream athlete's development models are also highlighted.

Keywords: para sport, context, social, organizational, athlete development

3.2 Introduction

The growth of the Paralympic Games has steadily increased over the past several decades, with over 4300 athletes from 160 countries competing at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games, in contrast with 400 athletes from 23 countries competing at the first Paralympic Games, Rome, 1960.

Along with the increased number of countries and athletes competing at the Paralympic Games, there has been greater media coverage of the Paralympic Games. During the Rio 2016

Paralympic Games coverage was offered in 154 countries worldwide. (International Paralympic Committee, n.d.). As well, with the growth of online media coverage, close to one billion people engaged with the IPC's digital media offerings during these Games (International Paralympic Committee, n.d.). With the increase in exposure and prestige of the Paralympic Games, a need for countries to consistently produce para athletes capable of competing on the international stage is created. Yet, while the engagement of countries and athletes has increased, there remains a lack of research into the management of para sport (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014) and lack of knowledge of the development systems required to produce elite para sport athletes (Hutzler et al., 2016). Thus, I sought to identify contextual factors that impact the para swimmer development experience.

3.2.1 Review of the Literature

Over the past few decades, as the race for nations to win international medals has intensified there has been increased interest in identifying the policy factors that lead to sporting excellence including identifying systems necessary for the development of mainstream athletes (De Bosscher et al., 2008). In a critique of the previously presented pyramid of sport development, Green (2005) labeled the key components of athlete development from a policy perspective as

the following; athlete entrance, retention and advancement. Ogden and Edwards (2016) described athlete development as having “multiple levels and the linkages between the levels act as transition points” (p. 323). Several models have been put forth, all of which identify that achieving sporting expertise is a process that is phased – a process that begins with initiation, moves through continued engagement comprised of identification of talent, skill development, elite performance, and ends with retirement, moving out of sport, or transitioning to recreational engagement (Balyi et al., 2013; Côté, 1999; Gulbin et al., 2013). Of the models that have been put forth so far, only one, the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model has proposed application to para athletes, with the inclusion of two additional phases, awareness of sporting activities and the importance of first experiences in sport (Balyi et al., 2013). These two components were deemed important to the para athlete development experience due to the lack of public knowledge of para sport opportunities and the prevalence of negative initial experiences of sport by individuals with an impairment (Balyi et al., 2016). No para athlete specific development framework has been developed and research unique to the identification and development of para athletes is limited (Dehghansai et al., 2017; Houlihan & Chapman, 2017).

A para athlete specific development framework is needed to understand and identify the contextual differences in para sport relative to mainstream sport. Para sport requires different policies and programs than that of mainstream sport (Patatas et al., 2018), as the contexts and demands on para athletes differ from those of other athletes (Dowling et al., 2018; Patatas et al., 2019). The classification system, which dictates the eligibility of para athletes (Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014) and the impact of societal attitudes regarding inclusion and para sport (Pankowiak et al., 2015) are two examples of concepts that are unique to the para sport context.

Understanding the context in which a para athlete develops can broaden knowledge around why a specific para athlete is successful or unsuccessful (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007). The first step towards designing an athletic development framework that is representative of the experiences of para athletes is obtaining an understanding of the context in which successful para athlete development takes place. As identified by De Bosscher et al. (2006), success is most often defined as winning a medal at a major international sporting event such as the Paralympic Games. By developing an understanding of the context of para athlete development, quality indicators can be determined and used in the establishment of a para athlete development pathway (Hutzler et al., 2016). As Hutzler and colleagues suggested more research into the quality indicators of para sport athlete, programming, and pathways are necessary to establish a more thorough understanding of the specifics required for an effective para athlete development pathway. The development of a specific para athlete pathway would lead to improvement of service provision, heightened athletic performance and heightened quality of life for para athletes worldwide (Hutzler et al., 2016).

The development context of para sport has been investigated from the perspective of stakeholders (sport administrators, sport managers, coaches, classifiers). Within the Brazilian context which was influenced by the hosting of the 2016 Paralympic Games, Patatas and colleagues (2019) identified social, political, economic, legal and technology components as having contextually impact on para athlete development. Social components that impacted para athlete development included para sport awareness, societal attitudes towards individuals with an impairment, and cultural of disability and sport. The influence of being a host-Games nation was identified as a political component. School culture and the qualifications of professionals working with individuals with an impairment within the school system were identified as

educational components which influenced para athlete development. Economic components related to financial resource availability and legal components were linked to themes of accessibility. Technology components included accessible equipment and the classification system (Patatas et al., 2019). While the perspective of stakeholders is important and can begin to provide information as to the contextual factors that impact para athlete development, this approach to research leaves out the voice and experiences of those who live the developmental context first hand, the para athlete, a recognized gap in the study.

In a study looking at the determinants of international sporting success of para athletes within the sport of athletics from the perspective of coaches, administrators and international successful para athletes, Peake (2019) identified funding, talent management, support services, coaching, competition structure, facilities and essential- others as having an effect on athlete success, where success was understood as winning medals at the Paralympic Games. The study also identified differences between the para and non-disabled sport experience, such as the nature of impairment, support/care need levels and equipment needs (Peake, 2019).

In this research, I have sought to answer the clarion call by other researchers to include athlete voice in the literature regarding para athlete development (Patatas et al., 2019, 2020, 2022). I chose to focus on the experience of para swimmers who had been selected to their first international multi-sport event, thus identified to be in the latter stages of their athlete development. Para swimming was selected due to the participation of the leader of the national para swimming program at Swimming Canada in the initiation of this study.

3.2.2 Approach

I utilized an interpretative phenomenology analysis approach (IPA) which is rooted in a realist ontology and a constructionist epistemology (Larkin et al., 2006). A phenomenological approach allows others to learn about situations or events from those who experienced it (Allen-Collinson, 2016). IPA focuses on producing an explanation of a lived experience without the influence or direction of a pre-existing theoretical perspective which fits the phenomena of para swimmer development as there is currently no theory specific to para athlete development from which I could draw from. Analysis is therefore conducted in an inductive manner with the participant being recognized as the expert of their experiences and the active role the researcher has in the process, working with the participant to identify the meaning of the phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Therefore, utilizing IPA allowed the athletes to be identified as experts of their development and their experiences to be highlighted, at the same time, recognizing my role as the researcher and my engagement in the research process. As I am a former elite para swimmer, current coach, and classifier, it was important to me to use a methodology that recognized my role as the researcher and the impact that my background within the community had throughout the research process. IPA also recognizes an idiography approach and therefore, is suited for use with small samples (Smith, 2004). Since the para swimming community is small, purposive sampling was used which fit within the recommended small sample size of IPA, making IPA a fit for the parameters of both the research process and phenomenon under study.

3.3 Methods

The study was conducted with the support of the Associate Director of High Performance and Para Swimming National Coach for Swimming Canada (ADHP). The partnership stemmed from

the ADHPs desire to understand more about the experiences of para swimmers in Canada with the intention to better support para swimmer development. To facilitate data collection, the ADHP arranged for the lead researcher to be one of the team managers for the 2019 Para Pan Am Games (the Games) Canadian swim team (the team). As a former international level para swimmer and having an active role within the community as the team manager, the lead researcher was able to build rapport and trust with the athletes on the team.

3.3.1 Data Collection

Athletes selected to the Canadian 2019 Para Pan Am Games swim team were involved as participants in this study. Data collection took place over a five-month period, beginning April 2019 at a ten-day training camp in Europe and ended September 2019 at the completion of the Games. Following athletes' selection to the team, a letter of information and a consent form was sent to all selected athletes (and to parents and/or guardians, where applicable.) The letter of information outlined what would be involved in the study and indicated that personally identifying information would be kept private, as much as possible. Participants were made aware that agreeing to participate in the interviews was voluntary and choosing not to participate would have no negative repercussions (e.g., future team selection, formal status within the team, etc.). Semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, and observations were all important sources of data in understanding the athlete experiences. The interviews were the key source of data that facilitated in depth inquiry into areas of interest (Smith, 2004), focusing on understanding of the participants' experiences. The literature on mainstream athlete development (Balyi et al., 2013; Côté, 1999; Gulbin et al., 2013; Sport for Life, 2013) was used as a starting point for the formulation of interview questions, as were discussions between the lead and secondary researcher. Questions focused on the participants' development experiences beginning

with their first involvement with swimming. Examples of questions included discussing first involvement with swimming, describing environments as swimmers moved through the competitive swimming levels, and exploring challenges faced as they moved through competitive levels. Probing and clarification questions were prepared and used as necessary to encourage athletes to elaborate. The interview guide was pilot tested with retired international level para swimmers, to determine the relevancy of the questions.

3.3.2 Participants

Nine of thirteen athletes on the team participated in the semi-structured interviews, with consent acquired prior to interviews. Parental/guardian consent was also obtained for all interview participants under the age of sixteen years and those with an intellectual impairment. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher.

Of the nine athletes who participated in the interviews, only one had previously been selected to an international competition team. Team members came from four provinces across Canada and their ages spanned twenty years, with the youngest athlete in their early teens and the oldest in their early thirties. There was also a range of classifications with all three impairment categories (functional, visual, intellectual) represented. Classification is a system that is used to provide as equitable a racing opportunity as possible (International Paralympic Committee, 2015). For the privacy of the participants, no impairment or identifiable classification information is included in this article. Pseudonyms are used when referring to participants to identify their quotations. Additionally, it is noted here that participants are identified as athletes for the remainder of the paper.

3.3.3 Data Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis, as outlined by Smith and Osborn (2003), was utilized. In beholding to the inductive data analysis process of IPA, each participant transcript was analyzed separately, and in detail before shifting analytical focus to look for the similarities and differences between experiences with the intent of identifying patterns of meaning regarding the shared experience (Shinebourne, 2011). Therefore, to begin data analysis, the lead researcher read and reread each interview for clarity and understanding. During the first reading, notes were taken on points of interest and identifiable similarities, or contrasts recorded. During the second reading, themes were given titles. In this phase, examples of themes included: feeling left out, lack of coach experience, impact of impairment, the classification process. Once the first transcript was read and themes assigned, all themes were reviewed and clustered where appropriate. The lead researcher then analyzed the next transcript using the themes from the first transcript as a guide while continuing to note any emergent themes. After all the transcripts were analyzed, all themes were reviewed, and clustering continued when necessary. Discussions between the lead and second researcher took place throughout the coding process. The second researcher, who was not involved in data collection acted as a critical friend (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Discrepancies that arose during these discussions were thoroughly investigated and resolved. A manner of member reflection was utilized to allow participants the opportunity to provide clarification or elaboration on the experiences they had shared during the initial interviews (Tracy, 2010). Transcriptions of the interviews were emailed to participants along with the request for participants to review and provide any further information or clarification regarding what they had shared during the interviews. No participant provided any

feedback or further elaborations after receiving the transcripts allowing me to be confident that the transcripts were representative of the participants' experiences (Tracy, 2010).

3.4 Findings and Discussion

As this study aimed to identify contextual factors impacting para swimmers' athletic development from the perspective of athletes selected for their first international multisport competition, two categories that resulted from data analysis were the social structures of support and the organization (Figure 1. Contextual Factors of Para Swimmer Development). The category of social structures of support includes themes related to personal interactions and relationships that athletes have been established with people around them throughout their development as athlete. Themes within the social category include parents, coaches, teammates, and other para swimmers. The organizational category includes themes related to the institutions and policies that athletes identified as been impactful of their development experiences. Themes in the organizational category included the nature of the swim clubs they trained with on a daily bases, the role of the provincial sport organization (PSO) and the national sport organization (NSO) and the athlete's interactions with the classification process which is overseen by the International Paralympic Committee (International Paralympic Committee, 2015) and administered at the domestic level by the NSO (Swimming Canada, n.d.).

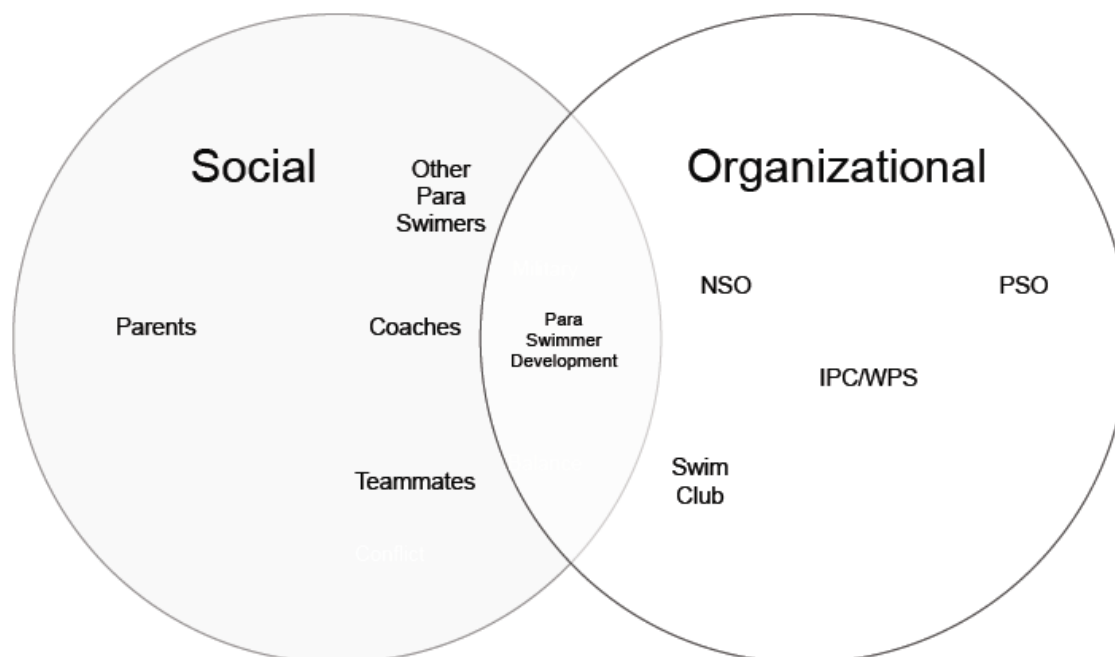


Figure 1. Contextual Factors of Para Swimmer Development

[National Sport Organizations (NSO), International Paralympic Committee (IPC), World Para Swimming (WPS), Provincial Sport Organization (PSO)]

3.4.1 The Social Structures of Support

3.4.1.1 Parents/Guardian/Advocates

The results demonstrate that parents have three roles throughout an athlete's development: initiation, advocacy, and support. Athletes indicated that their parents were the driving force behind their initial engagement/involvement in sport. For some, parents saw swimming as an important skill to have: "My mom wanted everyone to know how to swim but I continued it because I liked it" (Courtney), which is a common motivation behind parent's enrolling their children into sport. For other parents, swimming was seen as a tool for rehabilitation, "My dad came one night...and he's like guess where you're going to go next week...he's like to a pool where you're going to swim to improve like rehab" (Samantha). The initiation of sport for

therapeutic benefit is unique to para athletes and adds pressure to the expected outcome of their participation, beyond the sporting ideals of fun and skill development. Athletes also recognized the support that they received from their parents throughout their sport development experience. George summed up the support he had received by saying, "...my parents ...they're always supportive with it (swimming). And them being able to help take you to meets and stuff, allowing you to do that (swim), it's pretty great." The ongoing support of parents is significant in para swimming. Due to the functional abilities of some of the participants in this study, getting to training, processing their experiences, and having the ability to continue to engage in sport to an elite level would be negatively impacted without the continued support of their parents.

A unique role that was attributed to parents in this study was an advocacy role, working on behalf of their children to ensure their children were given the opportunity to be successful.

Amanda gave an example of this when she stated,

I always asked my coach "can I swim fly at a meet?" and she said, "no I don't think you would be good enough" and stuff like that, all these negative compliments. And then suddenly my mom just asked, "Can you just put her in it 'cause she's really dedicated and wants to try this race?" I got put in it and I was a second at regionals and then the next meet I went to, I made it."

While it is not uncommon for parents to have to speak up on the behalf of their children, the ongoing need for advocacy is unique. Additionally, parents being required to engage in advocacy for their children means that parents must possess the ability to recognize that advocacy is require and to have the skills, confidence, and energy necessary to effectively do so.

Parental advocacy, as identified in this research includes obtaining services/support for their child, highlighting the child's rights, well-being and welfare, bringing forth issues and working towards change, enhancing the knowledge of others regarding their child's impairment and "being a voice for their child" (Boshoff et al., 2016, p. 785). The advocate role of parents has been recognized, particularly in medical situations (Bishop, 2016; Clarke & Fletcher, 2004; Vasey et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2019). However, within the context of athletic development there is inadequate knowledge regarding the advocate role of the parents. For the athletes in this study, parents played an advocate role, most notably during the initiation of participation and interactions with coaches throughout their athletic development. While the importance of parents role in the initiation of sport engagement is recognized elsewhere, the parental role for mainstream athletes tends to shift to a follower, a less directly involved role as athletes progress in their development (Côté, 1999; Lauer et al., 2010; Wuerth et al., 2004).

From the perspective of coaches, the ongoing role of the parent has been recognized by Cregan et al. (2007) in informational interactions with coaches and in provision of physical assistance, like transportation to para swimmers. The athletes in our study identified that parents are not merely providing information in their interactions with coaches but are also advocating on the behalf of their children to ensure that their children are provided with the services, supports, and opportunities that they require. Being able to advocate effectively on the behalf of their children requires parents to have the necessary knowledge about not only their child's abilities but also about the realm of sport in which their child competes. Parents not having the necessary knowledge can lead to para swimmers being left at a disadvantage and excluded from opportunities they may otherwise have access to.

3.4.1.2 Coaches

Another key social support that was identified by athletes to be of significance was the relationship with their coaches. The importance of positive coach-athlete relationships has been recognized in other related research (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010, 2011; Petitpas et al., 2005). From the athletes' descriptions of their interactions with their coaches, three sub-themes to the coach-athlete relationship were identified: positive working relationship, negative interactions, and changing coaches. The athletes having an impairment was identified as an influential factor in each of the three sub-themes.

When discussing positive working relationships, athletes highlighted that they felt that working with coaches who had previous experience working with para swimmers was beneficial, but more important was the willingness of the coach to learn about para swimming, the functional abilities of the athlete and how those abilities may impact their swimming- technically, tactically, or physiologically. As Paul mentioned, "Every single one of them (personal coaches) that I've had on the para swimming journey has been front and center of it, wanting to get educated, wanting to make sure I'm on the right track." Along with understanding an athlete's individual needs, athletes felt that having a coach willing to personalize or adapt training to the athlete's abilities was key to their success. Barb discussed this concept when talking about her current training environment, "It's with my team but I don't do the same program...she (coach) does a different program for me." Similarly, from the perspective of female Paralympians, Alexander and colleagues (2020) found that willingness to learn and the personal adaptation of workouts impacted the athletes' perception of an effective working relationship with their coaches.

Most athletes mentioned the importance of trust in the coach-athlete relationship. Samantha laid this out plainly by stating,

Yeah my coaches knew pretty much where I was going, and I just trusted them. They prepared me for each level. They told me "now this is what we are going to do, and this is how we are going to do it, and hopefully that's where it will get us".

Feeling they can trust their coaches and having workouts tailored to the individual needs of the para swimmer is significant as there is a lack of coach education that is specific to para swimming and coaches tend to learn through experience. While there is some debate as to whether coaches working with para athletes require specific training or not (Patatas et al., 2018), there are areas of knowledge that have been recommended for coaches of para athletes that are unique to the para sport context including the influence of impairment on training, para sport specific technologies and rule modifications (Burkett, 2012). There are currently limited formal educational opportunities available to coaches working with para athletes (McMaster et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2014). Due to the current lack of educational opportunities, coaches need to be willing to gain knowledge through informal processes such as discusses with athletes and parents (Cregan et al., 2007). Interestingly, in Peake's (2019) study, elite level athletes (those winning international medals) rated the expertise of their coaches as high or very high, while coaches identified limitations in coach education that was available to them. Alternatively, the athletes in this study who were in the latter stages of their development recognized the limited expertise and knowledge of their coaches. As coaches who work with para athletes tend to increase their knowledge through interactions with para athletes and their parents (Cregan et al., 2007), and not through formal education, it is reasonable to assume that the elite athletes in Peake's study (2019) saw their coaches as being knowledgeable due to the increased exposure their coaches had to para sport as compared to the coaches working with athletes earlier in their development.

When discussing interactions with coaches that athletes considered negative, athletes described feeling that the coach was not open to listening to them, were not aware of their individual abilities or had other priorities and that they were not seen as an asset to their coaches. As stated by James in discussing struggles he had with his coach after he received a diagnosis which made him eligible for para swimming classification later in his swimming career and was looking to his coach for support in the transition to para swimming, "I think he just didn't care. He had other things that were more important to him."

Feeling undervalued by their coaches as James did in the example above was also mentioned by several

athletes, who expressed that their impairment was seen as a burden by the coaches that they were attempting to work with. For James, the impact of his impairment on the level of value his coach placed on him as an athlete was particularly blatant due to him acquiring his impairment after having already establishing himself as an athlete.

A significant event for athletes that impacted their development was changing coaches which often was a result of athletes changing programs, advancing through competitive levels or the coach leaving a club. Athletes shared that the experience of a coaching change was a source of stress on their development experiences, as it forced them to begin the relationship building process all over again. The establishment of a new coach athlete relationship is particularly impactful in the context of para swimming because there is a lack of coaches knowledgeable about para swimming. Therefore, working with a new coach is not just about the development of a new interpersonal relationship but also about educating their coach on their needs and abilities which takes time and energy and can be stress inducing for para swimmers. Amanda explained the stress of changing coaches when discussing her experience of working with a new coach,

Well that's kind of hard because I have a different coach now. But I know with my last coach he was humble about it so treated me the same. But this coach seems to always say how I'm a national level athlete and stuff. Like that kind of thing so it's sometimes overwhelming."

Amanda felt that over time she had developed a positive relationship with her former coach, who understood how she functioned and how to support her best. She did not feel that her new coach understood her needs and abilities and put additional stress on her. Having to develop a new working relationship felt overwhelming to Amanda and other athletes due to the high level of energy and time that they needed to put in to educating their coaches on their needs and abilities.

3.4.1.3 Teammates

Athletes spend a significant amount of time with their training groups during practices and competitions. Athletes mentioned that their interactions with their teammates played a role in their development experience. When athletes felt that they were accepted by their teammates, they described the interaction as being a part of a family. Kelly, "...we've grown closer as a team. I look at it more like a family, more than a team." Finding a place where an individual with an impairment feels accepted can be difficult due to the difference in functional ability an impairment can make. Also, the majority of the participants trained in integrated settings where they were the only or one of a few para swimmers, therefore, to be accepted they would have to make connections with their teammates who did not share the same sporting or life experiences as they did.

When describing negative interactions, athletes expressed feeling like they were outside of the group, unaccepted, and that they were not able to make a connection with their teammates. For some athletes, difficulty in making connections with their teammates was related to differences in age, as Amanda's experience demonstrates, "...sometimes I find with my teammates, there's some kids who are always like "Oh Amanda you're too old. Why do you still swim?" That kind of upsets me." Competitive swimming tends to be a sport in which the participation numbers peak before the age of eighteen. In para swimming, there is a much larger age range due to impairments being acquired later in life or due to continued participation. Also, para swimmers may come to sport later due to a lack of awareness of opportunities. Even within the participants of this study there was a twenty-year age range.

3.4.1.4 Other Para Swimmers

Athletes identified three areas in which other para swimmers played an important role in their development experience: introduction to the sport, competition, and acceptance.

Several athletes indicated they were introduced to para swimming by friends with an impairment, by a friend already engaged in the sport or by informing them about the opportunities available. As seen in George's experience, "I know someone who was already swimming as he went to my school." Other athletes discussed how seeing individuals with an impairment engaging in the sport made them want to give the sport a try. As Barb stated "My parents brought me to the World Championships in Montreal for para swimming. My parents said oh you should try it and I said okay and that's how I started." Seeing someone of similar abilities competing in sport or having a personal connection to someone of similar abilities already engaging in sport can help individuals with an impairment see themselves in the role of being an athlete. This is significant as there is limited exposure through the media or advertising of individuals with an impairment engaging in sport, particularly in comparison to the amount of exposure that occurs in mainstream sport.

When discussing participating in swim meets, athletes mentioned that they enjoyed competitions in which other para swimmers were also competing. These events gave them the opportunity to position themselves against other para swimmers instead of racing the clock. Along with providing someone to race against, having other para swimmers present gave athletes a sense of acceptance, something they did not feel when competing at competitions without other para athletes. Courtney summed up this experience when she stated,

I think that people who have disabilities and if they compete with able-bodied people, their chances of doing things, making finals, or having competition (others to compete against) isn't as fair as it is for abled-bodied. So, I think para swimming helped all the people with disabilities get together, talking about their disabilities, and compete against each other. Someone who has the same disability or the same time, who's like them in this sport then that was better.

Courtney's statement also highlights the importance of having opportunities to interact with other athletes with impairments who have a shared experience, and to build community. This is noteworthy as mentioned earlier, the majority of the participants in this study trained in environments where they were

the only or one of a few para swimmers. By engaging in competitions, the participants were provided with a community building opportunity that they may not have experienced elsewhere.

A sense of community was also impactful in training environments. Some athletes acknowledged advantages to being in an environment with other para athletes. Samantha stated, “I really liked swimming as only para swimmers because the coach would have adapted things for everyone.” When workouts are adapted for everyone the stigma of being seen as different would not be as apparent as compared to training in an integrated environment and having an adapted workout which would make a para swimmer’s differences stand out.

Feeling accepted and understood was easier to achieve with other para swimmers. As Amanda explained,

When there isn’t a lot of para swimmers it feels like I’m left out cause I’m the type that before a race I like to give fist pumps, right. So, the para swimmers all do it and I’m always so happy and say “Good Luck” back. But the able bodies always kind of have that weird stare and kind of rude.

Similar to the experience of Samantha in a training environment, Amanda found that when there were other para swimmers around there was less social stigma to her actions before a race. With other para swimmers there was a culture of acceptance that para swimmers did not always find in the larger swimming community.

3.4.2 The Organizational Category

3.4.2.1 Swim Clubs

Athletes discussed their perceptions of varying levels of support received from their swim clubs; from being consistently very supportive throughout the athlete’s development, to receiving support once they had reached a specific level of achievement, to feeling that they were not welcome within the club. The methods of demonstrating support included financial support, logistical support, visual means of recognition, and providing encouragement.

Amanda discussed her experience with a club that she felt was not supportive, “I went to this one club, but they won’t train me right because of my disability and stuff. They were always negative and really bad, and they didn’t really want to work with me.” Alternatively, Courtney stated, “my club they’re really supportive of me. They would help me out with all the travels and everything. They’re really supportive and made sure I got to where I needed to go.” Due to the personalized attention that para swimmers sometimes require in relation to their functional abilities or differing competition schedules, clubs may need to make accommodations for the para swimmer that they would not otherwise need to for the majority of the athletes in their programs.

3.4.2.2 Provincial Sports Organizations (PSO)

Another organization that was mentioned by athletes was the PSO, but only when they spoke about their involvement in provincial championships. This was noteworthy as PSO’s are overseen by Sport Canada to focus on development opportunities to athletes (Canadian Heritage, 2012) and the athletes in this study did not discuss viewing the PSOs as having played a significant role in their development. Most athletes viewed their PSO as the organization that put on a swim meet and did not identify further interactions with the organization. Only one athlete mentioned the PSO when discussing preparation for their first classification experience. Another athlete discussed how they did not feel that para swimming was important to the PSO.

... You have to hound the PSO and say you guys said that you would have this done by the date on this list. You've done the able-bodied list but for some reason you haven't done the para list.... And it's ongoing stuff. I'm like this is embarrassing because these are the kind of things that are subtle enough that young athletes and their parents would feel like they don't deserve it. (James)

As James mentioned, athletes felt that the PSO viewed them as being less important as compared to mainstream athletes which has a negative effect on athletes continued engagement and development in the sport, which is contrary to the mandate of the PSO organizations.

3.4.2.3 National Sport Organization (NSO)

While the NSO is predominately recognized to play a managerial role in athlete development, having more of a hands off approach in the development athletes (Henriksen et al., 2010), athletes indicated that they felt that the NSO staff provided direct support in several ways, including providing support to them and their families and advocating on their behalf, particularly in relation to their experiences with the classification process. Paul captured the support he had received from NSO staff in stating. “Everyone (NSO staff) is making sure that each of the identified swimmers... know names to faces. Them being invested in the swimmer themselves and getting to know that.” Paul went on to add,

I think we have more supports than we even think. We can get so much information and so much other knowledge from all these [NSO]people that are there that we don’t even know. It’s really great that if there’s a burning question that comes up, I can do directly to the source and get that answer, which is great.

Classification is a defining component of para sport engagement and is recognized as a primary difference between mainstream and para sport (Tweedy et al., 2014). In the sport of para swimming, the classification process has a medical component, where medical diagnostic forms and examinations/tests are required. For athletes with physical impairments, a bench test is required, conducted by a medical classifier who has the credentials of a physical therapist or related health profession. For athletes with visual impairments, an examination by a classifier trained ophthalmologist is required (Swimming Canada, 2018, n.d.). Perhaps due to past experiences with the medical professionals, athletes are hypersensitized to the reality of someone speaking on their behalf which may explain why para swimmers recognize the advocacy role of both their parents and NSO staff. Athletes may also recognize the significant support they receive from NSO staff due to the role the staff play in mitigating stress and uncertainty experienced regarding the classification process and outcomes. The elevated level of stress and uncertainty that athletes experience is due to the tremendous importance athletes place on the

outcome of classification (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020). Cutrona and Russell (1990) highlighted that different situations require different types of support. Relative to the support that athletes receive from the NSO staff, Cutrona and Russell (1990) identified that controllable events (those associated with threat or challenge) require more instrumental support (e.g. information, advice, various perspectives on difficulties, feedback) to assist in preventing or solving problems. Due to the importance of classification on the entry into and progression through competitive sport, the classification process would be perceived as a threat or challenge to the athletes. NSO staff are considered the experts when it comes to classification and are able to provide athletes with information and advice required when going through the classification process, therefore, athletes identify NSO staff as having provided them with significant support throughout the classification experiences. Additionally, classification is a process that para athletes go through multiple times during their development. For para swimming in Canada, there are three levels of domestic classification that athletes experience during their development and advancement along the competitive pathway (Swimming Canada, n.d.). All three levels of domestic classification are organized and facilitated by the NSO, therefore, providing NSO staff ongoing opportunities to provide support to the athletes.

Athletes discussed their experiences with national level competitions in a positive manner. They indicated that national level competitions provided a more competitive environment due to the presence of more para swimmers and these events were better set up for para athletes than lower levels of competition. Courtney noted, "...nationals and everything. I had more people who were the same disability and speed as me so it's much easier to compete with people."

The Next Gen program which is offered through the NSO and aims to assist in the development of athletes five to eight years from their peak athletic performance, was seen as a source of information and support. The Next Gen program was seen as such an important component to athlete's access to information and support that even athletes who had not engaged in the Next Gen program identified it as being important. Barb stated; "I wasn't in Next Gen and things, so I didn't have the information that I

needed.” Not being a part of the Next Gen program was seen as a detriment as athletes felt they were missing out on valuable information and support. One concern that athletes raised regarding the Next Gen program was the program was limited to athletes of a specific age, leaving late entry, and late achieving athletes unable to access certain supports. Not having the opportunity to access the Next Gen program lead late entry and late achieving athletes to feel that they were not as valued by the NSO and that their development was not seen as equally important as the athletes who did fit within the age range of the program.

3.4.2.4 International Paralympic Committee (IPC)/ World Para Swimming (WPS)

The final organizations that were identified as having played a role in the athletes’ development was the IPC and WPS through the role both organizations play in the governance of the classification process.

While the athletes did not directly name the IPC or WPS as having influenced their development experience, each athlete discussed the important role that classification played in their development. As the IPC and WPS are the international organizations overseeing the classification process, decisions that the IPC and WPS make regarding classification, have an impact of the development of the athletes.

Classification is a process during which athletes of similar functional ability, as determined through athlete engagement in specific tests depending on their impairment, are placed in the same category or classification for competition and was discussed by all athletes. Classification was identified as being important, while at the same time, associated with a feeling of stress and uncertainty regarding the outcome of the process at each level of competition (provincial, national, international). Athletes recognized that while classification is important to their engagement in competitive para swimming, they also identified the lack of control they had over the classification process, as seen in James’ statement,

At times it’s scary and it’s overwhelming, you know all of those experiences that I think everyone’s shares in the classification. Unsure of how it’s going to go, what’s not going to do, what’s going to be said, what’s not going to be said.

Similarly, George's statement also exemplified the stress athletes feel around classification. "So, it's honestly for going to a bigger meet and I get reclassified. That's the most stressful part of the whole meet is making sure that they classify me as where I should be." George's statement also illustrates the uncertainty that athletes feel about the outcome of classification, of being placed in the proper classification with the possibility of their classification being changed, which again exemplified the lack of control athletes have over the classification process.

Seven of the nine athletes discussed how their classification category had been changed at least once during their development. Some athletes saw these changes in classification as a positive step in their career. Samantha said, "So I was really happy. I'm like "Come on, Yeah I'm down one (class category). It'll be easier." While for others, particularly those athletes in the higher classifications such as S10, S13 or S14, changes in classification could mean being ineligible to compete. As Mark mentioned, "I got classed (went through the classification process) in (foreign country) and it was a long way to go if I didn't get classified (was deemed ineligible) and I'm pretty sure my career would have ended right there. So basically I was stressed out of my mind."

Through the classification system, the IPC and WPS have a significant amount of power over the athletic development and careers of athletes. Athletes recognized that the classification process had the ability to amplify or extinguish their athletic careers.

One factor several athletes mentioned which mitigated some of the stress and assisted athletes in feeling better prepared for the classification process was their connection to the NSO and support received from NSO staff. Barb stated, "I just thought (NSO staff) prepared us like really, like he sent us the questions and everything. So yeah that's cool. I wasn't nervous at all." Feeling supported and prepared by NSO staff while going through the classification process, allowed athletes to maintain at least a small sense of control.

3.5 Organizations Role in Providing Social Support to Para Athletes

Feeling supported, accepted and connected to others is considered a basic human need (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and has been identified as a motivator for para athlete engagement in sport (Swanson et al., 2008). The study participants identified the importance of receiving social support from parents, teammates, coaches, and other para swimmers. Participants also discussed receiving or not receiving social support from the agents of the organizations which they interacted with. Organizations were discussed in positive ways by participants when the organizations were perceived as being supportive. For example, agents of the NSO were seen as being supportive through stressful situations such as going through the classification process and clubs were seen as supportive when they provided tangible and emotional support. Contrastingly, PSOs were not seen as being supportive, with para swimmers indicating that they did not feel that the agents of the PSOs cared about them. While sport organizations are entities that are responsible for the facilitations of sport, para swimmers are also perceiving the level of social support agents of organizations are or are not providing them. Due to the impact social support can have on the continued engagement of athletes (Scanlan et al., 2003), sport organizations need to be aware of their role in providing social support and need to design programs that foster positive social connections for para athletes (Green, 2005).

3.6 Strengths, Limitations, & Future Directions

A strength of the current study is that it is one of the first of its kind to look at the contextual factors that impact para swimmer development from the perspective of the athlete utilizing an IPA methodology. The IPA methodology employed here emphasizes the experiences of the

athletes to be presented while also recognizing the active role of the researcher. Another strength was homogeneousness of the sample as all participants had been selected to their first international multi-sport event, depicting that they were all at similar place in their development pathway. The homogeneousness of the sample allowed for detail claims to be made about the understandings and perceptions of these para swimmers on their development (Smith & Osborn, 2007). While the methodology of IPA allows for the results to be specific to only the participants, the findings from this study can begin the conversation and help spur further research regarding the design of para swimmer development initiatives. Future research should investigate the contextual factors of para athlete development in different para sports and competition formats, such as in para ice hockey (sledge hockey), a team sport with a different classification system requires. Additionally, the current study identified the advocacy role of parents/guardians throughout the para swimmer development pathway. To assist parents in being effective in their advocate role, future research should investigate the skills required within the advocacy role of parents in the sporting environment as it relates to the athletic development of athletes with impairments. An in-depth investigation of the cultural impact on para athlete development at all levels of influence (club, PSO, NSO) would assist organizations seeking to enhance the para athlete development experience. Research that clarifies the role of the PSO in athlete development and the relationships between the sport organizations involved in the para development pathway is also necessary and would be benefit effective management of the para athlete development experience.

3.7 Conclusion

With the growth of the prestige of the Paralympic Games, there is an ongoing need to develop athlete development models which accurately represent the development experiences of para athletes. In order to design such a model, a better understanding of the para athlete experience of development and the context in which that experience takes place is fundamental. This research identified the contextual factors of para swimmer development from the perspective of para swimmers, athletes who were in the latter stages of their development and competing on the international stage.

Based on the interpretation of the experiences of a group of para swimmers in the latter stages of their development we identified that within the para swimmer context there are social and organizational factors that impact development and that these factors overlap in their roles and impact in the para athlete development experience. Parents as well as NSO staff play an advocacy role throughout the development experience of athletes. In mainstream sport the parent's role shifts to a less directly involved role as athletes progress along the development pathway. As well, in mainstream sport, the role of the NSO is seen as less of a hands-on contributor to the development of athletes in contrast with para athletes. Findings indicate that the athletes recognized that their coaches were not knowledgeable about para swimming and identified coaches as supportive based on coach willingness to learn and adapt to meet the needs of the individual athlete. Further formal and informal educational opportunities need to be offered to enhance the knowledge of coaches working with para athletes.

Other para swimmers were identified as an important catalyst for initial engagement, competition with sport. Though social connection with other para swimmers were limited in the early stages

of athlete development, social connection with like-athletes contributed to athlete retention in the sport and progression along the athlete development pathway. It is also important to highlight that the majority of these contextual factors are not recognized by the mainstream athlete development models, including the impact of lack of engagement and competition opportunities with other para athletes early in the athletic development experience.

Most of the athletes trained in integrated swim club environments, with several of the athletes feeling close to their mainstream teammates, while others were looking for more opportunities to interact with other para swimmers, and a few did not feel welcome in an integrated club environment. Therefore, while the idea of a spectrum of inclusion and athletes getting to choose which environment would work best for them may be optimal, there are limited opportunities for athletes to make such a choice. Part of the reason for a lack of choice is the inconsistency of the implementation of integration policies in the trickle down from government to NSO to PSO to swim club level with mainstream clubs not feeling supported, knowledgeable or that they have the necessary resources to effectively integrate. The inconsistency of experiences within a swim club environment is not recognized within the current mainstream athlete development models.

By answering the call of others for the inclusion of the athlete voice to the literature of para athlete development, this study has highlighted some of the contextual uniqueness that para swimmers may encounter during their development. It will only be through the recognition and consideration of contextually unique experiences that an effective athlete development model that truly reflects the development journey of para swimmers and other para athletes can be designed and implemented.

3.8 References

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Chapter Four

4 Hearing One Thing, Experiencing Another: A Comparative Analysis of the Experiences of Elite Para Swimmers and the Key Factors of the Long-Term Development Model

4.1 Abstract

As the current practice is to apply mainstream athlete development models to para athletes, a practice which has been questioned (Hutzler et al., 2016), this study sought to determine how the development experiences of para swimmers in the latter stages of their development compared to the key factors of the Long-Term Development (LTD) model (Higgs et al., 2019). Semi structured interviews were conducted with Canadian para swimmers who were selected to compete at the 2019 Para Pan Am Games (n=9). The data was analyzed using the key factors of the LTD as codes. Connections were made between the key factors of appropriate specialization, awareness and first involvement, competition, developmental age, and quality environments and para swimmers' development experiences. Further connections were made between the key factors to identify the systematic factors of long-term development and safe and welcoming environment which greatly impacted para swimmer development. At different stages of their development, para swimmers' experienced gaps in the physical literacy and fundamental skill development system, coach education system, club and PSO engagement systems and expediated movement through the competitive levels due to a lack of talent pool and the impact of the classification system. More research is needed to determine how to best support and foster the para swimmer development experience.

Keywords: para swimmer, development, long-term, safe, and welcoming, systems

4.2 Introduction

For athletes to reach elite levels of performance they require support and guidance from their social networks, and key organizations (Thomas et al., 2019). Several models outlining how athletes progress from their initial introduction into sport to elite levels of competition or lifelong participation have been developed to aid and provide direction to sport organizations who work with athletes (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014; Gulbin et al., 2013; Higgs et al., 2019). The sport organizations that work with athletes typically include clubs, provincial sport organizations (PSO), and national sport organizations (NSO), all of whom play specific roles in athlete development (Canadian Heritage, 2012; Higgs et al., 2019). For para athletes, a specific model of athlete development has not yet been developed, although phases of para athlete development have been put forth by Patatas and colleagues (2022), which are similar to stages present in mainstream development model. The current method of practices is for adaptations to mainstream models such as the Long-Term Development model to be made, as well as supporting literature such as the No Accidental Champions (NAC) (Higgs et al., 2016) document have been produced to address the unique athlete development needs of para athletes. The effectiveness of the implementation of LTD and NAC in addressing the needs of para athletes, however, has not been tested.

In Canada many sports, including swimming, have adopted an integrated sporting model (Misener et al., 2019), and the development of para athletes is overseen by the same clubs, PSOs and NSOs as the development of mainstream athletes. Therefore, using a single model and stating that “sport is sport” negates the requirement of clubs, PSOs and NSOs to take a closer look at how the use of a model which was made with mainstream athletes in mind are being implemented with para athletes. Some scholars have questioned the use of mainstream athlete

development models for para athletes, due to the nuances of para sport which are not addressed in mainstream models developed through an ableist lens (Hutzler et al., 2016; Patatas et al., 2019, 2022).

Ableism is the system of thought connected to ability, where “the able-bodied experience is...constructed and disseminated as the impartial and natural “norm”, which becomes the standard reference for the right and good way of being human” (Silva & Howe, 2019, p.3). With the abled bodied (referred to as “mainstream” in this paper) experience seen as the norm, anything that deviates from that norm, impairment for example, is seen as negative and those that experience an impairment as deviant and of less value. The development models that are currently being used have been established from an ableist perspective, meaning that they focus on the experiences of those without impairment. While the LTD and it’s supporting document, No Accidental Champions (Higgs et al., 2016) mention the development experience of those with an impairment, the LTD was designed based on the experiences of those who do not experience an impairment and therefore, does not explicitly address the needs and considerations of those who do.

At present, the LTD is being applied to the development of para athletes, the effectiveness of which has been questioned. To further add to the question of effectiveness, is the question of how is the LTD being implemented during the development of para athletes? As there is currently no para athlete specific development model, it is important to develop a clearer understanding of how the current model of athlete development, the LTD, is being used to impact the development of para athletes. Therefore, in this paper, through utilization of the perspective and experiences of international level para swimmers, I focus on identifying how the LTD is currently being utilized in the development of para swimmers. First, I review of the

literature on Canadian sport and para sport systems, as it is the systems and the organizations within the sport systems that impact the implementation of the LTD. This is of particular importance as the LTD is a national level framework and while the lower levels of sport (PSOs and clubs) do not have a say in the development of the framework, there is an expectation that they will implement it. Then I provide an overview of the LTD, its background, purpose, and current edition before comparing the development experiences of para swimmers to the twenty-two key factors of the LTD. Guided by the findings, the discussion focuses on the systematic gaps in the para swimmer development experience in comparison to the LTD guidelines.

4.3 Athlete Development Systems

4.3.1 Canadian Sport Systems

While the literature on sport organization systems in Canada touches on multiple levels of sport, there appears to be a predominant focus on the national level of sport, including government and associated agencies or national sport organizations (NSOs). The role and function of agencies such as Sport for Life and Own the Podium and their respective relationships with government through Sport Canada have been researched (Dowling, 2014; Dowling & Smith, 2016; Dowling & Washington, 2017a, 2017b). Regarding NSOs, the focus has been on changes to the systematic governance structure of NSOs (Kikulis, 2021) changes due to governmental policy pressures (Parent et al., 2018), and on efforts to be more athlete centered in practices (e.g., athlete representation on committees, increased funding for athletes, creation of training centers, development of forums for dispute resolution) (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). Interorganizational relationships within the Canadian sport system have also been examined from multiple angles. In reviewing documents from six regional conferences on sport, which were facilitated by Sport Canada and attended by stakeholders from all levels of sport (officials, athletes, NSOs,

aboriginal sport circles, etc.), Barnes et al. (2007) examined the determinants of interorganizational relationships. Three key challenges were identified; the creation and management of partnerships, development of mutual goals which reflect the beliefs and values of partners in the system and the ability to present the benefits of sport to non-sport partners. Similarly, Babiak (2007) looked at the factors which led to interorganizational relationships between Canadian Sport Centers and partnering organizations. Analysis of interview data found that power dynamics and political interactions were influential in the partnership decision, with both positive and negative components for the organizations involved and that overall, there was a pro partnership bias within the sport system context (Babiak, 2007). In Canada, sport is structured in a complex hierarchy of NSOs, PSOs, municipal sport and recreation, local and regional clubs.

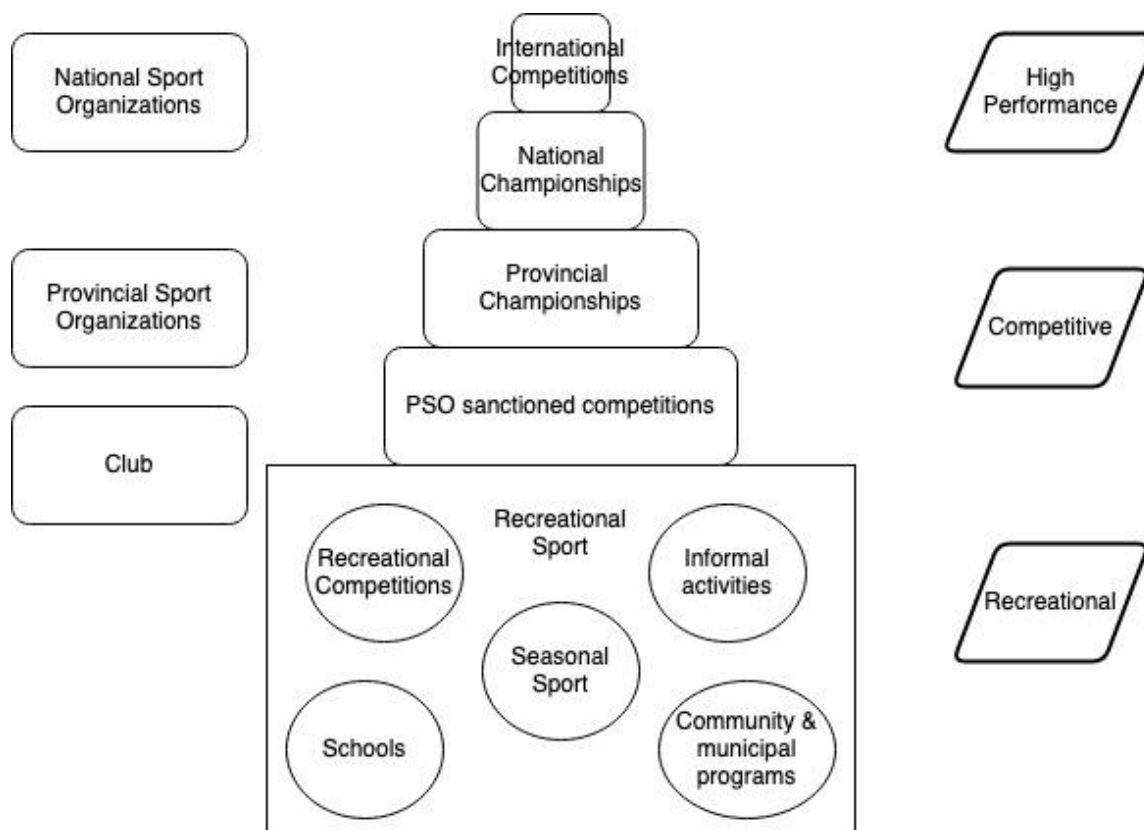


Figure 2. The Model of Sport Development in Canada. Influenced by Barnes et al. (2007)

In furthering the work on relational interactions between levels of sport governance, Harvey (2021) investigated multi-level governance and focused on the relationships between all levels of governance, including municipalities and the impact of sport policy on those relationships. Harvey (2021) suggested that for sport participation, bilateral agreements may lead to better collaboration between levels of government. He found that tensions can arise between PSOs and NSOs when, in an attempt to develop a unified sport system, federal governments and NSOs mandate the implementation of nationwide blanket initiatives without accounting for provincial differences. Similarly, Edwards and Leadbetter (2016), in critiquing the systemic governance structure between a NSO and a provincial sport organization (PSO) regarding the implementation of a nationally standardized program, found that strong communication and understanding of PSO resource capacity by the NSO were necessary for an effective

collaborative relationship to occur. Additionally, Adams and Stevens (2007) reviewed the governance structure of women's hockey in Canada and identified that "there is a social need to improve the power and authority" (p. 357) of sport governance of women in hockey, as well as sport for other marginalized groups (individuals with an impairment commonly fall into this identification). Under the current sport structure in Canada, there is a focus on the integration of para sport into mainstream sport organizations at all levels, similar to the structure of gender and sport with women being integrated into male dominated sport organizations. There is a need to provide more recognition, power and authority to the experiences of marginalized athletes such as para athletes.

While the literature on the systems of Canadian sport has focused heavily on the national level, it has also begun to address the interactions between organizations both laterally and vertically through the hierarchical sport system which exists in Canada. Scholars have called for changes to the hierarchical governance of sport in which the NSOs set policy with the expectation that lower levels of governance (PSOs, municipalities, community sport organizations) will implement as dictated (Adams & Stevens, 2007; Edwards & Leadbetter, 2016). Yet, this system remains firmly in place and what remains under-investigated is the experience and perspective of the key stakeholders in this system, particularly primary recipients - athletes. While Thibault and Babiak (2005) focused on the shifts in NSO governance to be more athlete centered, the experiences of the athletes and their interactions with the different levels of sport management remain poorly understood.

The perspective of athletes is important as athletes are at the core of sport. As identified in the 2002 Canadian Sport Policy, "athletes/participants...are the primary focus in the development of policies, programs and procedures. Athletes/participants [should be] involved throughout the

system in decisions that directly relate to them” (Sport Canada, 2002, p.13 as cited in Thibault & Babiak, 2021). Athletes are at the heart of sport programs and are directly impacted by sport policies and management. They are also stakeholders. According to stakeholder theory, “a stakeholder... is an individual or group that has some kind of stake in what business (or organization) does and may also affect the organization in some fashion” (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2004, p. 144). Stakeholder theory emphasizes that the concerns and interests of the stakeholders need to be taken into consideration when decisions are being made (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2004). Consequently, the perspective of athletes regarding the management, delivery, logistics, policies, etc. of their sport should be cogitated and as per the 2002 Canadian Sport Policy, athletes should be not only the focus but also have direct involvement throughout the decision-making process (Thibault & Babiak, 2021).

4.3.2 Para Sport Systems

Despite the recent emergence of literature pertaining to mainstream sport systems (in Canada), there is limited research into the systems of para sport at all levels. What has been considered has been the integration of para sports into the National Sport Organizations (NSO) of the mainstream equivalent (Bouttet, 2016; Hammond et al., 2019; Hums et al., 2003; Misener et al., 2019). Chennaprageda and Jain (2020) investigated the policies and governance of para sport and the Paralympic movement in India and provided recommendations on the systematic governance of para sport at all levels, including internationally, nationally and at the state level.

Chennaprageda and Jain (2020) highlight the need to investigate the sport system structure of para sport within each country as sport systems are impacted by the cultural, historical, political, and social context within a given country, which has also been identified as significant by Patatas et al. (2019). The evolution of elite para sport systems at the international level which would

include the International Paralympic Committee and International Sport Federations, has also received limited attention (Misener & Di Lu, 2020). Highly relevant to this study, Misener and colleagues (2019) conducted a case study on the integration of para swimming into the organizational structure of Swimming Canada and provided a background on the evolution of the governance of para swimming in Canada. Regardless of the setting, whether it be India (Chennapragada & Jain, 2020), Canada (Misener et al., 2019) or international (Misener & Di Lu, 2020), when looking at the organizational structure of para sport, the perspective of those whom the system is supposed to be supporting, the athletes, and their experiences within that system structure remains absent. From a para sport stance, not taking the perspective of the athletes, the majority of whom engage in sport systems that are predominately mainstream sport focused, into consideration is contrary to the Canadian Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2012) and does not recognize or address the needs of para athletes.

4.3.3 Long-Term Development Model (LTD)

Motivated by the limitations of the pyramid model of athlete development, including the sole focus on competitive sport, Balyi and Way produced the earliest version of the LTAD in 1995 (Balyi et al., 2013). By 2005, the LTAD was considered the athlete development model of choice in Canada, with Sport Canada encouraging NSOs to adopt and adapt the model to fit the parameters of their sports. The first renditions of the model were based around ten key factors; physical literacy, specialization, age, trainability, intellectual, emotional, and moral development, excellence takes time, periodization, competition, system alignment and continuous improvement. The model is built around seven stages which athletes move through, these being Active Start, Fundamentals, Learn to Train, Train to Train, Train to Compete, Train to Win, Active for Life.

Two additional versions of the model have since been released, 2.0 in 2015 and the latest 3.0 version, now called the LTD, in 2019 (Higgs et al., 2019). The latest version of the model has shifted to be more applicable to all physical activity, not just sport (emphasized with the dropping of “athlete” from the title), the ten key factors have been expanded to twenty-two, and guidelines as to the organizations responsible for each of the stages of the model has been added. The 3.0 version also acknowledges that movement through the model may not be strictly linear as people may move into, out of and through the model in various ways.

As the model has evolved, the application of the model to participants with a disability has also evolved. In 2006, the first version of the No Accidental Champions (NAC) document was released, followed by the second edition in 2015. In the second version the NAC is stated to be “a supplement to Canadian Sport for Life” (p. 1) and,

describes some of the opportunities and challenges that face persons with permanent disabilities in pursuing sport and physical activity and how the Canadian sport system can best accommodate their needs for increased activity and greater achievement through Long-Term Development (LTD) (Higgs et al., 2021, p. 5).

In 2013, Balyi, Way and Higgs released a book called Long-Term Athlete Development in which an entire chapter was dedicated to the application of the LTAD to athletes with a disability. The second version of the LTAD, released in 2015, included two additional stages, awareness and first contact which were identified to be of particular importance to athletes with a disability and were placed at the beginning of the model. In the third version of the model, these two stages were acknowledged to be applicable to all participants throughout the model, regardless of ability.

Throughout the evolution of the LTD model and the NAC, it has been maintained that the application of the LTD is sufficient for use with athletes with disabilities even though it was developed from an ableist perspective and not originally designed with para athletes in mind. Therefore, through analyzing the experiences of para swimmers in the later stages of their development and comparing those experiences to the LTD, I sought to identify how the LTD is being implemented for para swimmers.

4.4 Method

This paper is part of a larger study examining the contextual factors that impact the development of para swimmers from the perspective of the athletes. To do so I employ an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The initial findings from the larger study identified the para swimmers' perspective of the system structures that supported para swimmers through their development. Data was then deductively analyzed to determine how the development experiences of the para swimmers compared to the current athlete development system as proposed in the Long-Term Development (LTD) model (Higgs et al., 2019). Analyzing the development experiences of para swimmers through the lens of the LTD allows for a critical analysis of how the LTD is being implemented in para swimming.

4.4.1 Data Collection

Data collection focused on the athletes' perspectives of the contextual factors that impact the development of para swimmers. Purposive sampling of swimmers that had qualified for an international competition was used. This level of involvement was important so that the developmental experiences of para swimmers in the latter stages of the Long-Term Development (LTD) pathway (Higgs et al., 2019) could be considered. The 2019 Para Pan Am Games

Canadian swim team members met this criterion. This was the first multi-sport international competition experience for all team members, indicating that these athletes were on the cusp of the Train to Win stage of the LTD (Higgs et al., 2019). As the PI, I was also acting as the Team Manager, thus I made concerted efforts to ensure that athletes felt no pressure to participate. The initial email and the letter of information clearly stated that participation was voluntary and that there would be no negative consequences for choosing not to participate. Additionally, recruitment for the study did not begin until after the selection of the team had been announced so that athletes knew that choosing to participate/not participate did not impact their selection to the team. Lastly, I was considered staff during the team events but had no influence on the selection of athletes to the team or future teams. The athletes were informed in the letter of information and in a presentation given by the PI that their participation was voluntary and that there were no negative consequences associated with not choosing to participate. For athletes who indicated their desire to participate, written consent was obtained. For participants under the age of 16 years or with an intellectual impairment, written parental/guardian consent was also obtained. Nine of thirteen athletes (five females and four males), with representation from across the country and with an array of impairments and levels of function, chose to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Participants ranged in age from early teens to early thirties.

A semi-structured interview guide was employed focusing on mainstream athlete development as discussed in the scholarly literature and in-depth analysis of the LTD. The interview guide was developed in a manner that encouraged the participants to speak freely about their development experiences. Probes and clarification questions were used when needed to encourage thorough description of events. Participants were asked about their development experiences within swimming, including how they got involved in the sport and moved through the competitive levels,

as well as their experience of daily training environments, competitions, challenges, and supporting factors that impacted their athletic development. To respect the privacy of the participants, no classification information will be provided and pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of the data.

4.4.2 Data Analysis

As the focus of this paper is on how LTD framework was being implemented during the development of para swimmers, the data was deductively analyzed utilizing the twenty-two key factors of the LTD as codes (Higgs et al., 2019). The descriptions of the twenty-two factors from the LTD were used to construct functional definitions which provided a roadmap to the data analysis (See appendix A). Using the twenty-two key factors as codes allowed for the participant's experiences to be compared with the LTD guidelines and for the nuances of the para swimmer development experience from a system, personal, and organizational angle to be examined. The second author acted as a critical friend (Smith & McGannon, 2018) throughout data analysis process, providing opportunities for discussion and reflection on the analysis process.

4.5 Findings

The twenty-two key factors of the LTD are broken down into three operational levels: Personal, Operational, and System Factors (Higgs et al., 2019). Overall, in this study athletes' experiences were most heavily associated with the personal factors, followed by system factors, with the fewest linkages made with organizational factors. Of the twenty-two factors, there were five for which no or very limited connections could be made (different activities, framework, fully embedded, continuous improvement, and evidence based). As five factors focus on the

utilization of the LTD at the organizational and planning level of sport, it is understandable that connections to the athletes' perspectives of their development were limited.

Of the remaining factors, many connections were made between the experiences of athletes and the factors of *appropriate specialization, awareness and first involvement, competition, developmental age, and quality environments*, which will be laid out in the findings. When looked at together, *quality environments* and *awareness and first involvement* shed light on the system factor of safe and welcoming, while *appropriate specialization, competition* and *developmental age* provide insights into the system factor of long-term development, which will be elaborated on in the discussion section.

4.5.1 Appropriate Specialization

Engagement in multiple sports or physical activities and not focusing on a single sport too early are at the heart of the appropriate specialization factor. However, for the athletes in this study, only five of nine athletes had engaged in other sports and only one athlete was still actively engaged in another sport. Of the five athletes who did engage in other sports, most did so before they started competitively swimming but stopped once or shortly after having joined a swim team. Reasons for not continuing to pursue other sports was varied. For Courtney, she stopped playing other sports for pain related reasons,

But once I reached ten, I had joined a competitive swim team and I stopped hockey and soccer. Because I was doing hockey and soccer throughout all those years and then my knee started hurting and everything and so I stopped those and just did swimming.

Other reasons for stopping other sports included athletes finding that they enjoyed swimming the best, so they stopped participating in other sports or that swimming became their sole focus as was Mark's experience,

I did Taekwondo for about 6 years. Then I kind of just stopped doing that after a while and swimming took over my life. I did horseback riding just to help my body position and whatnot. And I stopped everything for this sport (swimming).

To be able to meet the criteria of appropriate specialization and engaging in multiple sports or physical activities, athletes should be made aware of what opportunities are available to them and have positive first experiences with the different sports and physical activities on an ongoing basis.

4.5.2 Awareness and First Involvement

Swimming is unique in that the initial engagement in the sport and the learn to play portion of development is handled by organizations outside of the club system. Municipal or private learn to swim programs are where swimmers are first exposed to the sport. For the athletes in this study, their experiences with swimming lessons were mixed. Five athletes discussed having experienced traditional group community swimming lessons. Amanda described her experience with community swimming lessons as having been very difficult, "I was always the one that would fail like a thousand times but still liked the water...it just took me longer but eventually I got all the levels done." When asked what helped her to pass through the swimming lessons levels, Amanda explained that her mother had taken her to recreation swim times and had helped her improve her skills. The need for one on one or small group attention while learning to swim was also identified by three other athletes.

In transitioning to competitive swimming, six of the athletes learned about para swimming from other para swimmers or the parents of para swimmers who shared their knowledge of the sport. Four of the six athletes had already joined a swim team and had begun training before learning about para swimming and identifying that it was an option for them. Two athletes learned about para swimming from seeing elite level para swimming competitions (World Championships). Only one athlete was introduced to para swimming as a form of rehabilitation.

4.5.3 Competition

The competition factor states that competition experiences need to be quality and timed in a manner that “serve the needs of the participant, allowing them to test the stage-appropriate skills they are developing” (Higgs et al., 2019, p. 18). The perceived quality of competition that athletes experienced varied based on their level of racing as athletes noted inconsistencies as they moved through the competitive levels in the way they were treated by officials and meet organizers. Athletes described feeling like they were an afterthought at provincial level competitions, as exemplified by James’ experience,

A prime example is at one point the para events were at the end of provincials before they were integrated in and so ultimately I was after the time trials at the end of the day... So it was like it was an oversight on their part and instead of them reworking the meet package it was like no we’ll just throw it in at the end.

Additionally, athletes felt that the system failed to recognize them, or their achievements as explained by Paul in describing what happened after he broke a national record at meet and it was not recognized,

So then I was emailing (NSO staff) and being like how do I get this [national record] ratified because there again it was, I thought, okay, I broke a record, great, and every meet manager in the province and the country is going to know that this para swimmer has broken a National Record. Not the case.

Conversely, at high levels of competition (national and international), athletes' felt that their needs were taken into consideration and that meet managers were better equipped to offer a quality competition environment. Athletes also discussed how there were more para swimmers in attendance at higher levels of competition which allowed for athletes to have a better competitive experience. Courtney explained the value of higher competition and having more para swimmers in attendance by saying,

When I first started [not para], I was always the last one and in the first heat (for) everything. Like I had no competition because everyone was just ahead of me. Then as I went up to provincials and nationals, I had more people who were the same disability and speed as me so it's much easier to compete with people. For example, I have to keep up with them and try harder and do more than them because they're older so it was a bit... it got hard as it went on but I still use them as competition.

George further discussed how being a para swimmer and racing against mainstream athletes was not equal competition,

Yeah because I think that people who have disabilities compete with able-bodied people, their chances of doing things, making finals or having competition isn't as fair as it is for able-bodied. So I think para swimming helped all the people with disabilities get together, talk about their disabilities and compete against each other. Someone who has

like the same disability or the same time, whose like them in this sport, then that was better.

Regarding competition timing, athletes moved through the levels of competition quickly. The average length of time from entry into para swimming to international competition was five years. Once athletes had qualified for their first regional or provincial competition, on average they moved up a level of competition each year. When asked if they felt prepared to move up the levels of competition as they did, some athletes expressed that they did feel prepared while others did not. When asked if she felt prepared when moving up the levels of competition, Amanda stated, “Some of them (moves to higher levels of competition), yes but some of them were a big jump. I went to provincials (provincial championships) and then right to Trials (national level competition) so that was a huge jump.”

Tied to advancing through the levels of competition for para swimmers is going through the classification process. All para swimmers must go through the classification process to be given a sport class, which identifies which category they race within and what time standards they need to meet to move up the levels of competition. To be eligible for a competition that has minimum entry time standards, para swimmers must be classified to be able to know which entry time standards they need to achieve. Therefore, going through the classification process was a launching point for para swimmers’ competitive careers. The average length of time from first classification to international competition/classification was three years. For two athletes who would be considered late entry as they entered para swimming after the age of eighteen, once they had been through the classification process for the first time, they qualified for national level competition within the same calendar year.

The athletes stated that they had all been through the classification process at each level of competition beginning with regional championships. Most athletes discussed how the classification process was stressful with George stating, "...the most stressful part of the whole meet is making sure that they classify me as where I should be." George's statement also brings to light how important being classified correctly is to the athletes. Seven of the nine athletes had had their classification changed at least once through their development journey. Three athletes had their classification changed at each time they went through the classification process.

For those athletes in higher functional classifications, the fear of being "classed out" or deemed to be ineligible for para swimming is fear inducing. James described how he felt after being classed out at a national level classification,

There was like this ultimate dejection right like oh my gosh I'm a fraud, I'm a fake. I'm not eligible and by that point it wasn't a secret that I was trying to swim and it's parasport. And it's like you come home and trying to tell people oh I'm not actually eligible. It's a tough conversation.

Similarly, Mark described how impactful classification can be on an athlete's career, "...if I didn't get classified (deemed eligible for para swimming) I'm pretty sure my career would have ended right there." Alternatively, Samantha described how being placed in a lower classification was positive for her career, "then I got classified national and they moved me down. So I was really happy I'm like "come on yeah I'm down one. It'll be easier."

While competition and classification impact the athlete development experience so does the daily training environment and how athletes perceive that their individual needs are being met which is a large component of the factor of developmental age.

4.5.4 Developmental Age

The developmental age factor identifies that “people grow and develop at different rates” (Higgs et al., 2019) and therefore, the individual needs of the athletes need to be taken into consideration. All athletes discussed how their coaches were able to personalize their workouts, however, to varying levels of specificity to meet the individual athlete’s needs. When asked about the personalization of her workouts, Barb stated, “...most of the time he just cuts it in half but sometimes he changes some things cause it doesn’t fit for me.” Samantha had a similar experience, “

Yeah he adapts it the right way I guess. It’s just I feel like he does it the easy way. Okay well I want my group to do eight 200s I’ll adapt it by doing it six 200s instead of eight. You know instead of ‘they need paddles’ or ‘they need pull’ or that one we should do a different stroke.

When asked if they felt their coaches had their development planned out, there was a divide with some athletes knowing that their coaches had a plan as they had seen it or discussed it with their coaches and others not aware if their coaches had a plan or not. There was also a divide with some athletes feeling that their coaches would be open to their input into their training such as Paul who stated,

...as you progress towards those teams there’s definitely more of an individual shift and that something where I worked with my coaches personally on making sure that not only, I understand it, but just to make sure we’re both on the same team, on the same page. And I’m constantly checking in with them to make sure that we’re both working together.

Meanwhile others felt that their coaches did not want or did not listen to the input they provide as was Amanda's experience, "Sometimes he is, but I feel like sometimes I try to talk to him he says "Okay sure." But then it never really gets progressed."

Despite the authors of the LTD acknowledging that athletes progress differently and at different rates, not adhering to chronological age advancement patterns, which for para swimmers could be exacerbated with some impairments, the Next Gen program offered through the NSO is based on age and no development. In respect to developmental programming and the Next Gen program, while younger athletes discussed the many benefits of the program, athletes who were older in age discussed how it was only for those that fit within a certain age bracket and how this was limiting to their development. As Amanda stated,

I'm not the age for Next Gen camps, I have less opportunity. Last year I got to go to Copenhagen and Italy with the Next Gen team and the Next Gen camps for past two or three years but now all of that is gone.

Amanda's experience highlights while the Next Gen program was identified as helpful to their development experience, athlete involvement with the program hinged on athletes being a specific age and not on their development needs.

James expressed similar frustrations with the age limits placed on the Next Gen program

as well as on the lack of support that was provided to athletes that were older when entering the sport in stating, "...late entry into a program as an upper-class person is less favorable for sure... from the NSO's perspective it was like oh you're too old to really make improvements."

Therefore, while the Next Gen program was deemed as beneficial to athlete development, due to age restrictions on the program, it did not meet the development needs of all athletes. Older biological age was perceived as a negative by the athletes due in part to their lack of inclusion in the Next Gen program and their perception of the attitude of the NSO. Being welcome, included, and safe are also components of the factor of quality environments.

4.5.5 Quality Environments

Within the definition of quality environments there are three components of safety: physical, mental, and social-emotional safety. As laid out by James social-emotional safety is a big part of feeling that one belongs, “I think that sense of belonging is key. If it bothers me as a _____ year old there’s got to be other people in para sport who feel that belonging and that they’re part of something and valued is important.”

Several athletes discussed situations where they felt unwelcome or that they did not belong. In describing a club environment in which Amanda felt that she was not welcome, she stated “I went to this one club but they won’t train me right because of my disability and stuff. They were always negative and really bad and they didn’t really want to work with me.” In contrast, Courtney described being part of a club in which she felt welcome and supported, “They’re really supportive of me. They would help me out with all the travels and everything, so yeah they’re supportive and made sure I got to where I needed to go.” Mark discussed how his club provided him with both tangible and intangible forms of support,

I’m pretty sure they made a postcard when I made the national team. They’re great....Emotionally, they’ve always been great emotionally. Just making sure I was okay. Whenever I was stressed out they always were there to keep me going there.

Along with a club being supportive and welcoming, athletes discussed how their coaches played a significant role in the overall quality of the environment. Athletes discussed the importance of working with a coach who had experience working with para swimmers, which James made clear in saying,

having coaches understand parasport better that would have been easier because that removes a lot of the roadblocks and the challenges of time standards and entries and what meets do you go to what meets don't you go to, what considerations are needed and all of those things.

At the same time, most of the athletes trained in integrated training environments and worked with coaches who did not have experience coaching para swimmers. When working with a coach without experience, athletes felt that it was important that the coach be willing to educate themselves about para swimming. When discussing how her coach went about becoming educated about para swimming, Courtney stated, "He's asking me questions about how it works and everything. He tries to learn new things every time he sees me depending on what I do and if I show him something he'll ask me why and then he'll know."

Athletes also discussed how having a positive relationship with their coaches, a relationship built on trust and mutual understanding was important. As George put it, "I think being able to be open with your coach and vent about stuff especially at meets...I think it's good that my coach is kind of opposite (to me)...she makes sure that I'm smiling and stuff and not just sitting there with my headphones on, my hood up on my parka just sitting there." When discussing a positive experience with a coach and the significant impact they can have on your life, Samantha stated, "When I was with the coach that I really love, it was like a family...A good coach as I said it's almost like a dad."

Another component to a quality environment was having opportunities to interact and train with other para swimmers. The benefits of a training environment with other para swimmers were identified as allowing for a more specialized approach to the workouts, as stated by Samantha,

My favourite group, the group that most helped me were small groups of para swimmers because it was more adapted and I liked it better because we could be more focused then if it was paras in an able bodied group because we had less attention.

For the athletes in this study, the concept of a quality environment also included their experiences with the national team. Athletes felt that the other para swimmers on the national team understood them and that they were all equally included. Courtney summed it up nicely in saying, “We understand each other and everything. So it's really good. We know we each have different disabilities and do certain things that we can all do together and will accommodate things to everyone's needs. Everyone sticks together.” Physical, mental, and socio-emotional safety are key components of quality environments and athletes were able to find all three in their relationship with other national team members.

4.6 Discussion

The findings of this study bring to light that while guidelines for athlete development for all Canadians, including para athletes are laid out in the LTD, there are gaps within the para athlete development system. Using the LTD system key factors of long term development and safe and welcoming as a guide, we will discuss the systematic gaps that were identified through the experiences of the participants of this study.

4.6.1 Long-Term Development

The Long-Term Development factor of the LTD denotes that “excellence takes time so it is essential organizations not build systems that create pressure for immediate success” (Higgs et al., 2019, p. 19), which includes avoiding early specialization. The guidelines in the LTD indicate that it takes eight to twelve years of training for an athlete to reach elite levels of performance (Higgs et al., 2019). Contrary to the timelines laid out in the LTD, the average length of time for an athlete in this study to move from initial engagement in para swimming to international competition was five years. Similarly quick development experiences were found by Dehghansai and Baker (2020) in a study examining participants of a Canadian Paralympic Committee initiative called Paralympian Search. The goals of the Paralympian Search are to heighten awareness, draw in new athletes and facilitate the transfer of experienced para athletes between sports. On average, participants in the Paralympian Search events required three years to transition from recreational to international competition (Dehghansai & Baker, 2020)

In looking at the experiences of para swimmers in the latter stages of their development, it is important to identify systems in place that promote an accelerated experience such as the classification and competition system, and systems that are lacking or missing altogether whose absence led to athletes’ experiencing barriers to their development.

Systems that the athletes’ experiences depicted as having accelerated their development experiences were the classification, and competition systems. Classification provides a structure to competition in para sport and reduces the impact an impairment has on the results of competition (Tweedy et al., 2014). Classification is seen as the gateway to competition for para athletes (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020) as it identifies which athletes are and are not eligible to engage in competitive para sport (Jones & Howe, 2005). In Canada, the allocation of a sport

class in para swimming is stated to be delayed until an athlete is at least twelve years of age (Swimming Canada, n.d.c). While the delay of classification has the potential to slow down the initial stages of a para swimmers' development, once an athlete has been through their initial sport class allocation classification process, their development accelerates rapidly, with athlete's reaching international competition within an average of three years. For the late entry athletes in this study, going through the classification process not only identified them as eligible for para swimming but also slingshot them to national and international levels of competition within a single year.

The governance structure of the classification system has a significant impact on the development of para swimmers. There are three levels of domestic classification, each with its own requirements. According to the Swimming Canada Sport Classification Process document, requesting a Level One sport class evaluation is open to any para swimmer who is "in the late fundamentals or early Learn to Train stage of athlete development and will be attending sanctioned swimming competitions" (Swimming Canada, n.d.c). As identified above, athletes identified the assignment of a sport class as their entry point into the para swimming community. Therefore, it is understandable that para swimmers see classification and those that make classification possible (NSO staff) as playing a significant role in their athletic development. Additionally, as classification plays such a fundamental role in para sport competitive engagement, athletes can experience substantial uncertainty regarding the process and outcomes (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020). Athletes in this study expressed experiencing such feelings of stress, uncertainty, and frustration. Since it is the NSO that controls classification within the domestic context, it is the NSO staff that athletes, parents, and coaches reach out to for support,

to find answers to their questions and to calm their fears as was also identified by athletes in the work of Van Dornick et al. (2020).

Due to the three-level classification process in Canada, the NSO continues to interact with the athletes at each stage of their development. Athletes require a Level Two classification once they are competing in sanctioned competitions, are a minimum of twelve years old and are at “the Learn-to-Train or Train-to-Train stage of athlete development” (Swimming Canada, n.d.c). Level three classification is required once an athlete has achieved a national championship competition standard and the athlete “should be in the Train-to-Train or the Train-to-Compete stage of athlete development” (Swimming Canada, n.d.c). Due to the domestic classification system, the NSO has a role in the development of every para swimmer in Canada from the Fundamental to the Train to Compete stage of LTD as identified by the experiences of the athletes in this study, who had been through all three levels of the domestic classification process.

Engaging with the NSO from early on in their development due to the classification system may have set athletes sights on higher levels of competition from very early in their development due to the high-performance mandate of NSOs. As laid out by the 2019 Canadian High Performance Sport Strategy (Strategy), NSOs are

to provide support (includes funding) and leadership of the sport-specific high-performance program through the facilitation of access to world class daily training environments including but not limited to, coaching, facilities, equipment, sport science and research services, and international level competitive opportunities. (Government of Canada, 2019, p.20)

Thus, clearly the NSOs role is to be working towards athlete engagement at international levels of competition. In staying within their mandate, everything the NSO does should be focused on high performance. Therefore, when the NSO begins to have interactions with para swimmers at the Fundamental stage of development through their control of the domestic classification system, even though the focus at the Fundamental stage is on the development of physical literacy skills, participation, and fun (Higgs et al., 2019), it is conceivable that the underlying focus of those interactions is towards high level performance.

Conversely, it is the provincial sport organizations that are stated to be responsible for the development of athletes. As one provincial government website states “the primary function of PSO/MSOs is the development of athletes, coaches and officials” (Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, n.d.). And yet the athletes in this study did not mention the PSOs as having a significant role in their development. The athletes that did discuss their interactions with PSOs either directly or through description of their experiences with PSO organized provincial championship competitions, did not feel that the PSOs were welcoming, encouraging, or recognized para swimmers and their accomplishments. Two athletes mentioned hearing about provincial development camp opportunities, however, neither athlete had participated in PSO organized camps. This is in contradiction to the LTD which includes a diagram outlining the organizational structure of the athlete development pathway (Figure 1. Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity Framework) (Higgs et al., 2019). This diagram depicts the organizations which govern each level of athlete development. The local sport organizations (example: club and municipalities) oversee the first three stages of the LTD (Active Start, Fundamentals and Learn to Train) and the final Active for Life stage. The provincial sport organizations (PSOs) begin to be involved at the Learn to Train stage and extend

into the Train to Compete stage. National sport organizations (NSOs) oversee the Train to Compete and Train to Win stages. However, based on the experiences and perspectives of the athletes in this study, Figure 2 titled The Para Swimmer Perspective of the Systematic Structure of Athlete Development demonstrates NSO involvement with para athlete development begins at the Fundamental stage of the LTD and continues through to the Train to Compete stage, essentially eliminating the PSOs from the para swimmer development experience. If there is no room within the expedited development pathway for the PSOs to play a role then it is no wonder that athletes did not see the PSO as playing a significant role in their development.

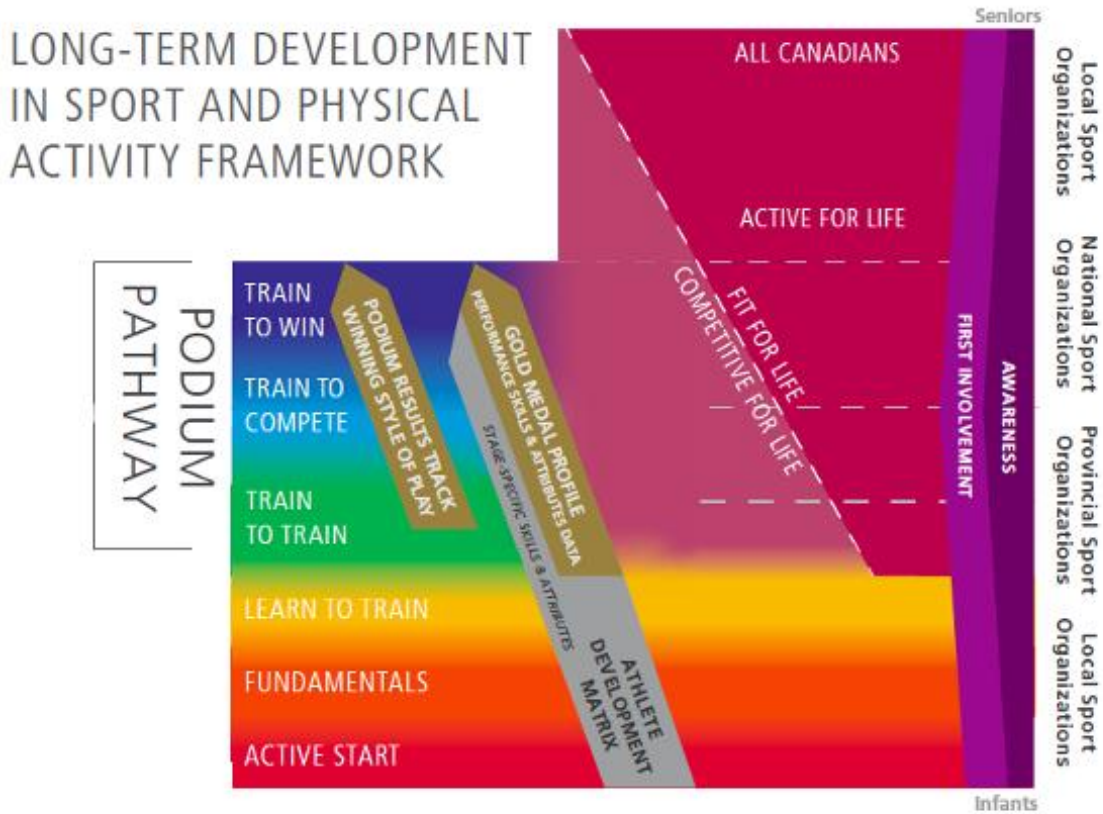


Figure 3 Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity Framework

Note. Reprinted from Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity 3.0 Retrieved from <https://sportforlife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Long-Term-Development-in-Sport-and-Physical-Activity-3.0.pdf> Copyright 2019 by Sport for Life Society.

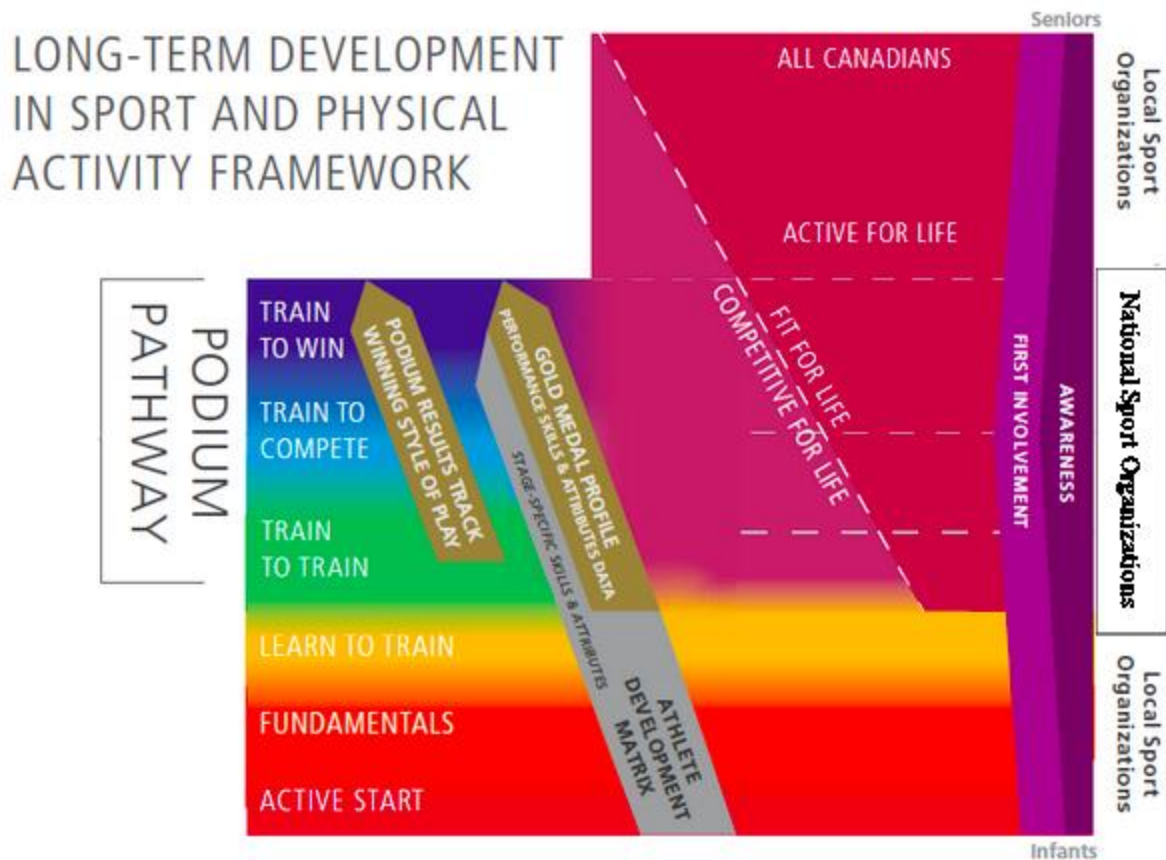


Figure 4 The Para Swimmer Perspective of the Organizational Structure of Athlete Development

Note. Adaptation of the Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity Framework, from the Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity 3.0 (Sport for Life, 2019) Retrieved from <https://sportforlife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Long-Term-Development-in-Sport-and-Physical-Activity-3.0.pdf> Copyright 2019 by Sport for Life Society.

Along with the domestic classification system leading to athletes' early engagement with the NSO, there is also a lack of depth within para swimming as compared to the mainstream swimming system, which leads to early identification by the NSO. In 2021, a year impacted by a pandemic which saw sport participation numbers in swimming drop by 31.7%, there were over 31,000 registered competitive swimmers in Canada (Swimming Canada, 2021). At the same time, there were less than 300 classified para swimmers (Swimming Canada, n.d.b). By there being less people to compete against for recognition and the financial pressure NSOs are under

to produce elite athletes (Own the Podium, n.d.), para swimmers are identified and begin to have interactions with the NSO early in their development.

One factor impacting low participation numbers is the lack of awareness regarding para swimming. While awareness is a significant first step in the athlete development pathway of the LTD (Higgs et al., 2019), most of the athletes in this study identified that they became aware of para swimming through their own or their family's engagement with other para swimmers, while two athletes learned about para swimming through watching an international level para swimming competition. None of the athletes discussed having learned about para swimming due to a concerted effort or awareness system having been in place by any of the para swimming stakeholders (clubs, PSOs, NSO). The awareness of each of the athletes to para swimming was left up to chance. The problem with leaving awareness to chance is that there is equally as good of chance of individuals who could fit within the para swimming system not learning about para swimming. Jaarsma and colleagues (2020) outlined that there are several methods of awareness building that can be undertaken to increase access to information about physical activity and sport opportunities for individuals with impairments. Methods included informing credible messengers (such as peers, and health professionals), the utilization of modern resourced (such as social media), as well as traditional methods (such as word of mouth) and the need to be specific about the targeted age and impairment groups. An emphasis on evaluating current procedures and ensuring that the target audience is being reached and broadening who the information is sent to was also made (Jaarsma et al., 2020). Taken together, organizations at all levels of sport need to make a concerted effort to improve their awareness/promotional practices and systems.

The lack of systematic awareness is a problem in other para sports as well. While just over half of the athletes stated that they had engaged in other sports at one point in time, most of whom had done so in mainstream sports and had ceased participating once they began to engage in para swimming. Therefore, one reason para swimmers are specializing early may be due to a lack of awareness of other para sport opportunities (Lemez et al., 2020). Providing credence to the previous suggestion is that the only athlete who was still engaging in another sport, was playing a para sport in an exclusive para athlete environment, which they learned about from a friend who was also engaged in the other para sport.

Enjoying engaging with other para swimmers was discussed by several athletes as they described opportunities to be with other para swimmers as being safe and welcoming, another system factor from the LTD which can be used to further explore systematic gaps in the para swimmer development experience.

4.6.2 Safe and Welcoming

The factor of safe and welcoming states that “diversity is a reality and corresponding participant-centered programs supporting diversity are a necessity” (Higgs et al., 2019, p. 19). This factor identifies that there should be systems in place to proactively address and support diversity and yet the experiences of the athletes in this study indicate that this is not currently happening within para swimming. At all levels of sport (community, club, PSO, NSO) athletes encountered situations in which diversity was not supported. Most first involvement in swimming takes place in community swimming lessons and yet the experiences of the athletes in this study demonstrated that traditional community swimming lessons were not able to meet their needs, and that one on one or small group learn to swim environments were necessary for athletes to

receive the individualized attention they required to be successful in the learn to swim setting. For athletes to be successful in the learn to swim environment, more attention needs to be placed on providing programming that is targeted towards meeting the needs of a diverse range of abilities, learning styles and timelines (Gelinas & Reid, 2000).

At the club level, athletes encountered clubs that were not open to working with them, presumably due to the functional level of the athletes, or clubs that allowed them to join the program, but the coaches were not knowledgeable enough about para swimming to meet their individual needs. DePauw and Gavron (2005) identified a lack of understanding and knowledge regarding how to work with para athletes as a barrier to sport participation for para athletes. Tied to the idea of a lack of understanding, athletes discussed the challenges of working with a coach that was not experienced coaching para swimmers and therefore, the coach was not always able to design programming to meet the developmental needs of the athletes. A lack of coaches and clubs educated in working with para swimmers is a gap in the coach and club education system. Historically, there has been a lack of educational opportunities and resources for para sport coaches, leaving coaches to find their own means of gaining knowledge regarding working with para athletes (Douglas & Falcão, 2018; Fairhurst et al., 2017; McMaster et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2014; Townsend et al., 2022). To address this gap, the Coaching Association of Canada (Coaching Association of Canada, n.d.) and Swimming Canada (Swimming Canada, 2019) have developed modules that focus on coaching athletes with impairments. However, what is not currently known is how and when coaches are utilizing these resources and how utilizing these modules is impacting their coaching practices. Additionally, at this time, while there has been research done regarding the inclusion of para athletes into mainstream sports clubs (Jeanes et al., 2018; Kitchin & Crossin, 2018), there are very few, if

any, training or resources available to clubs on how to effectively include para athletes into their organizations and programming. As knowledge is power, the better educated and supported a club and coaches are, the better the experience and outcomes will be for the athletes (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006; De Bosscher et al., 2006). Therefore, an educational system that addresses the needs of both coaches and clubs is needed to help adherence to the LTD guidelines.

In conjunction with the system view of participant centered programs, the LTD denotes that athletes develop at various rates and that emphasis should be on the stage of development and not on chronological age (Higgs et al., 2019). As discussed earlier, athletes experienced workouts not being tailored to their individual needs. Some athletes described not knowing whether their coach had a plan for their development, while others felt that their coaches were not open to their input into their training plans. Athletes who feel that they have autonomy in their training experience greater satisfaction and are more motivated to continue to engage in sport (Banack et al., 2011; Jones & Howe, 2005; Zahariadis et al., 2006). Therefore, along with an improved coach education system, there needs to be an emphasis on enhancing the coach athlete relationship.

For several of the athletes in this study, their age was an issue at both the club and NSO level. Within the club system, which in Canada typically caters to the ages of eight to eighteen, athletes were often training with mainstream athletes who were younger than them. While some athletes felt welcomed by younger teammates, others did not. One reason that athletes may not have felt comfortable training with younger teammates is the concept of relatedness, which is “the extent to which individuals perceive that significant others are genuinely invested in them and their well-being” (Markland et al., 2005, p. 820). Research into the impact of relatedness on the retention of marginalized groups (female golfers) found that relatedness was a strong indicator of

athlete retention, particularly with similar peers (Williams et al., 2013). The idea of relatedness is significant within the para swimming context due to the integrated sport system; para swimmers are often the only para swimmer in their club, leaving them without others in their situation to connect with. Additionally, due to the lack of depth in para swimming, the athletes in this study indicated that it wasn't until they were competing in higher levels of competition that they had the opportunity to connect and build relationships with other para swimmers. Therefore, systems within para swimming need to be put in place to promote and assist para swimmers to have opportunities to engage with other para swimmers earlier in their development to help enhance their sense of relatedness.

Athletes in this study also experienced exclusion from the development programming offered by the NSO's Next Gen program because of their age. The Next Gen program aims to support athletes five to eight years from their peak performance, however, athletes over the age of twenty years are excluded. Even athletes who had previously been engaged with the Next Gen program found that once they reached the age threshold that they were no longer able to engage with the services of the Next Gen programming.

As an impairment can occur throughout the life span, all athlete development systems at all levels need to be prepared to offer programming to para athletes of all ages. While at the club level, there are masters swim clubs in Canada, which are for swimmers eighteen years of age and old (Swimming Canada, n.d.a), the masters system does not cater to para athletes as classification is not recognized within the masters competition system leaving para athletes without a true competitive opportunity (Jones & Howe, 2005). For the Next Gen program, there needs to be a shift towards athletic potential and support needs when admittance criteria are written. If age is used as a criterion in determining who does and does not receive development

support, there is no telling how many athletes with great potential have been overlooked or slipped through the cracks.

4.7 Strengths, Limitations, & Future Directions

A strength of the current study is that it is the first of its kind to look at the implementation of the LTD for para swimmers through a comparative analysis between the experiences of para swimmers and the key factors of the LTD. Using the twenty-two key factors as codes allowed for recognition of the areas of athlete development that were identifiably significant along the para athlete development pathway from the perspective of the athletes. While the sample of the current study were all elite level athletes, the use of the twenty-two key factors of the LTD as codes could be utilized to determine the implementation experiences of athletes, para or otherwise, at any stage along the athlete development pathway. For future studies conducting a comparative analysis between athletes' experiences and the LTD, consideration should be given to utilizing the twenty two key factors during the development of the interview guide to enhance the focus of the research. A limitation of the study is that the sample was small and limited to para swimmers who had been selected to a single international multi-sport event. Due to the small size and specificity of the sample, caution should be taken when applying the findings to other populations. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research should use the key factors of the LTD as codes in analyzing the experiences of para athletes in other sports such as team sports and para specific sports such as goalball. Through the current study, gaps in the para athlete development system were identified. As the LTD was developed from an ableist viewpoint, replicating the study with mainstream athletes, and comparing the findings to the current study would allow for the identification of any gaps in the implementation of the LTD

with mainstream swimmers and illustrate the areas of similarity and variance between the para and mainstream swimmer development experience.

4.8 Conclusion

By analyzing the experiences of para swimmers in the latter stages of their development through the lens of the factors of the LTD, differences between the guidelines of the LTD and the experiences of para swimmers were exposed. The system factors of Long-Term Development and Safe and Welcoming were then utilized to situate the experiences of para swimmers within the current sport system. Under the umbrella of the factor of Long-Term Development, it was determined that athletes in this study encountered programs at both the club and NSO level that were tied to athlete age rather than development needs. Athletes also experienced a lack of engagement in a variety of sports and engaged in early specializations. Additionally, athletes in this study and their achievements were not recognized and celebrated at lower levels of competition identifying that that more training and awareness is needed. There were limited interactions with PSOs which is counter to the LTD organizational layout. Lastly and potentially most importantly, athletes experienced expedited advancement through the competitive levels once they had been through the classification process and received a sport class. At the core of the LTD is the idea that development takes time and yet para swimmers experienced fast advancement due to a variety of reasons including lack of talent pool depth and the classification system.

For athletes to feel safe and welcome within the sporting environment, the sport system and programs need to recognize the diversity of athletes and offer support and encouragement accordingly. Athletes in this study experienced learn to swim programs that were not equipped to

meet their needs, clubs that were not welcoming to para athletes, coaches who did not have the necessary education and knowledge to support them effectively, and had limited opportunities to engage with others like them. Overall, the experiences of para swimmers at the latter stages of their development highlighted that there are systematic issues or gaps throughout the para swimmer development pathway that need to be addressed. As the LTD and the current sports system in Canada was developed from an ableist perspective, it is not surprising that such significant gaps were identified.

According to the Canadian High Performance Sport Strategy, “The high-performance sport system is principled, nimble, and innovates to enhance high performance opportunities and outcomes” (Government of Canada, 2019). This study has brought to light the areas within the para swimmer development experience that require attention from sport managers and sport administrators at all levels. All involved in the development of athletes will need to draw from the ideals of high-performance system in being principled, nimble, and innovative as they work together to enhance the development experiences of the next generation of para swimmers.

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Chapter Five

5 Discussion & Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This work was motivated by questions that have been raised by scholars regarding the current mainstream athlete development models' application to para athletes and whether they are adequate for addressing the contextual needs of the para athlete (Hutzley, et al., 2016). My research sought to enable the often overlooked voices of athletes by examining athletes (and parents of athletes) experiences of para swimmer development. Through the three studies, I have explored the para swimming development pathway from initiation through to high level competition from the perspective of para swimmers. The inclusion of the para athlete experience in policy development and implementation is important and this work has added further evidence that this perspective is needed. From the findings of the three studies, I pull together these perspectives to present a model of key areas of considerations for para swimmer development. I discuss the impact my role as the researcher had on the research process and lastly, provide practical implications for the findings, which are tying together the experiences from initiation, retention and advancement phases of development (Green, 2005). The impact of the two overarching themes of People and Policy guides the discussion on practical implications (see Table 1.).

5.2 The Para Swimmer Experience

Throughout the research process it has been my intent to offer an avenue to engage the voices of para swimmers. The knowledge gained needs to be taken into consideration and utilized to

inform future avenues of research and the production of any future para swimmer development models/frameworks.

In Canada, there has been a shift in policy which has been touted to be more athlete centered (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). Athlete centered means that athletes are involved in all aspects of sport from participation through to policy development (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). To be truly athlete centered, the experiences of athletes need to form a significant component of any athlete related discussion, with athletes having an active role in sport programming including being involved in determining the needs, goals and action steps taken (AthletesCAN, 1994). Regarding athlete development, no one knows what the development of an athlete truly looks like better than the athlete themselves. A close second would be the athletes' parents/guardians, who not only impact athlete development (Côté, 1999; Lauer et al., 2010; Wuerth et al., 2004) but also have significant involvement in their child's athlete development (Sales & Misener, 2021).

While there will continue to be nuances in each athlete's experience, the commonalities of the athlete experience can help to provide a clearer picture of the development experience. Coaches, administrators and other stakeholders can shine a light on many areas of athlete development (Patatas et al., 2020), but only athletes can identify the areas that they felt had a significant impact on their development.

As my studies highlight and has been identified by other scholars (Hutzler et al., 2016), there is contextual uniqueness to the development experience of para swimmers in Canada. Without investigating the experiences of athletes and allowing athletes and their families the opportunity to express the highs and lows of that experience, models and frameworks will never be truly representative of athlete development.

5.3 Key Areas of Consideration for the Para Swimmer Development

Drawing from the findings of the three papers, I propose a model highlighting key areas of consideration when working with para swimmers within the Canadian context (Figure 1. Key Areas of Consideration for Para Swimmer Development).

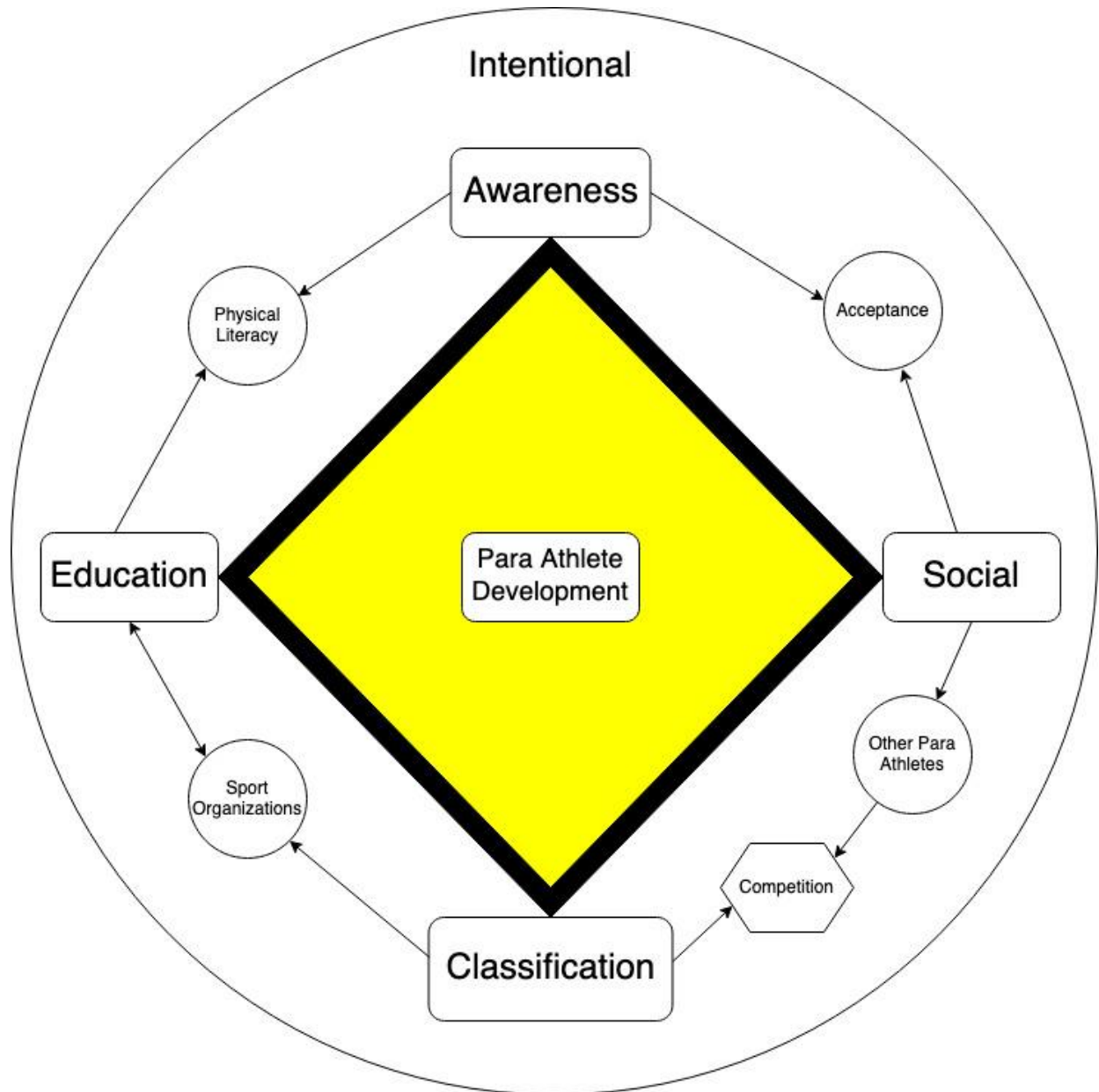


Figure 1. Key Areas of Consideration for Para Swimmer Development

The centre of the model is composed of a yellow and black diamond into which any of the current athlete development models or the six phases of para athlete development as proposed by Patatas et al. (2022) could be placed. The key areas of consideration which encircle the diamond need be taken into consideration regardless of the athlete development model being used. The yellow and black diamond is used in reference to the traffic sign for “slow”. Based on the experiences of the participants in this research study, para swimmers are moving through their development from initiation to international competition in an average of five years, which is three to seven years quicker than the recommended eight to twelve years in the LTD (Higgs et al., 2019). Deghansai and Baker (2020) found similar development timelines in their work involving participants in the Paralympian Search program. In chapter four, I outline several possible reasons for why the participants in study two experienced an amplified development timeline (system design, classification, limited talent pool). Based on the findings of study two, I believe that there is a need for more research into the development needs of para swimmers to identify an appropriate timeline or guideline for all areas of para swimmer development (physical, emotional, psychological, and social). In the meantime, as mainstream models of athlete development are all that are currently available, more research is needed on the developmental appropriateness of these models for para athletes. Practitioners should be conscious of the eight-to-twelve-year timeline and monitor para swimmer development accordingly and make a conscious effort only to advance para swimmers to the next level of competition when they are prepared and ready. There are psychological, emotional, and physical consequences of moving para swimmers through the development pathway too quickly. Surrounding the yellow and black diamond are four themes (awareness, social, classification,

education) and five subthemes (acceptance, other para athletes, competition, sport organizations, physical literacy).

5.3.1 Awareness

Starting at the top of the diamond is Awareness. Individuals with impairments cannot engage in para sport if they do not know it exists. Similar to what others have identified (Jaarsma et al., 2014, 2020) word of mouth from people of influence in the lives of individuals with impairments was how most participants learned about para swimming. Peers and colleagues (2018) identified that programs that offer para sport need to do a better job of advertising these opportunities. Therefore, learn to swim programs and swim clubs that are open to working with para swimmers need to include this information in all their communications and advertising (website, newsletters, etc.) on an ongoing basis so that more people in the general population can learn about para swimming opportunities and can pass on this information. Additionally, learn to swim programs and swim clubs engage para athletes within their programs in their marketing schemes and encourage these athletes to spread the word of the inclusivity of their programs to their friends with impairment (Jaarsma et al., 2020). All stakeholders (clubs, PSOs and NSOs) play a role in enhancing awareness of para swimming through the active promotion of current para athletes as new role identities can impact an individual's motivation to engage in a sport (Stevenson, 1990). Enhanced awareness of sport and physical activity opportunities for individuals with impairments will also help to enhance the physical literacy skills of para swimmers. Participants discussed having participated in very few physical activities or sports outside of swimming and all, but one participant had ceased engagement in other sports shortly after they joined a competitive swimming program. Research into early specialization of

mainstream athletes has found that there is an increased risk of injury and sport medicine organizations recommend multisport participation for both psychological and physical benefits (Jayanthi et al., 2019). More research is needed to determine if multisport engagement is also beneficial for para athletes. Additionally, enhanced awareness and recognition of para swimming (and other para sports) at all levels from grassroots to high performance will help to increase the acceptance of para swimming and para swimmers within the broader swimming community. Acceptance can also be affected by recognizing and improving the social benefits and impacts that para swimmers experience during their development. While para swimming is an individual sport, most of the training and competition takes place within a team environment. Many of the participants trained in an integrated environment, meaning that they trained alongside mainstream athletes.

5.3.2 Social

Social is the second theme to the right of the model. Social interactions with mainstream teammates, parents, coaches, and other para swimmers are important to para swimmers. Participants described relationships with mainstream teammates on a spectrum from feeling as close as family to feeling disconnected or unwelcome. Parents are a source of both tangible and intangible support and some participants spoke about the advocacy role of parents throughout their development to ensure they got the treatment and assistance from clubs and coaches that the para swimmers required. The coach – athlete relationship is critical (Jowett, 2017) and at times it can be positive and at other times frustrating depending on the level of willingness of coaches to increase their knowledge of the nuance of para swimming and the needs of the para swimmer. The athletes noted that most coaches did not have prior knowledge or experience working with para swimmers before they joined their programs, and the willingness of coaches to increase

their knowledge and ability to individualize their approach impacted athletes' positive affect of the sport experience. Coaches' lack of prior knowledge led to increased stress on the relationship between coach and para athlete as the responsibility of educating coaches about individual needs often fell on the para athlete themselves. Athletes identified that the responsibility of educating coaches added an additional level of stress regarding changing coaches throughout the participants' development experiences.

It is not surprising that para swimmers noted a desire to train and compete with others 'like them'. Other para swimmers as teammates, friends, and rivals is a key social resource in a child's development experience. Roles that other para swimmers took on through the development experience of the participants included a source of introduction to para swimming, a source of acceptance and belonging and a source of competition. Several participants indicated that it was other para swimmers that they had a prior relationship with who were already competing in para swimming who encouraged them to try para swimming. A few other participants identified that it was through seeing other individuals with a similar impairment to themselves competing in para swimming that made them decide to try para swimming. Therefore, representation and connection are two key factors to helping to increase and maintain the engagement of individuals with impairments in the sport as well as impact the athletic identity of athletes with impairments (Anderson, 2009). As mentioned earlier, para swimming is an integrated sport where para swimmers spend a large majority of their training and/or competitive experiences being the only or one of a few individuals with an impairment. Participants said that being with other para swimmers positively impacted their development experiences. Other para swimmers were described as accepting, supportive, and providing a sense of comfort. Being with other para swimmers was also identified as having a positive impact on the training environment as

participants felt they received less judgment and more inclusively coached practices. Despite the benefits of interacting with other para swimmers, participants who trained in integrated environments discussed how they did not get the opportunity to interact with other para swimmers until they were competing at higher levels of competition. Therefore, emphasis needs to be placed on providing opportunities for para swimmers to interact with other para swimmers throughout the development experience. Having opportunities to interact with other para swimmers would positively impact the development of a sense of identity and belonging (Anderson, 2009) which in turn would improve the para swimmers' quality of life (Ablon, 1981).

Jones and Howe (2005) define sports competitions as having at least two competitors being pitted against each other to determine the competitor that best accomplishes a specific challenge or goal of the contest. Fair competition requires all competitions to be treated equally and starting from a "level playing field" so that it can be the athletic performance of the competitors that makes the difference in outcomes of the contest (Jones & Howe, 2005). In para sport, the classification system is in place to ensure fair competition. Therefore, in para swimming, for competition to take place two key factors are required: classification and other para swimmers. The findings highlight the importance of competing where other para swimmers were present and how they were able to test themselves against others of similar ability. Unfortunately, opportunities to compete against other para swimmers were not readily available to participants until they reached higher levels of competition (provincial championships or higher). Ideally, efforts should be made throughout the development experience to provide para swimmers with opportunities to compete against other para swimmers. Due to the geographical size of Canada and the limited number of para swimmers, providing competitive opportunities between para swimmers requires sport organizations to invest in creating opportunities critical for connections.

5.3.3 Classification

Classification is necessary for fair competition and was discussed at length by each participant in both studies, although specific experiences with the classification process and outcomes varied between participants. Classification is identified as the third theme of the model. Participants identified classification as being important to their development at all stages of the pathway. Participants in the beginning stages of development identified classification as the entrance point to competition and as the gateway into the para swimming community. Participants indicated that classification determines an athlete's future in the sport, knowledge which causes stress and uncertainty for them. Similar findings were found by Van Dornick and Spencer (2020). Para swimmers and parents in the first study identified a lack of knowledge and understanding of the process, outcome and ramifications of classification which led to stress for all involved. As all the participants in the second study were competing at their first multi-sport international competition, they had all been through the classification process a minimum of three times. Most of the participants discussed how their sport class had changed at least once. Several participants in higher sport classes discussed how their swimming careers could be over if they had been deemed ineligible for para swimming. One participant discussed how classification was the most stressful part of competing. The stress and lack of control of submitting oneself to the classification process is unique to para sport (Peers, 2012) and is not represented in any athlete development models. As classification has such a profound impact on para swimmer development, it is an area that requires additional research and consideration when working with para swimmers.

The fourth subtheme was sport organizations such as clubs, PSOs, NSOs, IFs which play a role in the development of para swimmers. As discussed in chapter three, the four levels of sport

organization had varying impact on the development experiences of the participants. In relation to classification, IPC and WPS are responsible for determining the policies and procedures of the classification system. NSOs are responsible for administrating the classification system to the degree that is most appropriate for the domestic needs of their country. PSOs and clubs were not discussed by participants as having a significant role in the classification process, and possible reasons for why were discussed in chapter three. Sport organizations play such a significant role in the development of para swimmers that in the comparison between the experiences of the participants in the second study and the twenty-two key factors of the LTD in chapter four, I highlight several gaps in the athlete development system. Addressing the following gaps would lead to an enhanced para swimmer development experience:

- lack of systems to address and support diversity at all levels including lack of systematic awareness programs
- impeded physical literacy due to a lack of exposure to multiple physical activities
- lack of knowledgeable swim instructors and coaches
- expediated movement through competitive levels due to early engagement with the NSO because of the governance structure of the domestic classification system and the limited depth of the talent pool
- lack of PSO engagement in athlete development

Addressing these areas of concern would require sport organizations at all levels to have an active role in the solutions.

One area that sport organizations can play an important role is in providing their members with adequate education when it comes to working with para swimmers. To do so, sport organization

must be both receivers and distributors of knowledge on how to best support, coach, and work with para swimmers.

5.3.4 Education

Education is the fourth of the themes of the model. As identified above, there are several areas in which more knowledge and information is needed to enhance the development experiences of para swimmers. Several participants discussed difficulty in finding swim instructors who were knowledgeable in adapting programming to meet the learn to swim needs of the swimmer with an impairment. A similar experience was described by participants when they transitioned to a swim club particularly for those athletes who joined an integrated swim team and were working with coaches who had no or limited experience working with para swimmers. Para swimmers found themselves having to educate their coaches on their impairment, what they could and could not do, etc., and several participants discussed the stress this added to the coach-athlete relationship. Swim clubs need to continue to make coach education a priority, particularly in para specific areas such as rule exemptions, allowable technologies, and the classification process (Burkett, 2012). Most coaches that the athletes were working with during the middle stages of their development did not have prior knowledge or experience working with para swimmers and were reactively seeking information. Therefore, educational opportunities/resources provided by clubs, PSOs and NSOs need to be readily available and easily accessed. Coaches also need to continue to utilize non-formal means of increasing their knowledge of working with para swimmers (Townsend et al., 2022). Enhancing education for learn to swim and other para swimming instructors/coaches would lead to more positive early sport and physical activity experiences which would in turn lead to enhanced physical literacy (the fifth subtheme) of individuals with impairments. Participants discussed their engagement in other sports and

physical activities, with most para swimmers having participated in very few other sports/physical activities. As engagement in a variety of sports and physical activities has been identified as a key factor in developing physical literacy (Higgs et al., 2019) the physical literacy of the participants in both studies would be affected. Learn to swim programs need to ensure that their instructors and coaches who are working with para swimmers receive adequate training on aspects of the para swimmer specifics such as impact of impairment on swimming, and a variety of teaching techniques (Gelinas & Reid, 2000). As there is a lack of formal coach education opportunities available to individuals working with para athletes (McMaster et al., 2012), learn to swim and swim clubs need to make a conscious effort to provide mentorship and informal learning opportunities to their instructors and coaches (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). Instructors and coaches should also be provided with training on how to effectively work with parents as parents play an important role in the initiation of sport for their child (Côté & Hay, 2002). Along with the education of sport instructors, awareness of sport and physical activity opportunities is also necessary for enhancing the physical literacy of para swimmers. Therefore, bringing us back to awareness and the top of the model.

The themes and subthemes are laid out in a circular manner as the para swimmer development experience is an ongoing process which will continually need to be reviewed and addressed. Outside of the model is a circle and the word Intentional to identify that sport practitioners must be intentional when working with para swimmers and in addressing the themes and subthemes of the model. For too long, the idea that an athlete is an athlete has been perpetuated throughout the para swimming community to the detriment of the athlete development experience of para swimmers. The nuances and uniqueness of the para swimmer experience needs to be taken into

consideration if we are to adequately support and enhance the para swimmer development experience.

5.4 Impact of the Researcher

As was identified in the introduction, my role as the researcher had an impact on all components of the research process. While the research question for study one was influenced by the OPC wanting to know more about the para athlete development experience, it was my background in para sport that led me to be interested in taking on the project. While I was aware of my own experiences, I was interested to learn about the experiences of others and as my own experiences took place several decades ago, I was curious to learn what current para swimmers were experiencing. Driven by my experiences as a para athlete in an integrated sport system in which I did not feel like my needs were always taken into consideration when decisions were made, I wanted to give a voice to para swimmers. This desire was further strengthened when I turned to the literature and learned that very little research had been done with the inclusion of para athletes.

Having the background and experience I have in para sport (athlete, coach, classifier) allowed me to access participants in a manner that may not be available to others. It was due to my background and prior relationship with Swim Ontario that allowed me to reach the participants of the first study. The second study was initiated due to the ADHP recognizing my background and their desire to support research into the development of para swimmers. Therefore, without my personal position within the para sport community, I may not have had the access to the participants that I did.

My background and prior experiences also influenced the data analysis process throughout all the studies. Utilizing an IPA methodology allowed my prior experiences to be acknowledged and

valued and recognized as an influential component of the research process (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Adhering to Heidegger's double hermeneutics process, allowed for the recognition that while the participants were trying to make sense of their experiences, they were influenced by their prior experiences in the same way that I was influenced by my prior experiences in trying to make sense of the participant's experiences (Crotty, 1998). IPA is an idiographic approach which focuses on the experiences of a small number of participants, in conjunction with the influence my prior experiences had on the data analysis process, the findings of the study are specific to the current participants and my influence as a researcher. Therefore, while I have provided key areas of consideration when working with para swimmers, further research is necessary to expand on the findings of this study and to allow for the findings to be applied to a larger population.

5.5 Practical Implications of the Para Swimmer Development Experience

Table 1

The Para Swimmer Development Experience and Areas for Enhancement and Systematic Change

	Initiation	Retention	Advancement
People	Parents/Family Instructors/Coaches Community Other Para Swimmers	Parents Coaches Teammates Other Para Swimmers	Parents Coaches Other Para Swimmers
Policy	Municipal and Community Learn to Swim Programs Club	Club PSO NSO	NSO Classification PSO

	PSO/NSO	Classification	
Areas for Enhancement	<p>Awareness campaigns aimed at para and general community</p> <p>Education for instructors/coaches regarding working with para athletes</p> <p>Opportunities for engagement with other para athletes</p> <p>Multi-sport/physical activity engagement opportunities</p>	<p>Education for instructors/coaches regarding working with para athletes</p> <p>Enhance knowledge/understanding of the classification process/outcomes for athletes/families/coaches</p> <p>Enhance diversity and inclusion culture of clubs/PSOs/NSOs</p> <p>Establish clear lines of communication between athletes, parents, and coaches</p> <p>Opportunities for engagement with other para athletes</p>	<p>NSO support of PSO engagement in the para athlete development pathway</p>
Systematic Change	<p>Awareness needs to be systematic and involve all levels of sport (FDSPs, clubs, PSOs, NSOs)</p> <p>FDSP readiness to work with diverse populations</p>	<p>Coach education which includes knowledge required for working with para athletes</p> <p>Diversity and Inclusion policies established at all levels of sport (NSO, PSOs, clubs, FDSP)</p>	<p>Classification requires a domestic shift towards participation.</p> <p>PSOs need to be engaged in the systematic development of para athletes.</p> <p>Need systems in place to ensure para athletes are adequately prepared on all levels (physical, psychological,</p>

			emotional) for advancement to higher levels of competition
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5.5.1 Initiation

Participation in sport begins with an interest in the activity, experiencing fun and enjoyment early in participation and developing fundamental skills, in this case learning how to swim, and then transitioning to becoming a member of a club and focusing on the development of competitive swimming specific skills. To do so, para swimmers and their families need three things to occur. First, they must be made aware of the opportunities, second they must have a positive first experience, and third, they must work with knowledgeable instructors and coaches to help them acquire the necessary skills (Higgs et al., 2019). The participants of my studies learned about swimming opportunities from people of significance in their lives, family, friends, other para swimmers and medical personnel. Jaarma and colleagues (2020) found similar findings in regard to individuals with impairments learning about physical activity opportunities. Therefore, fundamental skill development programs (FSDP) (such as municipal and community learn to swim programs and swim clubs) need to ensure that their marketing of inclusive opportunities is targeted towards a wide audience so that the necessary people of significance can hear about programming and pass the information onto potential para swimmers and families. Additionally, FSDP need to ensure that their instructors and coaches who are working with para swimmers receive adequate training on aspects of the para swimmer specifics such as impact of impairment on swimming, and a variety of teaching techniques (Gelinis & Reid, 2000). As there is a lack of formal coach education opportunities available to individuals working with para athletes (McMaster et al., 2012), FSDPs need to make a conscious effort to provide mentorship and informal learning opportunities to their instructors and coaches (Conroy & Coatsworth,

2006). Instructors and coaches should also be provided with training on how to effectively work with parents as parents play an important role in the initiation of sport for their child (Côté & Hay, 2002). FSDP should also utilize the para athletes within their programs in their marketing schemes and encourage these athletes to spread the word of the inclusivity of the FDSP to their friends with impairment (Jaarsma et al., 2020). Additionally, all stakeholders (clubs, PSOs and NSOs) should be helping to build awareness of para swimming through the active promotion of current para athletes as new role identities can impact an individual's motivation to engage in a sport (Stevenson, 1990). Participants in my second study discussed engaging in few sports outside of swimming which may have led to a lack of physical literacy and early specialization (Higgs et al., 2019). Therefore, parents and FSDP leaders need to proactively seek to engage individuals with an impairment into a variety of sports and physical activities. FDSP should consider making formal connections with other FDSPs which focus on the development of different fundamental skills (ie a swim club partnering with a basketball program) or plan into their programming an emphasis on alternative fundamental skills (ie. dryland program for swimming includes jumping or throwing). The ultimate goal is to enhance the physical literacy of individuals with an impairment through greater exposure to multiple physical activity and sporting activities.

5.5.2 Retention

In the retention phase, the knowledge of coaches and a willingness to learn were identified as significant to the athletes in my studies. Swim clubs need to continue to make coach education a priority, particularly in para specific areas such as rule exemptions, allowable technologies, and the classification process (Burkett, 2012). My studies identified most coaches that the athletes were working with during the middle stages of their development did not have prior knowledge

or experience working with para swimmers and were reactively seeking information. Therefore, educational opportunities/resources provided by clubs, PSOs and NSOs need to be readily available and easily accessed. Coaches also need to be aware of the ongoing advocacy role of the parents of para athletes throughout their development as this is unique to para sport compared with mainstream sport where the role of the parent tends to decrease as they move through the development process (Lauer et al., 2010). Parents, coaches, and athletes need to establish clear lines of communication early in their relationship so that all parties feel they have a voice and a role within the sporting triad.

Having a sense of belonging was also deemed to be important by the participants of study two throughout their development, particularly through the retention phase as the majority of para swimmers train in integrated training environments where they are often the only or one of a few para swimmers. Being accepted, supported and valued helps athletes to feel connected to their teammates which can help keep them in the sport (Allan et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018).

Therefore, swim clubs, PSOs, and NSOs need to make a recognizable effort through policy and action to help para swimmers feel safe, welcome and that they belong. Actions such as having representation of para athletes in the organization's advertising, and coaches and other staff being trained to work with para athletes through taking courses such as the NCCP Coaching Athletes with a Disability course (Coaching Association of Canada, n.d.). Celebrating and recognizing the accomplishments of para athletes at all levels through means such as social media and news releases can help para athletes know that their contributions to the organizations are valued.

Most of the participants in my studies had limited contact with other para swimmers through the retention phase. To encourage ongoing engagement of athletes clubs, PSOs and NSOs need to

provide opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions (Williams et al., 2013). To help para swimmers connect with other para swimmers, clubs can partner with other clubs with para swimmers for training and competitive opportunities, coaches can choose to attend swim meets which provide opportunities to race other para swimmers and organizations can host or encourage and support their para athletes to attend regional, provincial or national camps. Opportunities for parent-to-parent connections, networking and engagement should also be a priority as parents can gain knowledge and support when they have the opportunity to connect with other parents of individuals with impairments (Shilling et al., 2015). As mentioned earlier parents play a significant role in their child's engagement in sport (Lauer et al., 2010), therefore, if parents feel supported and engaged in the para swimming community, it may lead to increased retention of para swimmers.

Classification is perceived by athletes to play a significant role in their entry into competitive swimming and yet there are a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings of the process and outcome of classification. Therefore, all para swimming stakeholders (athletes, parents, coaches, club administrators, PSO staff) require education on the classification process (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020). Information about the classification process should be user friendly, simplistic, relevant, and updated as necessary as the classification system is internationally dictated and changes occur from time to time. The more knowledge all stakeholders have regarding the classification process, the better informed and supported athletes will be as they move through the classification system.

5.5.3 Advancement

The pace at which para swimmers moved through their development was significantly quicker than what is outlined in current athlete development frameworks such as the LTD (Dehghansai & Baker, 2020; Higgs et al., 2019). The enhanced speed at which para swimmers find themselves engaging in high levels of competition is concerning as while they may be physically ready for elite competition, they may not be emotionally and psychologically ready (Balyi et al., 2013). Not being ready on all levels (physically, emotionally, mentally and cognitively) can lead to loss of interest, injuries or burnout (Balyi et al., 2013). More research is needed to identify the impact of accelerated development on para swimmers.

As para athletes begin to move through the competitive levels, their parents/guardians continue to play a supportive and advocacy role, with ongoing interactions with coaches, and NSO staff, which is unique to the para athlete experience (Cregan et al., 2007). Once athletes begin to be involved in NSO programming such as the Next Gen program, not only do they begin to have interactions with coaches who are highly experienced in para swimming, but their coaches begin to receive mentorship opportunities, which leads to an enhancement in their para swimming knowledge (Cregan et al., 2007). The increase in knowledge of coaches leads to changes in athlete programming, further helping the athletes to achieve faster times and higher levels of competition (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). Once competing at higher levels of competition, such as national and international competitions, athletes begin to have more opportunities to engage with, compete against and feel supported by other para swimmers. In environments with other para swimmers, athletes feel understood and accepted, which helps to keep athletes engaging in sport (Morris et al., 2019). Training beside other para swimmers can also help push the athletes to work harder (Corbett et al., 2012), ultimately leading to enhanced performance.

From a policy perspective, classification continues to play a significant role in the athletic career of para swimmers as they move through the competitive levels and are required to repeatedly go through the classification process. Due to a lack of education as mentioned above, but also due to the high level of significance placed on the outcome of classification and the impact it can have on the career of an athlete, classification causes stress and uncertainty (Van Dornick & Spencer, 2020). To help athletes through the increasingly involved classification process, ongoing support and advocacy from knowledgeable NSO staff is required.

Additionally, for para swimmers to advance through their development, they need to feel supported, to have someone to answer their questions, to feel valued and respected. For the para swimmers in my studies, they felt that they received support from the NSO. Contrarily, the para swimmers did not identify the PSOs having a significant role in their development. In fact, the PSOs were seen almost strictly as a swim meet sanctioning body. Moving forward, either the PSOs need to be removed from para swimmer development, leaving the NSO to handle development from initiation onwards, or the NSO needs to actively support the PSOs in taking on a more active role in all areas of the development of para swimmers (education, funding, and policy changes regarding the administration of classification at the initial levels in the process, etc.).

5.6 Conclusion

My studies provided an opportunity for the experiences of multiple para swimmers to be represented, the contextual uniqueness of para swimmer development discussed, and gaps within the para swimmer development system that the participants of the studies experienced were highlighted. There is a popular saying within the para sport community that “sport is sport”. This

saying is supposed to help minimize the uncertainties those who are outside the para sport community may feel and to help elevate the stance of para sport as being equal to mainstream sport. I believe that my research has identified that while the goals and objectives of sport are the same in both mainstream and para sport, the environments, experiences, and the impact of current systems vary significantly between para and mainstream sport. So, while “sport is sport” may sound harmless, the reality is that the nuances and uniqueness of the para swimmer experiences need to be recognized, strategized and addressed if we are to have athlete development models and systems that truly support the needs of all athletes, para or otherwise.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Study One: Letter of Information and Consent

Study One: LETTER OF INFORMATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Understanding Athlete Experiences of Parasport Pathways

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this important research study conducted by Dr. Laura Misener (Western University) and Darda Sales, PhD student (Western University). If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Laura Misener at 1-xxx-xxx-xxxx ext. xxxxxx or by email at xxxx@uwo.ca or Darda Sales at xxxx@uwo.ca.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of para-swimming athletes' experiences in progressing through the stages of the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model. A number of research questions will be addressed: 1) How do para-swimming participants reflect on their experiences with the LTAD model and what are some of the current barriers, constraints, or challenges they have experienced? 2) How do experiences differ within the LTAD model for those with congenital vs. acquired disabilities? 3) What are the current implementation strategies and are they effective in achieving desired results? (e.g., being active for life) 4) What is the disconnect with the LTAD model and the needs of para-swimming participants?

PROCEDURES We are asking you to complete a semi structured interview either in person, over the phone or via skype. The interview could last up to 60 minutes.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS There are no known risks to participation in this study. If you feel uncomfortable with any line of questioning in the interviews, please feel free to decline to respond. Also, please feel free to request a break if you feel the interview is too long.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY You will have the opportunity to reflect on your experiences navigating through the para swimming athlete development system and perhaps take back insights to your sport community.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION There is not extrinsic compensation for participation in the study. Participation is strictly voluntary.

CONFIDENTIALITY Completion of the interview is entirely ANONYMOUS. No personal information will be collected that can connect you to the completed interview. All proper names and references to any names will be changed or deleted from transcripts.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL You can choose whether or not you would like to participate in the study. Once you have completed the interview, your information provided will

not be connected to you personally as it will be anonymous.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Office, University of Western Ontario, at xxx@uwo.ca, xxx-xxx-xxxx.

PUBLICATIONS The results of this research will be written up in the form of a published report and other outputs. For example, in press releases and scholarly articles. By completing the survey, you are consenting to have your anonymous data be a part of the published reports.

These are the terms under which we will conduct research.

DARDA SALES; LAURA MISENER, PhD

Consent Form

Project Title: Examining Athlete Experiences of Parasport Pathways

Study Investigator's Name: Dr. Laura Misener

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to the interview process: YES NO

I consent to audio recording: YES NO

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Study One: Interview Guide

Ontario Para Swimmers and Parents Interview Guide

PROTOCOL:

The interviewers introduce themselves

The purpose of the study is repeated

Let participants know that they will have the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview if they wish to do so

The consent form is signed or oral consent is confirmed for both interview and audio recording. If no consent for audio recording, proceed with interview and take notes.

[Start the audio recorder]

1. How long have you been involved with swimming?
Probe: What is highest level achieved?
2. Can you tell me how you got involved in swimming?
Probes: Did you take swimming lessons? Where? Who facilitated?
Was learning to swim part of your rehabilitation?
Where did you learn to swim? Pool/beach/cottage?

Who facilitated this process? Family/friends/you?
3. How did the transition from learning to swim/recreational swimming to a swim team/competitive swimming happen for you?
Probes: Who facilitated?
What resources did you need/use in this process?
What challenges do you face in the process?
4. What challenges did you face as you moved through the competitive levels?
Probes: Describe how you navigated those challenges
Who/what was most helpful to you as you navigated these challenges?
5. What supports helped you the most as you progressed in your swimming career?
Probes: Interpersonal supports → Who helped you as you progressed?

Organizational supports → How did the swim club structure support your development?
6. What supports do you think would have been helpful to your swimming development?
Probes: Interpersonal
Organizational

7. Tell me about your experience with the classification process.
 - Probes: How long had you been swimming when you were first classified?
 - Where did your first classification take place?
 - How old were you when you were first classified?
 - Have you been reclassified at any point? Ie. Qualified for the next level of competition, set review, etc.
8. Are you aware of the Long Term Athlete Development model?
 - Probe: Brief description, if necessary. Does the model describe your experience with the LTAD.
9. How do you think your athletic development aligns with the LTAD?
10. What advice would you give to someone looking to get into competitive para swimming?
11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your swimming experience?

Description of the LTAD

The LTAD is a model identifies the general framework of athlete development in the sport of swimming.

There are 7 stages to the model.

Active Stage – 0-6 years of age

- first introduction to the sport

Fundamentals – Females: 5-8 yrs, Males: 6-9yrs 2-3 hours/per week (1-3 sessions)

- basic movement skills, no formal competition

Learn to Train – Females: 8-11 yrs, Males: 9-12 yrs – 4-7 hours/week (4-6 sessions)

- Intro to competition

Train to Train – F: 11-14yrs, M: 12-15yrs – 12-14 hrs/wk (6-12 sessions)

- Mastery of sport skills, training systems

Train to Compete – F: 14-16yrs, M:15-18yrs – 16-24hr/wk (8-12 sessions)

- Individualized training approach, high level competitions

Compete to Win – F: 16+yrs, M: 18+yrs – 20-24 hr/wk (10-15 sessions)


- Competing at the highest levels

Active for Life – Any age

- Recreational sport, self-directed, active lifestyle

Appendix C: Athletes' Experiences Along the Para Sport Development Pathway – Para Swimming Infographic

Athletes' Experiences Along the Para-Sport Development Pathway - Para-Swimming



Coaching

"...the coaches looked at me, looked at my mom being like "You're insane! How are we going to integrate this child into a competitive swim team?"

- Gap in Experience/Education
- Adaptation/Individualization




Classification

"I felt like we went into that classification blind and didn't really know what we were supposed to get out of it."

- Significant
- Lack of knowledge/ understanding


Education & Communication



Word of Mouth

"I had a friend who shared with me about the swim club..."


- Learning about programs from friends & family



Learn to Swim

"...when I had the one on one opportunity to work with someone who understood disability and I was able to learn how to swim pretty quickly after that."

- 1 on 1
- Specialized programs
- Rehab









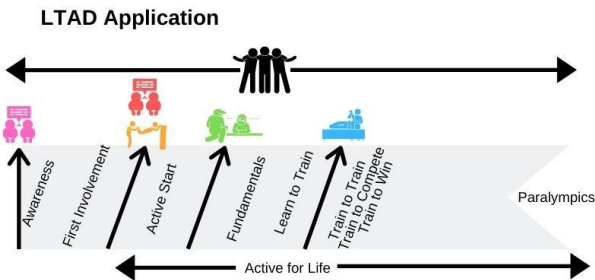
Social Connection

"it's a lot of fun when you're able to just compete against someone with similar abilities."

- Sameness
- Role Models
- Competition
- Parents

Recommendations:

-  Develop a **practical** guide for coaching athletes with a disability.
Ex. a multi sport database
-  Develop an educational resource for athletes/parents/coaches on the **process** and **components** of classification.
-  Pursue a Communication Specialist to provide a strategy for improving **awareness** of programs.
-  Conduct a **review** of learn to swim programs
-  Provide **assistance** in the development/implementation/awareness of training for swim instructors for teaching individuals with a disability.
-  Provide social & competitive **segregated** opportunities.
Parenting **networking program** Ex. Forums/gatherings at events.
Develop a **mentorship program** for athletes.



Appendix D: Study Two: Letter of Information and Consent

LETTER OF INFORMATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Beginner to Elite: Understanding the Athlete Experience of the Para-sport Development Pathway

Thank you for your interest in participating in this important research study conducted by Dr. Laura Misener (Western University) and Darda Sales, PhD Student (Western University). If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Laura Misener at 1-xxx-xxx-xxxx ext. xxxxx or by email at xxxx@uwo.ca or Darda Sales at xxxx@uwo.ca.

SPONSOR This study is being conducted in collaboration with Swimming Canada and the National Para-Swimming program. Swimming Canada will provide Darda Sales with in-kind contributions such as travel assistance, accommodations, and food when Darda is engaging in data collection within the National Para-Swimming programming, training camps and competitions. You may request any details about this in-kind contribution from either Darda Sales xxxx@uwo.ca or Wayne Lomas, xxxx@swimming.ca.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST The co-investigator, Darda Sales, was a member of the National Para-Swimming Team from 2000 to 2010 and is now a swim coach with the London Aquatic Club, working with both athletes with an impairment and able-bodied athletes. There is potential for Darda to have had contact with participants outside of this study as either a teammate, or a coach. Darda has been named the Assistant Team Manager for the training camp in Torremolinos, Spain and there is also the potential that Darda will be named the Team Manager for the 2019 Para Pan Am Games. While Darda will fulfill a staff position during the training camp and potentially the competition, Darda has no influence over the team selection process.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of para-swimming athletes' experiences in progressing through the stages of athlete development. A number of research questions will be addressed: **1)** What are the experiences of para-swimmers as developed as an athlete? **2)** What supports do athletes need throughout their development? **3)** What cultural, social and environmental factors play a role in an athlete's success?

PROCEDURES We are asking you to complete a semi structured interview either in person, over the phone or online chat service Zoom. The interview could last up to 60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded. Audio records will be transcribed verbatim, and all identifying information will be kept confidential. There will also be a participant observation component to the study, during which the primary investigator will observe the participants as they interact with other members of the Para Pan Am Games team, including interactions between teammates, coaches, and support staff. Locations of the observations include in the training environment (pool and dryland), in the public areas of the lodgings and during transportation.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION There is no extrinsic compensation for participation in the study. Participation is strictly voluntary. Choosing to participate or not to participate in this study will have no impact on your standing within the National Para-Swimming Program. You

may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time.

WITHDRAWAL FROM STUDY You can choose whether or not you would like to participate in the study. Once you have completed the interview, your information provided will not be connected to you personally as all names will be removed. Should you choose to withdraw your information from the study, please contact Dr. Laura Misener at 1-xxx-xxx-xxxx ext. xxxxx or by email at xxx@uwo.ca to indicate your desire to withdraw. Once a written request for removal from the study received, all information pertaining to you will be removed from the study.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS The only known potential risk of participation is social discomfort (e.g. not being able to recall information, pressure to participate from other athletes; expecting to have a ‘right’ answer). If you feel uncomfortable with any line of questioning in the interviews, please feel free to decline to respond. Also, please feel free to request a break at any point during the interview. You may also ask to stop the interview at any time for any reason, with no explanation needed.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY You will have the opportunity to reflect on your experiences navigating through the para-swimming athlete development system and perhaps take back insights to your sport community. The findings of this research project will be utilized to develop a legacy program within the para-swimming community of Swimming Canada. The findings may also be used to influence the supports and services that are made available to future para-swimmers as they advance through their development.

CONFIDENTIALITY. *Any disclosures of harm to self or others, will be reported to the appropriate authorities.* Only personal information related to your swimming experience will be collected. All proper names and references to any names will be changed or deleted from transcripts. Only the two researchers listed above and a professional transcriptionist (who will have signed a confidentiality agreement) will have access to the raw data. De-identified direct quotes and aggregated data will be shared with Wayne Lomas, Vince Mikuska and Jocelyn Jay, for the purpose of utilizing the data to develop a legacy program within the Para-Swimming community and for the enhancement of para-athlete development systems.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study. Representatives of Western University’s Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

PUBLICATIONS The results of this research will be written up in the form of a published report and other outputs, such as, in press releases and scholarly articles. By completing the interview, you are consenting to have your anonymized data be a part of the published reports.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics xxx-xxx-xxxx, 1-xxx-xxx-xxxx, email: xxx@uwo.ca. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

These are the terms under which we will conduct research. This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

DARDA SALES; LAURA MISENER, PhD

Consent Form

Project Title: Beginner to Elite: Understanding the Athlete Experience of the Para-sport Development Pathway

Study Investigator's Name: Dr. Laura Misener

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to the interview process:	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
I consent to audio recording:	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
I consent to the participant observation process:	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO
I consent to the dissemination of any direct, unidentifiable quotes:	<input type="checkbox"/> YES	<input type="checkbox"/> NO

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

For Participants under the age of 18 years and/or in the S14 classification:

Parent/Guardian's Name (please print): _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____

Date: _____

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Study Two: Email to Para Pan Am Games National Team Athletes

Dear Para Pan Am Games National Team Athlete,

At the current time, the majority of literature regarding athlete development is centered around the experiences of able-bodied athletes. In an effort to gain a better understanding of para athletes, specifically para-swimming athletes' experiences in progressing through the stages of athlete development, you are invited to participate in one-on-one interviews with Darda Sales, 4-time Paralympian and PhD Student from Western University.

The interview will focus on your development experiences as a para swimmer, including how you got involved in swimming, your progression through the competitive levels, and the challenges you have encountered and the supports you have utilized throughout your development. The interviews should take between 30 and 60 minutes to complete and can take place in person, over the phone or using the online video chat program, Zoom. The interviews will be scheduled at the Training Camp, in Spain for either during or after the camp.

The findings of this study will be used to influence the design of a para-athlete specific development pathway model, as well as, impact future athlete development initiatives and a legacy program at Swimming Canada.

Your participation in the research component of this project is **completely voluntary**. Choosing to participate or to not participate in this research project, will have no impact on your selection to future national teams.

Please find a letter of information and consent form regarding your potential role in the one-on-one interviews attached. If you choose to participate in the one-on-one interviews, please sign the consent form and either email it to Darda Sales xxxx@uwo.ca or bring a hardcopy with you to the Training Camp. Parental/guardianship signatures are required along with athlete signatures for all athletes under the age of 18 years or who compete in the S14 classification.

If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact either Darda Sales, PhD Student xxxx@uwo.ca or Wayne Lomas, Associate Director of High Performance and Para-swimming National Coach xxxx@swimming.ca

Thank you for your consideration to this project,
Sincerely,

Wayne Lomas
Associate Director of High Performance and Para-swimming National Coach | Swimming Canada/
Directeur associé de la haute performance et entraîneur national de paranatation | Natation Canada

Darda Sales
PhD Student
Department of Kinesiology/Faculty of Health Sciences
Western University

We are celebrating today's champion to enable us to honour our past, succeed in the present, shape a prosperous future and proudly meet our responsibilities to the community.

Appendix F: Study Two: Interview Guide

Para Pan Am Games Para Swimmers Interview Guide

PROTOCOL:

Interviewer:

Introduces themselves (provides business card).

Repeats the purpose of the study and the process that will take place.

Participants will be reminded that their participation is voluntary and that their participation can be ceased at any point.

The consent form is signed, for both interview and audio recording. If no consent for audio recording, proceed with interview and take notes.

[Start the audio recorder]

- 1) Please tell me about your first involvement with swimming.
Probes: When, Where, With who, Why

- 2) Describe your first involvement in competitive swimming.
Probes: When, Where, Why, Who was helpful in getting you involved?

- 3) Please tell me about your experiences of moving up the competitive swimming levels (ex. moving from regionals to provincials to nationals to international competitions).
Probes: How old were you when you moved to each higher level of competition?

How did you feel when you moved to each higher level of competition?

- 4) Describe your training environment as you moved through the competitive swimming levels.
Probes: Did the number/length of training sessions you did per week change? If so, how?

Did the coaching approach or methods you received change? If so, how?

Did the teammates you trained with change? If so, how?

Did you do any cross training (training outside of the pool) as you moved through the competitive levels? If so, what and how often? Was this prescribed by your coaches or self-started?

- 5) Describe your relationship with your teammates as you moved through the competitive swimming levels.

Probes: How was your relationship with your teammates in your home club?

How was your relationship with your teammates on the National team?

How was your relationship with friends and/or competitors from other teams?

- 6) Describe your relationship with your coach or coaches as you moved through the competitive swimming levels.

Probes: Did your relationship change with your home club coach or coaches as you

moved through the competitive levels? If so, how?

Were there any changes in your communication style/frequency with your home coach?

- 7) What challenges did you face as you moved through the competitive levels?

Probes: Did you feel you were prepared to move to each level?

Physically prepared

Emotional prepared

Mentally prepared

- 8) What supports helped you the most as you progressed in your swimming career?

Probes: Was the club you swam with supportive to you as you progressed? If so, in what ways was the club supportive that helped you the most?

Were there people in your life such as coaches, family, friends, or teammates that were supportive? If so, in what ways were they supportive that helped you the most?

- 9) What supports do you think would have been helpful in assisting you progress through your swimming career?

Probes: Were there any organizational supports such as from your club or sports organizational (provincial or national) that would have been helpful?

Do you think that there could have been more support or different support from people of significance in your life? For example, your coach, family or friends.

Were there any supports you saw or heard that other people used or received that you think would have been helpful to you?

- 10) Tell me about your experiences with the classification process at each level of competition.

Probes: How old were you each time you went through the classification process?

Was the process similar at each level? If not, how was it different?

What were the outcome or effect of classification at each level?

How did you feel before and after each classification process?

Did you feel adequately prepared for your first classification experience?

11) How do you feel about your athletic development experience?

Probes: Do you feel that your development was thought out and planned for?

Why or why not?

Are you aware if your coach has a plan laid out for your development? Has it been communicated to you? If so, how?

Are you given the opportunity to have input into your development or training plans? If so, how is this opportunity presented to you?

12) What does being a competitive swimmer mean to you?

Probes: Why do you continue to swim?

What comes to mind when someone calls you a competitive swimmer?

13) What does being a member of the Canadian National Para-Swimming Team mean to you?

Probes: Why did you want to be a member of the National Para-Swimming Team?

Why did you train as hard as you did to make the National Para-Swimming Team?

14) What advice would you give to someone looking to get into competitive para swimming?

15) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your swimming experience?

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Darda Sales

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2001-2006 BA Honours

Georgian College
Orillia, Ontario, Canada
Post Graduate Certificate in Therapeutic Recreation
2005-2006

The University of Alabama
Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA
2015-2017 M.A

Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2017 - 2022 Ph.D.

Honours and Awards: Four Time Paralympian
Canadian Paralympic Committee
2000, 2004, 2008, 2016

Dual Sport World Champion
Para Swimming 2002, IPC
Wheelchair Basketball 2014, IWBF

Related Work Experience Co. Education and Consulting Inc.
London, Ontario, Canada

2020-present

Owner and Consultant

Consulting on Para Development for Swim Ontario/Swimming Canada

Western University

London, Ontario, Canada

2017-2020

Teaching Assistant

London Aquatic Club

London, Ontario, Canada

2008 – 2015, 2017 – present

Swim Coach/Co-founder of the Intro to Para Swimming Program

Sport Canada

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

2000-2011, 2014-2017

National Carded Athlete

Thames Valley Children's Centre

London, Ontario, Canada

2010-211

Therapeutic Recreation Specialist

Community Stroke Rehabilitation Team – St. Joseph's Health Care

London, Ontario, Canada

2009

Therapeutic Recreation Specialist

Royal Bank of Canada
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2008-2010
RBC Paralympian

Child and Parent Resource Institute
London, Ontario, Canada
2007-2008
Therapeutic Recreation Specialist

Publications:

Sales, D. & Misener, L. (2021). Para sport development experiences: Perspectives of para swimmers and parents. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 38(4), 643-660.

Schneider, A.J., & **Sales, D.** (2019). The future role of the Paralympics in times of “rebuilt bodies”. In C. Mullen (Ed.), *Emerging Technologies in Sport: Implications for Sport Management* (pp. 142-155). Routledge Press. ISBN: 978-0-8153-6063-6