



## Towards just and inclusive community sustainability initiatives: learning from the Mixed Ability movement

Jen Dyer | Lucie Middlemiss | Harriet Thew

Sustainability Research Institute, University of Leeds

Email address: [j.dyer@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:j.dyer@leeds.ac.uk)

### Abstract

Sustainable development is centrally concerned with collective action, but has paid limited attention to inclusivity. An emerging critical approach has begun to address this, by pointing out the risks of exclusion in an interest area dominated by white, middle-class and able-bodied participants. Community activities that are designed and run by a relatively homogeneous group of people are unlikely to take into account diverse voices, address a range of needs and abilities, or offer solutions that are inclusive, effective and just. In this paper, we profile a radical attempt to design-in inclusivity, drawing on the lead author's sustained ethnographic engagement with the Mixed Ability movement in the UK. The movement brings people with and without disabilities together to play sport in community settings, alongside facilitating peer education, to raise awareness about inclusion and diversity. The Mixed Ability movement offers a challenge to sustainable development action at community level, by recognising social difference, creating an inclusive process, as well as integrating and celebrating diversity for effective and just outcomes. It also offers a radical vision of socially just community initiatives in demonstrating that inclusion is not solely a remedy to recognition injustices experienced by marginalised groups, but can also be a route to better outcomes for the entire community.

**Keywords:** justice recognition, material exclusion, symbolic exclusion, disability, participation

### Résumé

Le développement durable se préoccupe essentiellement de l'action collective, mais a accordé une attention limitée à l'inclusion. Une nouvelle approche critique du développement durable a commencé à résoudre ce problème, en soulignant les risques d'exclusion dans un lieu d'intérêt dominé par des participants blancs appartenant à la classe moyenne et sans handicap. Les activités communautaires conçues et gérées par un groupe de personnes relativement homogène sont peu susceptibles de prendre en compte la diversité des voix, de répondre à un éventail de besoins et de capacités et d'offrir des solutions inclusives, efficaces et justes. Dans cet article, nous décrivons une tentative radicale de concevoir l'inclusivité, en

nous appuyant sur l'engagement ethnographique soutenu de l'auteure principale dans le mouvement Mixed Ability au Royaume-Uni. Ce mouvement rassemble des personnes en situation de handicap ou non pour faire du sport ensemble dans un cadre communautaire tout en facilitant l'éducation par les pairs, afin de sensibiliser à l'inclusion et à la diversité. Le mouvement Mixed Ability pose un défi à la réflexion sur le développement durable, en particulier dans le contexte de l'action collective, en reconnaissant la différence sociale, en créant un processus inclusif, et en intégrant et célébrant la diversité afin d'obtenir des résultats efficaces et justes. Il offre aussi une vision radicale des initiatives communautaires en démontrant que l'inclusion n'est pas uniquement un moyen de remédier aux injustices associées à la non-reconnaissance vécues par les groupes marginalisés, mais peut également être un moyen d'obtenir de meilleurs résultats pour toute la communauté.

**Mots-clés :** justice associée à la reconnaissance, exclusion matérielle, exclusion symbolique, handicap, participation

## Introduction

From its inception, the concept of sustainable development has alluded to the need for collective action on sustainability problems, participation in decision-making processes, and the devolution of action (Middlemiss, 2014). There is a considerable literature examining the role, process and outcomes of sustainable development initiatives, particularly at community level. However, a growing body of research highlights the tendency for community sustainability initiatives to exclude non-traditional participants (Anantharaman, 2014; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Grossmann and Creamer, 2016; Taylor Aiken et al., 2017; Anantharaman et al., 2019). When diversity is not recognised it is not integrated into design and planning (Anantharaman et al., 2019), and activities led by dominant groups are unlikely to fully appreciate the needs of the marginalised (Axon, 2016; Grossman and Creamer, 2016; Taylor Aiken et al., 2017). This is supported in the social justice literature, where Iris Marion Young (1990; 2011) emphasises that a recognition of diverse social groups must be considered alongside distributive justice. She argues that to be just, diverse groups must be recognised as having a stake in community action and must have meaningful input to initiative design and implementation. These two literatures combined suggest a need for radical approaches to inclusion in both the sustainable development agenda, and in sustainability initiatives.

The Mixed Ability movement is one such radical approach to inclusion that has emerged in the sporting world. The movement aims to facilitate people of all abilities in playing sport together in existing local sports facilities, including people with a range of physical and learning disabilities and difficulties, and non-disabled people of all backgrounds. The Mixed Ability approach uses peer education to raise awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion in order to genuinely integrate people with very different abilities into a mainstream setting, working towards a common goal and creating more inclusive clubs and communities. Having emerged from the sport of rugby, it has since spread to other sports in the UK and beyond, including boxing, rowing and bowls. It is also being explored within other domains, including universities and healthcare. The Mixed Ability movement challenges the orthodoxy of community sports provision, and assumptions around disability, by showing that people of all abilities can benefit through playing, competing and socialising together in a mainstream sporting environment. The Mixed Ability movement provides an important and illuminating lens on the way disability is conceptualised

in society, and offers opportunities to reflect on community inclusion beyond disability and beyond sport: specifically, here, inclusion in sustainability initiatives at the community level.

### **Aims and structure of the paper**

In this paper we draw on an ethnographic study to explore the possibilities for the environmental movement to learn from this radically inclusive, and community-based approach. We argue that in order to create truly inclusive and just futures, we need to find new models for inclusion in sustainable development policy and practice, and that the Mixed Ability approach offers a framework for radical inclusivity in this field. While inclusion, or at least integration, is often a stated objective of sustainable development policy and practice (Middlemiss, 2014), it is not always clear what kind of process might be appropriate to ensure this can take place. There is potential for learning from the Mixed Ability approach here. There is also emerging evidence that by failing to recognise diverse needs and starting points, sustainable development policy and practice can exacerbate injustices (Martin et al., 2016; Taylor Aiken et al., 2017; Anantharaman et al., 2019). The Mixed Ability movement has potential to inform this debate, contributing to the conversation around inclusion in the sustainable development literature, specifically in relation to community initiatives, and to understandings of the potential to enhance outcomes for all through proactive inclusion.

We begin by profiling an emerging interest in inclusion in the sustainability literature, drawing on concepts of recognition justice and material and symbolic exclusion. We introduce the Mixed Ability movement, and present the aim and objectives of this paper before explaining our research methods. In the remainder of the paper, we explore what the practicalities, challenges and impacts of the Mixed Ability movement mean for our understanding of justice and inclusion in the context of community sustainability initiatives. We conclude that the Mixed Ability movement showcases the benefits of recognition and meaningful inclusion for community initiatives in reducing marginalisation, overcoming prejudices and creating more inclusive, diverse and sustainable outcomes by fostering parity in participation. In doing so, the Mixed Ability movement illustrates that the normative goal of inclusion is not only to reach out to marginalised groups for their own benefit, but that their inclusion enhances social cohesion, enables the pursuit of more broad-ranging goals and adds diverse knowledge and skills to an initiative, resulting in tangible benefits for all.

### **Sustainability, recognition, and exclusion**

While the idea of sustainable development has its roots in a liberal politics which broadly adheres to inclusion and egalitarianism (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013), there is a tendency to neglect social differences when designing and delivering policy and interventions (Taylor Aiken et al., 2017; Middlemiss, 2018). An emerging body of literature around sustainable consumption, community sustainability initiatives, and environmentalism and disability has begun to articulate the implications of this for sustainable development. Here we offer an analytical summary of this work, focusing on the forms of exclusion that

sustainable development actions and policies can produce, including those based in communities. We use concepts from the justice literature, particularly recognition injustice (Fraser, 1995; Young, 1990), and concepts of material and symbolic exclusion, drawn from critical policy research (Williams, 1989) and Pierre Bourdieu on distinction (1984).

Note that we draw on both the literature on sustainable development, and the more specific literature on community sustainability initiatives here, as both speak to the issue of inclusion. The broader aim of the paper is to contribute to the community sustainability literature. This is the literature that sees community (loosely defined as groups of people, sometimes, but not always, anchored in a place) as a space in which sustainable development solutions can emerge, while being cognisant of the limits of such solutions (Taylor Aiken et al., 2017). One of the limits here is the tendency for these solutions to emerge within existing social networks, and in doing so to exclude people who do not already engage with environmentalism (Taylor Aiken et al., 2017).

### *Recognition injustice*

When the impact of different forms of human diversity on process and outcomes is not recognised, policies and interventions are likely to be, at best misguided and at worst harmful. One of the principal concerns here is that of recognition. The literature on social justice argues for the importance of recognition justice as an extension of liberal justice theory (e.g., Rawls, 1971; Miller, 1999) “beyond” distribution of goods and resources as the sole benchmark of a just society (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1995). Recognition of diversity is a necessary precondition to social groups achieving parity in participation, and a first step to “remedying” injustice and removing barriers to people being able to participate equally (Fraser, 1995). Looking to social groups rather than individuals as the subjects of justice analysis, draws attention to structural inequalities (Young, 2001). Young contends that rather than assuming redistribution of resources will reduce inequality in society it is necessary to ensure that different groups are identified (recognition) and included throughout the design and implementation stages of social policies and programmes. Meaningful participation is also dependent on the ability of diverse social groups to articulate the injustices they experience and for these claimants to be accepted as “worthy” contributors to discussions of social and environmental justice (Thew, Middlemiss, and Paavola, 2020).

Some forms of diversity are beginning to be recognised as significant in considering how to address sustainable development, but many are treated as peripheral. So, for instance, a number of studies make reference to income (Büchs and Schnepf, 2013), class (Evans, 2011; Johnston, 2008; Shirani et al., 2015) and gender (Hawkins, 2012; MacGregor, 2016; Vinz, 2009) as forms of diversity that are impacted by action on sustainability. Disability status (see below), ethnic origin (Clarke and Agyeman, 2011) and age (Thew, Middlemiss, and Paavola, 2020) are much less frequently addressed, despite the challenges associated with the inclusion of people experiencing these forms of difference. A lack of recognition and integration of diversity at the design phase is likely to lead to solutions that are only relevant to those who are involved. Anantharaman et al. (2019, p. 179), for example explored community sustainability initiatives in the UK, Canada and India and found they are often “initiated and designed by middle-class members” and “privilege apolitical tactics and behavioural solutions”. Recognising that diversity affects policy processes and outcomes is a necessary first step. The limited recognition of this effect in the field

of sustainable development prevents the identification of injustices, and likely results in both the reproduction of historic inequalities, and exclusion. We now go on to discuss two different forms of exclusion: material and symbolic exclusion, and their relevance to sustainable development thinking.

### *Material and symbolic exclusion*

Material exclusion refers to people being excluded from action around sustainability by virtue of their material circumstances. Material exclusion has had the most substantive attention in this literature, and Deborah Fenney Salkeld's research on disability and environmentalism is an obvious starting point here (Fenney and Snell, 2011; Fenney Salkeld, 2016; Fenney Salkeld, 2017a; Fenney Salkeld, 2017b). Fenney Salkeld (2017a) argues that many of the dominant narratives around environmentalism, such as active transport, reducing energy and water consumption and self-sufficiency represent a form of physical exclusion for bodily reasons. Some bodies can exist off grid and without heat, some cannot; some can reduce the water and energy consumption associated with cleanliness practices, some cannot. Material exclusion can also be exacerbated by intersecting differences: for instance, disabled people, youth, women and people of colour are more likely to be economically poor, and therefore be doubly excluded.

Symbolic exclusion is more pernicious, and refers to the exclusion of people by virtue of their tastes (Bourdieu, 1984). In environmentalist circles, the privileging of particular practices and actions can be a form of "distinction": the association of "correct" environmentalist practices with specific tastes results in the exclusion of other "incorrect" practices and tastes. Authors note a moralistic tendency, with those practicing "correctly" expressing moral superiority, with limited regard for the social and material constraints that exist in association with taste (Littler, 2009; Humphery, 2010; Axon, 2016). In the community sustainability context, symbolic exclusion is apparent, for example, in the distinction between middle-class and "subsistence" cyclists in Bangalore (Anantharaman, 2016), in middle-class tastes and etiquette around food (Anantharaman et al., 2019) and in the tendency to characterise community action on sustainability to middle-class tastes (Taylor Aiken et al., 2017).

In practice, material and symbolic exclusion are frequently intertwined. For instance, Fenney-Salkeld identifies the ableism associated with the symbolic practice of cycling in environmentalism (Fenney Salkeld, 2017a), a practice that is intimately connected to environmentalist identities but which materially excludes many groups who cannot ride a bike. Built into the reification of cycling as a practice is an assumption of a certain set of bodily capabilities, as well as an ability to cope with the emotional and mental demands of cycling in car-dominated environments. The fact that cycling is reified in environmentalist circles, without a critical appreciation of the exclusive reality of the practice, represents a form of symbolic exclusion for those that cannot. The relationship between material and symbolic exclusion is poorly understood, further highlighting the need for further research in this field.

### *Implications for community sustainability initiatives*

These concepts have significant implications for community sustainability initiatives, and indeed sustainable development policy and practice more broadly, revealing where current practice is exclusive. For instance, we anticipate that narrow framings of sustainability which appeal to particular tastes and social groups (such as a focus on cycling as a gold standard environmental practice) are likely to produce both stigma and resistance. Further, such framings are likely to result in a lack of innovation, given that some social groups are not invited to offer ideas and solutions. When identities associated with disability, class, age, gender, race or poverty are stigmatised through narrow framings, this can amount to an entrenchment of a distinction between “us and them”, environmentalists and others. This “othering” of unsanctioned practices and people with different tastes, as well as the use of such othering to shore up environmentalist identities, have been observed in empirical work on community and sustainability (Axon, 2016; Anantharaman et al., 2019).

There are a number of research gaps here, associated with finding ways to include people in community sustainability initiatives, including further exploration of who is recognised, who is ignored, and how material and symbolic exclusion play out in practice. For the purposes of this paper, however, we wish to explore a more radical agenda: to explore Mixed Ability as an alternative model for inclusion, and to consider how this might be mobilised for use in sustainability practice. In particular, given that the Mixed Ability movement represents a radically inclusive model within (sports) communities, we see opportunities for learning about how to improve inclusion in community sustainability initiatives beyond the “usual suspects”. Note that Mixed Ability is about including people in sport no matter who they are: while exclusion of disabled people was the starting point, the inclusive spaces that are created under this ethos are designed to accommodate mixed needs. In the context of community initiatives on sustainability which tend to have a middle-class, white and able-bodied following (Anantharaman, 2014; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Grossmann and Creamer, 2016; Taylor Aiken et al., 2017; Anantharaman et al., 2019), there is huge value in understanding how this could be done differently.

### **Introducing the Mixed Ability movement**

In 2009, Anthony Brooke, a man with Cerebral Palsy and learning difficulties wanted to play full-contact rugby. He had regularly served as the “water-boy” at his local club in Yorkshire, England, but had been prevented from taking part more actively due to perceived risks of injury, and was only offered alternative formats of the game such as tag and touch. As part of an educational class promoting self-advocacy, he was supported to approach England’s Rugby Football Union (RFU) to seek advice. The RFU Regional Officer suggested setting up a training session at the Bradford and Bingley Rugby Club where Anthony could be coached to play the full-contact version of rugby. The first Saturday training session in 2009 was attended by four players, five coaches and the class tutor. The weekly training coincided with the Bradford and Bingley 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Team match day and gradually other players and coaches started expressing an interest and getting involved, or indeed, were actively recruited by Anthony, who never questioned whether disabled and non-disabled players should or could play together. Further disabled players were recruited through disability service organisations and other non-disabled players trained and played alongside.

In this rather organic way, the recognition injustice and exclusion that Anthony had faced were overcome and England's first Mixed Ability rugby team, the Bumble Bees, was born, where players with and without learning and/or physical disabilities play alongside each other in the same full-contact rugby game. The sporting environment that was created through this initiative meant that players who had stopped playing because of (among other things) injury, illness, poor self-perception/confidence and decreased mobility also returned to the club to join in the new team, and all these players started to compete together. Importantly, disabled players also became integrated as full members of the club and began to enjoy both physical and social elements of the game. This differed markedly from the current and historical context of disability sport in the UK, the majority of which is disability specific, occurs in discrete blocks of activity rather than continuously, categorises different disabilities and does not encourage club membership or social activities with non-disabled participants.

Martino Corazza and Jen Dyer (2017) evaluated participants' experiences of Mixed Ability rugby and found that benefits of participating were evident at the individual, club and community level. These included expanded and more diverse social networks, personal development, expanded and more diverse club membership, perception shifts around dis/ability, more inclusive club environments and communities. One of the most powerful quotes from a non-disabled participant, which captures this broader impact and fundamental perception shift was:

"The biggest impact on me has been the change in my attitude to all people I come across now [...] I do not worry about whether I'm saying or doing the right thing [...] I see the person first."

As the Bumble Bees developed, they were contacted by the Llanelli Warriors, who offered to share their experience of a similar format of rugby in Wales, and a network of Mixed Ability rugby clubs began to develop. Now, more than 10 years on from that first training session, the Bumbles have 40+ registered players, play regular fixtures against local, "non-disabled" community teams, and regularly participate in rugby tours.

The potential for this model of sports provision to play a transformative role in society was recognised by the Founders of the Community Interest Company, International Mixed Ability Sports (IMAS). Thus far, consideration of how learning from the Mixed Ability movement can be integrated into sustainability policy and practice is lacking. This paper aims to fill that gap by addressing the following objectives: 1. to evaluate the potential of the Mixed Ability movement to "remedy" recognition injustice and exclusion; 2. to better understand the realities of recognition injustice and exclusion through the Mixed Ability movement; 3. to consider what this means for inclusion and justice in sustainability initiatives.

## Methods

The lead researcher has been involved with the Mixed Ability movement in the UK in various roles since 2014, resulting in extensive ethnographic engagement over time. Ethnography is a deep, qualitative methodology that permits detailed investigation in everyday lives and social interactions, and this sustained, active involvement meant she was able to immerse herself in the social and cultural practices around Mixed Ability, gaining access to a wealth of perspectives and

observations she may not have been privy to as an “outsider” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This is particularly valuable when studying marginalised and poorly understood social groups to ensure that research does not exacerbate marginalisation by perceiving the situation only through the lens of the dominant social group (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The role of reflexivity in this is key both regarding one’s own positionality in collecting and interpreting data (Atkinson et al., 2001) but also in permitting deep critical insights through inductive development and ongoing testing and refinement of theory. Here she briefly outlines her involvement: “My involvement in the Mixed Ability movement started when I helped IMAS organise the first International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournament held in Bradford (UK) in 2015. I then became a founding member of the IMAS Mixed Ability Forum and provide ongoing support and guidance around, for example, monitoring and evaluation and communication. As well as sustained involvement with IMAS, I led an evaluation of the Sport England-funded Mixed Ability Sports Development Programme (MASDP), between November 2016 and January 2019, where IMAS began trialling Mixed Ability in new sports in England” (Dyer, Sandford and Beckett, 2019).

Over the course of the MASDP, in-depth individual and small-group interviews, focus groups and workshops were carried out with a range of stakeholders including Mixed Ability participants, coaches, club representatives, IMAS representatives and national governing bodies of sport (n=129) (Dyer, Sandford and Beckett, 2019). In each case, questions were themed around motivations to be involved, experiences, impacts and relating Mixed Ability to other areas of society such as the workplace and education. I actively participated in and/or observed participants in Mixed Ability sports and other relevant IMAS events, including a weekly boxing class, IMAS taster days and presentations, tennis, bowls, golf, rowing, cricket, swimming and KinBall sessions (n=93 sessions/events). In all cases where I was observing and/or taking part in activities, participants were made aware I was a researcher through self-introduction or an introduction by the organiser of the activity. The research was co-developed with IMAS and Sport England and it was crucial to all of us that the voices of a variety of participants and other key stakeholders were heard as the research was feeding into design and delivery of the MASDP project. This aligns with calls from, among others, Janice Ollerton (2012), Debbie Kramer-Roy (2015), and Andrea Hollomotz (2018).

Towards the end of the MASDP project, IMAS asked for an in-depth case study of the first Mixed Ability rugby team in Ireland, the Sunday’s Well Rebels (SWR). This allowed me to observe the team in action both playing rugby and socially. I carried out semi-structured interviews with coaches, medics, team coordinators, players, parents of players and IMAS representatives (n=23). These were, again, themed around motivations, experiences and impacts of Mixed Ability rugby, as well as relating Mixed Ability to other areas of life and society. The following section brings together data from these various ways of researching the Mixed Ability movement. While this research represents a large body of data, the context specific nature means generalisations beyond the UK would not be appropriate.

### **Mixed Ability: a radical approach to community inclusion**

The potential for transformation through Mixed Ability occurs through an innovative mixture of positive recognition of disability, meaningful inclusion of a diverse range of voices at every stage of the process rather than segregation, and

combining peer education with experiential learning. The practical outcomes of Mixed Ability have an impact on social justice outcomes for disabled people, including, for instance making sporting facilities more accessible, considering alternative financial membership models, ensuring the timings of sessions are appropriate and developing creative adjustments to activities to ensure everyone can take part meaningfully. The real transformation, however, which comes about through experiential learning in Mixed Ability sports settings, is in participants' understandings of what inclusion means, and how to practice it.

When Mixed Ability participants from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities share their experiences and learning around equality, diversity and inclusion, perceptions start to shift. In many sports clubs, committees mirror the white middle-class, able-bodied demographics of community sustainability initiatives. When Mixed Ability participants share their diverse experiences with their peers, there is often a palpable sense of discomfort as the invisible politics of misrecognition are exposed. Mixed Ability participants speak openly of discrimination they have faced, and the impacts it has had on them, and also of the achievements they have made through Mixed Ability sport. Many at this point begin reflecting on the demographics of their club. One sports club which has embraced Mixed Ability didn't find this an altogether smooth process:

“When we first mentioned the words ‘Mixed Ability’ and ‘disability’ it was like [sharp intake of breath] just because it’s a very traditional club, it was a members-only club so the fact that non-members would be coming in, it’s ‘well this is a tennis and squash club, you can’t start doing boxing and dance.’ But now, [the members have] seen the effect it’s had on people and the fact that these participants go and socialise upstairs and they’ve met them and they’ve got involved themselves, it’s massively changed and they’re all ‘we want more Mixed Ability sports, we want more classes on’. And they’re happy to volunteer for open days now too.” (Statement from an interview with a representative of Bradford-based sports club as part of the MASDP evaluation [Dyer, Sandford and Beckett, 2019])

This quote reveals the ableist nature of a club, which previously thought of itself as “welcoming”. It highlights material and symbolic exclusion through perceptions of “non-members” and even through different sports, which did not previously align with existing members’ tastes. However, it also highlights that if positive recognition of “others” can be facilitated by creating peer learning between diverse individuals (who under other circumstances may not consider themselves as peers) then these perceptions can be broken down and tastes can change through exposure to variety.

As a form of experiential learning, Mixed Ability sport is particularly effective because the practical sport element embodies the learning both literally and figuratively, and only afterwards do people reflect on the fact that they have been interacting with people who they previously would have thought of as “other”. The impact of interaction in a sporting environment and subsequent reflection is substantial and many research respondents spoke of a powerful shift in thinking:

“When I saw one of the [disabled] lads in town I would have crossed the road. I had no experience, no relations with Mixed Ability. I was fierce nervous of them when I came out training. It’s had a massive impact on me being involved in this. I’d have been the last person I would have expected to be involved.” (Statement from an interview with an SWR player)

“I did feel [a bit uncomfortable] but once I started becoming personally involved and being in a boat with [the Mixed Ability participants], all that went away. And I just thought ‘It’s done me some good really, being part of this training session.’ For me it has made it easier to be around people when I don’t understand what they’re saying.” (Statement from an interview with a member of the Bradford Amateur Rowing Club Mixed Ability squad as part of the MASDP evaluation [Dyer, Sandford and Beckett, 2019])

“Being involved with Mixed Ability rugby has made me less quick to judge people and given me a much better understanding and awareness of people’s needs and abilities.” (Statement from a focus group with SWR players)

In line with the Mixed Ability ethos, the SWR rugby team is focused around inclusion and celebration of what you can do rather than what you cannot, this also has profound impacts on the inclusion of disabled players:

“There is a new player who has joined the team and he is a natural and he is fantastic. He has some sort of disability, I don’t know what, it doesn’t matter. And he wouldn’t have joined a different rugby team but he’s been amazing from day one. There is no correlation between what disability you have and how good you are at playing rugby.” (Statement from an interview with an SWR coach)

“It’s a massive impact to see your child getting involved and being treated the same as anyone else. Massive. There’s no kind of ‘bless ‘em’, they are genuinely involved, they get tackled the same as anyone else.” (Statement from a father of an SWR player [who also plays himself] in a focus group)

When Mixed Ability rugby teams play community opposition teams, who are not Mixed Ability, the impacts are spread further. Non-disabled players come to perceive their disabled teammates and opposition as peers rather than as “others”. In this way, perceptions of disability are broken down by interacting with a larger number of people, often exposing unconscious prejudices or stereotypes. Another unintended consequence of Mixed Ability is that it has noticeably broadened into an approach to sport, which offers a safe, welcoming and non-judgemental space to a huge variety of participants both with and without disabilities who have previously faced barriers to participation, and who are benefiting socially and physically from being involved. The initial recognition and celebration of one form of social difference lead to people with other forms of social difference feeling less excluded and able to consider getting involved whilst challenging the blindness to difference held by the dominant group.

The Mixed Ability movement represents a transformative response to recognition injustice, which *addresses the underlying causes of inequality* by deconstructing the relations of recognition within sports clubs and wider communities. The Mixed Ability movement changes every participant’s sense of self, disrupting the patterns of self and social recognition that erodes the idea of the “other”. However, Mixed Ability sport happens within a UK social context which is decidedly ableist and disableist. In the next section, we document some of the challenges that these initiatives have faced in promoting radical inclusion.

## Challenges to achieving inclusion in the Mixed Ability movement

Researching the Mixed Ability movement also provides an insight into how recognition injustice and exclusion manifests around disability in the UK. Challenges to achieving inclusion are explored below.

### *Othering language: “us and them”*

When introducing and seeking to explain Mixed Ability sport to potential new participants, clubs, and other key stakeholders, it is often difficult for people to understand how it “works” and be comfortable with it even after an initial IMAS training session. There is an assumption that Mixed Ability sport is disability provision under a new or different name. This leads to a number of outcomes which are not in line with the Mixed Ability ethos: one of genuine and meaningful inclusion. For example, non-disabled people often see themselves as “volunteers” rather than equal participants making it challenging to recruit non-disabled contributors. This plays out in the language used which is often around “us and them” rather than “all of us together”, which is more in line with the Mixed Ability ethos and with Nancy Fraser’s (1995) concept of recognition justice as parity in participation for all.

An “us and them” attitude is problematic in relation to the Mixed Ability movement’s objectives, as it does not suggest or encourage inclusion, instead suggesting a segregated approach to disability, as well as positioning the idea of interacting with people with disabilities as a charitable act. In more practical terms the “us and them” attitude is problematic as the Mixed Ability movement promotes sustainable sports provision which is financially viable (i.e. everyone needs to pay) and volunteers tend not to want to contribute financially are often less reliable and may not continue to participate for as long as those who would be participating for their own gains and enjoyment.

The “us and them” attitude represents direct exclusion from sport through social attitudes to disability. In many cases this is due to a lack of awareness or understanding of disability, in others it is a reflection of how our society is segregated. The concept of disability sport as a separate entity which requires volunteers to help it run is far more familiar in the UK, and the Mixed Ability movement is proposing an alternative that many find hard to understand. These misunderstandings emphasise predominant social perceptions of disability as needing charity, help and kindness, which disabled people’s organisations campaign strongly against (Cameron, 2007). Many of those involved in Mixed Ability sport were able to highlight other areas of society which would benefit from a Mixed Ability approach, such as one of the SWR medics who stated:

“A lot of the [SWR players] are capable of so much more than they are allowed to do within the system. The system is set up against them. They are pigeonholed and assessed and assessed and assessed and ‘this guy can work 4 hours a day and he can work at Tesco’ and he’s capable of so much more. It’s self-defeating!” (Statement from an interview with an SWR medic)

---

### *Preconceived ideas of dis/ability*

A general assumption around Mixed Ability sport is that people with learning and/or physical disabilities will have a lower skill level and will progress and learn more slowly in a new sport. This proves a further challenge to the recruitment of non-disabled participants as they often feel they will not be challenged by Mixed Ability sport. In fact, through the Mixed Ability context it is clear that there is a marked difference between dis/ability and skill and the two should not be conflated. While many think you can predict how good someone will be in a sport by whether they have a disability, Mixed Ability sport challenges this. Indeed, in the Mixed Ability boxing class, one of the boxers who has learning difficulties is by far the most physically skilful member of the group and the one who is most interested in progressing to a coaching qualification. In Mixed Ability rowing, one of the participants with learning difficulties is well recognised as the perfect build for rowing with long, powerful levers but fellow club members were still surprised by his well-developed core strength, balance and coordination:

“I’ll be honest and say I was expecting [the Mixed Ability beginners] to be slower to get to this level. One thing I wasn’t sure about was how good their coordination and balance would be. And with both of them their balance is superb which makes a huge difference. As I’ve got to know them, I can see they spend every day being very active—probably much more so than an adult with a desk job.” (Statement from an interview with a member of the Bradford Amateur Rowing Club Mixed Ability squad as part of the MASDP evaluation [Dyer, Sandford and Beckett, 2019])

Preconceived ideas of what someone’s abilities and needs are before understanding them fully is likely to result in many people being excluded from processes that they could have meaningfully contributed to. This is also very limiting in terms of developing different and more positive points of reference.

### *A reductive view of disability: “Where do we put the wheelchairs?”*

When promoting Mixed Ability sport to clubs, common responses are often “where do we put the wheelchairs” and “but we don’t have a ramp”. This focus on infrastructure and access raises some interesting points. For example, where do people facing invisible barriers come into society? Does the image of someone with a disability as a wheelchair user put that at the forefront of our minds? What image do we have of someone with a learning difficulty? What is our point of reference? If it is assumed that all disabled participants need a ramp to access a sports club then the majority are materially excluded by proxy. Data show that confusion and fear related to invisible disabilities is commonplace:

“I’ll lay my cards on the table and say I think I’d find it very difficult to coach someone with learning difficulties. Physical difficulties I can cope with, but learning difficulties is a bit tricky.” (Statement from a focus group with the Bradford Amateur Rowing Club Committee as part of the MASDP evaluation [Dyer, Sandford and Beckett, 2019])

Mixed Ability boxing illustrates the complexity and diversity of dis/ability. It is a completely different set up to a team sport like rugby but remains true to the principles of Mixed Ability by all participants training together in the same community space regardless of ability. What results is an enormously diverse group of people of different gender, ages, ethnicity, backgrounds, size, ability, fitness-level and ambition. The group includes participants who would identify as non-

disabled as well as those with chronic health conditions, wheelchair users, participants with Down's syndrome, returners to boxing who used to fight competitively and one participant recovering from a head injury. The class is led and coached by a female boxer who, herself, was prevented from participating in competitive sport and, in fact, regular employment through chronic illness, and who would like to expand her boxing social enterprise in order to employ others who struggle with conventional work patterns. Many participants, both with and without disabilities, have experienced logistical, physical and psychological barriers to participating in sport in the past through, for example, lack of self-confidence, non-accessible facilities, fear of being judged, chronic illness that prevents regular and/or full participation in training and lack of provision. With boxing in particular, the majority of participants, including the lead author of this paper, said that they would have felt intimidated at the thought of entering a boxing gym but that the Mixed Ability class feels very welcoming and safe (Dyer, Sandford and Beckett, 2019).

Mixed Ability boxing highlights that the category of "disabled" is broad. Narrowing the category of disability into the symbol of a wheelchair has a reductive impact on our understanding of difference, implying that all disabled people experience life in the same way despite the myriad difference among and between lived experiences of disability. Using the concept of intersectionality, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) explains that while categories such as "disabled" can play a central role in both identity and belonging, and in access to opportunities to engage in sport (or indeed environmentalism), people hold multiple and intersecting identities. A person who is disabled might feel excluded or included in society for other reasons (being female, being Muslim, being LGBTQ+). In creating an inclusive atmosphere, the Mixed Ability movement highlights the myriad intersections between the similarities and differences in our identities, and as a result creates inclusivity for all, across all abilities and other forms of difference.

#### *What if "they" get hurt?*

A further challenge of promoting Mixed Ability sport is the worry that disabled participants will get hurt. This is particularly acute in the context of full-contact rugby, boxing (although this is non-contact boxing) and rowing. Indeed, the Irish Rugby Football Union did not recognize Mixed Ability rugby until 2018, due to concerns over risk. This meant that SWR were playing without being recognized by their National Governing Body (NGB), had to obtain alternative insurance and were restricted on where they could play. However, Corazza and Dyer (2017) found that the element of self-determination in Mixed Ability rugby was key to disabled participants feeling included and linked strongly to shifts in both self-perception and perceptions around dis/ability in general. IMAS, of course, take risk seriously and have mitigating measures in place for reducing risk for all participants through awareness raising, co-production of resources around risk, and education. However, they are firm believers that if someone has the mental capacity (as defined in the Department of Health Mental Capacity Act, 2005), they should be able to choose to assume risk for themselves. IMAS quote Anthony Brooke on the subject, who said:

"I supported my local team for years. They would not let me play. The only thing I could do was to carry water bottles. They were afraid I could get injured. Of course, I can get injured, it's part of the game. And since I joined the Bumbles I have snapped my Achilles and done my ligaments and I still want to play."

Self-determination was recognized by Jenny Morris (2005) as one of three forms of citizenship desired by disabled people, along with contribution (being involved economically and socially in one's society), and participation (being able to actively participate politically and socially in the community). Mixed Ability aims to promote all three of these elements for all participants in a very genuine way, combining voices across social difference to inform activities.

### **Learning from Mixed Ability for community sustainability initiatives**

In exploring the Mixed Ability movement, there are a number of lessons that can be used for informing what "just" community sustainability initiatives could look like. We structure these below according to the importance of a pluralist recognition of diversity, how that can take place procedurally and the likely outcomes this will lead to.

#### *Recognising different needs and abilities to engage with an agenda*

Recognising that people have different needs and abilities to engage with an agenda, whether that be sport or sustainability, and have different interpretations of what the agenda is a critical first step to remedying recognition injustice. Many sports clubs do not realise they are being exclusive until they are exposed to disability through the IMAS training, interact with Mixed Ability participants and have the opportunity to reflect. Our literature review highlighted that this is also likely the case for many sustainability policies and practices. The Mixed Ability experience reveals that disability, and indeed other social differences, exist in a plethora of forms and intersections, but that public discourses on social difference tend to be rather simplistic leading to nonrecognition and misrecognition injustices (Fraser, 1995). Mixed Ability tends to engender an appreciation of the intersectional experiences that people have under the category of disability and beyond (Crenshaw, 1991). In Mixed Ability, the role of peer education, and experiential learning is critical to this recognition, as people experience working together with others who have a wide range of abilities, they have the chance to encounter both the diversity of social difference and the possibilities of working together. Many people report that just being made aware of this range of abilities, makes you more likely to think about other people's diverse needs and "see the person first" (a participant).

#### *Involving diverse voices in decision-making*

In practical terms, we can draw on ideas of procedural and representation justice in which, following Harriet Thew, Lucie Middlemiss, and Jouni Paavola (2020), we differentiate between procedural justice, as the presence of rules to ensure that formal structures are fair, and representation justice, as ensuring that informal rules are fair and allow representation. To do this, *involving* a diverse range of voices in decision-making from the design phase onwards is critical. The development of the Bumble Bees, for example, by a disabled man who had previously struggled to have his voice heard, highlights that the key to developing inclusive activities is empowerment of people to ensure they have an equal say, and opportunities to challenge assumptions and simply be different. This not only results in parity of participation (Young, 2001) but also in more

relevant, inclusive, innovative and creative approaches to tackling problems. From the Mixed Ability movement, we can see that a partnership between diverse people works well as a way of designing-in inclusivity from the start and overcoming exclusion. This echoes insights from studies of community projects on sustainable consumption, which often exude (white, middle-class) meaning from the start and in doing so exclude other identities (Anantharaman, 2014; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Grossmann and Creamer, 2016; Taylor Aiken et al., 2017; Anantharaman et al., 2019). Starting off with a Mixed Ability partnership reduces the risk of both material and symbolic exclusion, because, as the initiative evolves, members who are working together with mixed abilities will need to continuously reflect on how things are working.

#### *Creating safe, welcoming, diverse and non-judgemental environments*

Once a context like this has been created, the outcomes of such an initiative are likely to surpass “parity of participation” (Young, 2001) and result in benefits for all those involved. The Mixed Ability movement shows that *creating safe, welcoming, diverse and non-judgemental environments* can become a virtuous cycle where further diversity is recognised for even more creative and sustainable solutions that integrate a multitude of perspectives. This can have extensive knock-on benefits for broader society. As well as the potential to shift perspectives, Scott Kuhn (1998) explains that meaningful participation strengthens democracy. This echoes findings by Aspa Baroutsis et al. (2016) around student voice, where they assert that enabling young people to participate meaningfully and have their voices heard resulted in active participation and the creation of a more democratic community. Robyn Eckersley (2004) suggests that the benefits of meaningful participation extend beyond individual initiatives to increase the potential for reflexive learning in society, which is certainly evident in Mixed Ability given that Mixed Ability teams are often playing other community teams or in mainstream community settings. While all this sounds promising, Baroutsis et al. (2016, p. 451) emphasise that challenging, in their case, age-based, hierarchical power structures, takes time and requires “ongoing teaching and mentoring of the entire community”. This aligns with the peer education component of the Mixed Ability movement, and it is worth considering the role of a similar process for community sustainability initiatives before hierarchies of white, middle-class, able-bodied power structures are too well established. It is also apparent in the “realities” of recognition injustice and exclusion that we outline above.

We do not want to paint Mixed Ability as a utopian vision, certainly the challenges we outline above show that this is a movement that can only provide some of the answer. For instance, social norms and public discourses in relation to disability are deeply ingrained, and many, both inside and outside of this movement, do not really understand the radical intent behind it. As such reframing the discourse of “us and them” requires consistent effort. If this is the case with action on disability inclusion, it is also likely to be a challenge in attempts to create inclusive environments for other forms of social difference and in other policy domains. These practical challenges highlight the need for ongoing evaluation and proactive management of how inclusivity is framed but should not detract from the vision and the potential for greater and more diverse engagement and participation in community sustainability initiatives.

## Conclusions

While sustainability initiatives are generally seeking to foster positive impact, they are at risk of not recognising social difference and excluding many groups in society. This is likely to lead to narrow framing of problems, and the pursuit of solutions that may be inappropriate, unsustainable and insufficiently innovative. In these most critical of times, where community action has a key role to play in tackling complex environmental, social and economic challenges to create a sustainable future, it is simply not viable to forge ahead with solutions which do not recognise or meaningfully engage with difference. The Mixed Ability movement represents one possible way to address this. Our research highlights that recognising difference in all its forms is a critical first step to overcoming recognition injustice. If done effectively, empowering and genuinely integrating diverse voices through partnership working and peer education can go a long way to overcoming material and symbolic exclusion. More significantly, the Mixed Ability movement shows that when parity in participation is achieved, it goes beyond the normative goal of recognition justice and results in benefits for everyone involved. In terms of community sustainability initiatives, this offers potential for more innovative, creative and transformative solutions.

## Acknowledgements

This paper draws on data from the Sport England-funded Mixed Ability Sport Development Programme. We would like to thank the Editor of this special issue and two anonymous reviewers for helpful and insightful comments on the paper, and International Mixed Ability Sports for contributing to discussion around the themes raised. We would also like to thank the translation team and Martino Corazza for his input into translation of terminology. Finally, we would like to thank all the participants who shared their experiences of the Mixed Ability model in such an honest, open and candid way.

## To quote this article

Dyer Jen, Middlemiss Lucie, Thew Harriet, “Towards just and inclusive community sustainability initiatives: learning from the Mixed Ability movement” [« Vers des initiatives communautaires de durabilité justes et inclusives : tirer des leçons du mouvement Mixed Ability »], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, n° 16, 2021 (<http://www.jssj.org/article/vers-des-initiatives-communautaires-de-durabilite-justes-et-inclusives-tirer-des-lecons-du-mouvement-mixed-ability/>).

---

## References

- Atkinson Paul et. al (ed.), *Handbook of ethnography*, London, Sage, 2001.
- Anantharaman Manisha, “Networked ecological citizenship, the new middle classes and the provisioning of sustainable waste management in Bangalore, India”, *J Clean Prod*, vol. 63, 2014, p. 173-183.
- Anantharaman Manisha, “Elite and ethical: The defensive distinctions of middle-class bicycling in Bangalore, India”, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 17, 2016, p. 864-886.
- Anantharaman Manisha et al. “Who participates in community-based sustainable consumption projects and why does it matter? A constructively critical approach”, in Isehour Cind et al. (ed.), *Power and Politics in Sustainable Consumption Research and Practice*, London, Routledge, 2019, p. 178-200.
- Axon Stephen, “‘The Good Life’: Engaging the public with community-based carbon reduction strategies”, *Environmental Science, Policy & Politics*, vol. 66, 2016, p. 82-92.
- Baroutsis Aspa et al. “Student voice and the community forum: Finding ways of ‘being heard’ at an alternative school for disenfranchised young people”, *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 42, n° 3, 2016, p. 438-453.
- Bourdieu Pierre, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Büchs Milena, Schnepf Sylke, “Who emits most? Associations between socio-economic factors and UK households’ home energy, transport, indirect and total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions”, *Ecological Economics*, vol. 90, 2013, p. 114-123.
- Cameron Colin, “Whose problem? Disability narratives and available identities”, *Community Development Journal*, vol. 42, n° 4, 2007, p. 501-511.
- Clarke Lisa, Agyeman Julian, “Shifting the balance in environmental governance: ethnicity, environmental citizenship and discourses of responsibility”, *Antipode*, vol. 43, 2011, p. 1773-1800.
- Corazza Martino, Dyer Jen, “A new model for inclusive sports? An evaluation of participants’ experiences of mixed ability rugby”, *Social Inclusion*, vol. 5, n° 2, 2017, p. 130-140.
- Crenshaw Kimberle, “Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color”, *Stan. L. Rev.* vol., 43, n° 6, 1991, p. 124-299.
- Department of Health, *Mental Capacity Act*, London, HMSO, 2005.
- Dyer Jen, Sandford Rachel, Beckett Angharad, “Evaluation of the Mixed Ability Sports Development Programme”, 2019, ([https://www.mixedabilitysports.org/wp-content/uploads/MASDP\\_EvaluationReport2019.pdf](https://www.mixedabilitysports.org/wp-content/uploads/MASDP_EvaluationReport2019.pdf)).

- Eckersley** Robyn, *The green state: rethinking democracy and sovereignty*, MIT Press, 2004.
- Evans** David, “Thrifty, green or frugal: reflections on sustainable consumption in a changing economic climate”, *Geoforum*, vol. 42, 2011, p. 550-557.
- Fenney** Deborah, **Snell** Carolyn, “Exceptions to the green rule? A literature investigation into the overlaps between the academic and UK policy fields of disability and the environment”, *Local Environment* vol. 16, 2011, p. 251-264.
- Fenney Salkeld** Deborah, “Sustainable lifestyles for all? Disability equality, sustainability and the limitations of current UK policy”, *Disability & Society*, vol. 31, 2016, p. 447-464.
- Fenney Salkeld** Deborah, “Ableism and Disableism in the UK Environmental Movement”, *Environmental Values*, vol. 26, 2017a, p. 503-522.
- Fenney Salkeld** Deborah, “Environmental citizenship and disability equality: the need for an inclusive approach”, *Environmental Politics*, vol. 28, n° 7, 2017b, p. 1259-1280.
- Fraser** Nancy, “From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a ‘post-socialist’ age”, *New Left Review*, vol. 212, 1995, p. 68.
- Grossmann** Mena, **Creamer** Emily, “Assessing diversity and inclusivity within the Transition movement: an urban case study”, *Environ Polit*, vol. 20, 2016, p. 1-22.
- Hammersley** Martyn, **Atkinson** Paul, *Ethnography: Principles in practice*, London, Routledge, 2007.
- Hawkins** Roberta, “Shopping to save lives: Gender and environment theories meet ethical consumption” *Geoforum*, vol. 43, 2012, p. 750-759.
- Hollomotz** Andrea, “Successful interviews with people with intellectual disability”, *Qualitative Research*, vol. 18, n° 2, 2018, p. 153-170.
- Humphery** Kim, *Excess: Anti-consumerism in the west*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010.
- Johnston** Josée, “The citizen-consumer hybrid: ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market”, *Theory and Society*, vol. 37, 2008, p. 229-270.
- Kenis** Anneleen, **Mathijs** Erik, “De-politicising the local: the case of the Transition Towns movement in Flanders, Belgium”, *J Rural Stud*, vol. 34, 2014, p. 172-183.
- Kramer-Roy** Debbie, “Using participatory and creative methods to facilitate emancipatory research with people facing multiple disadvantage: A role for health and care professionals”, *Disability & society*, vol. 30, n° 8, 2015, p. 1207-1224.

- 
- Kuhn** Scott, “Expanding public participation is essential to environmental justice and the democratic decision making process”, *Ecology LQ*, vol. 25, 1998, p. 647.
- Littler** Jo, *Radical consumption*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2009.
- Lorek** Sylvia, **Fuchs** Doris, “Strong sustainable consumption governance precondition for a degrowth path?” *Journal of cleaner production*, vol. 38, 2013, p. 36-43.
- MacGregor** Sherilyn, “Go ask ‘Gladys’: why gender matters in sustainable consumption research”, *Discover Society*, n° 28, 2016.
- Martin** Adrian et al, “Justice and conservation: the need to incorporate recognition”, *Biological Conservation*, vol. 197, 2016, p. 254-261.
- Middlemiss** Lucie, *Sustainable Consumption: Key Issues*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2018.
- Middlemiss** Lucie, “Individualised or participatory? Exploring late-modern identity and sustainable development”, *Environmental Politics*, vol. 23, n° 6, 2014, p. 929-946.
- Miller** David, *Principles of Social Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Morris** Jenny, “Citizenship and disabled people: A scoping paper prepared for the Disability Rights Commission”, Leeds, Disability Archive UK, 2005.
- Ollerton** Janice, “IPAR, an inclusive disability research methodology with accessible analytical tools”, *International Practice Development Journal*, vol. 2, n° 2, 2012.
- Rawls** John, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Shirani** Fiona et al, “‘I’m not a tree hugger, I’m just like you’: changing perceptions of sustainable lifestyles”, *Environmental Politics*, vol. 24, n° 1, 2015, p. 57-74.
- Taylor Aiken** Gerald et al, “Researching Climate Change and Community in Neoliberal Contexts: an emerging critical approach”, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, vol. 8, n° 4, 2017, p. 463.
- Thew** Harriet, **Middlemiss** Lucie, **Paavola** Jouni, “‘Youth is not a political position’: Exploring justice claims-making in the UN Climate Change Negotiations”, *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 61, 2020.
- Vinz** Dagmar, “Gender and Sustainable Consumption: A German Environmental Perspective”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 16, 2009, p. 159-179.
- Williams** Fiona, *Social policy: a critical introduction: issues of race, gender, and class*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989.

**Young** Iris Marion, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

**Young** Iris Marion, “Equality of whom? Social groups and judgments of injustice”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 9, n° 1, 2001, p. 1-18.

**Young** Iris Marion, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011.

**Yuval-Davis** Nira, “Intersectionality and feminist politics. European journal of women’s studies”, vol. 13, n° 3, 2006, p. 193-209.