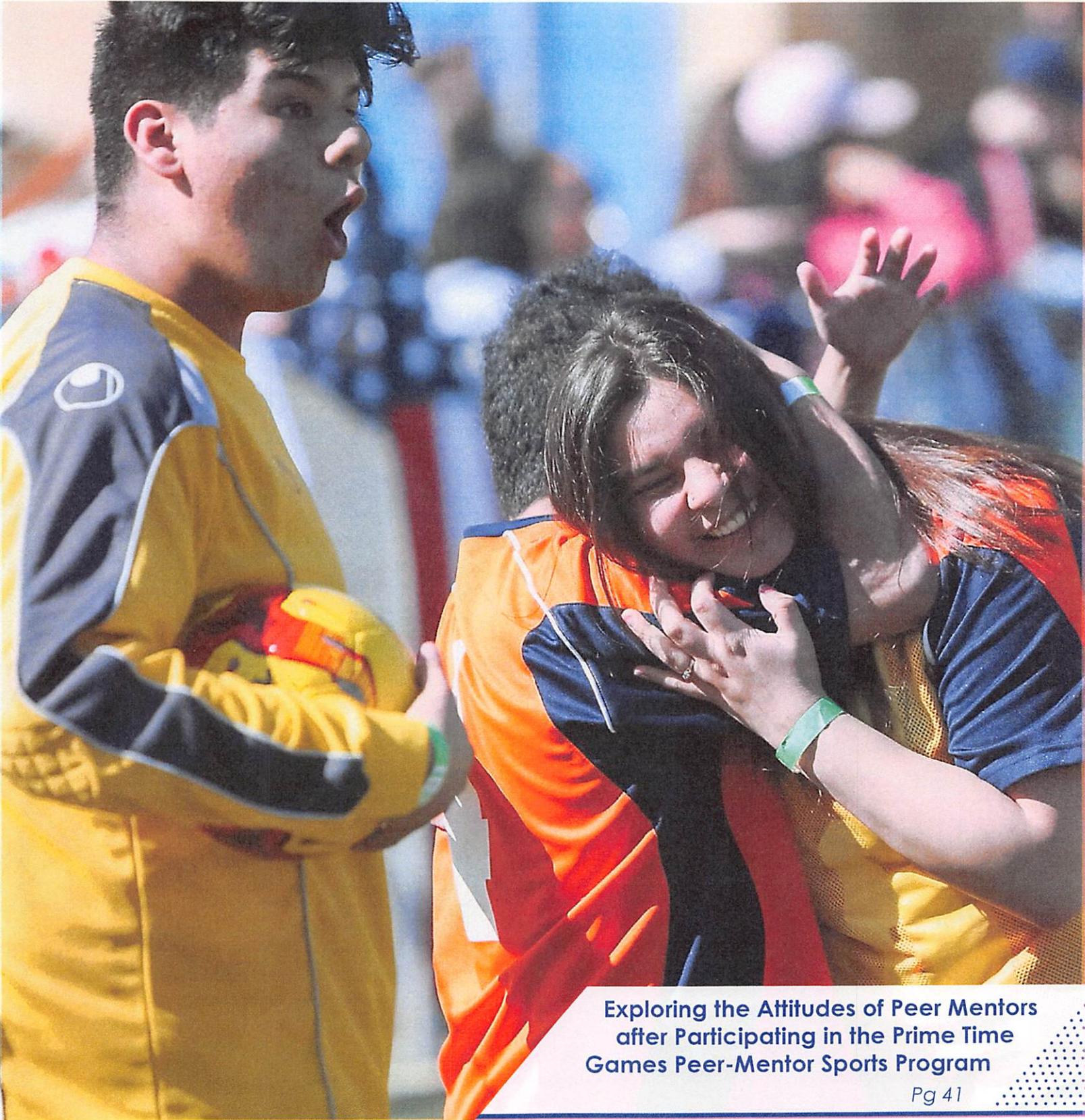


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Exploring the Attitudes of Peer Mentors
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Exploring the Attitudes of Peer Mentors after Participating in the Prime Time Games Peer-Mentor Sports Program



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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore peers without disabilities' perspectives toward students with disabilities and the impact of participation in a season of the Prime Time Games®. The findings were supportive of the Prime Time Games® as a peer education model that can help high school-aged students without disabilities gain new knowledge and enhance attitudes toward students with disabilities. Additional research is needed that utilizes rigorous methodologies to explore and understand the experiences of students with and without disabilities to gain a deeper and more rich understanding of experiences in the Prime Time Games®.

Keywords: *Perspectives, mentors, disability, descriptive*

Introduction

The attitudes of peers without disabilities have long been identified as being among the most influential variables in regard to supporting meaningful and successful experiences of students with disabilities in physical education and sport contexts (Kozub et al., 2020; McKay et al., 2015; 2019). Central to the importance of peers without disabilities may be the role that they can play in the establishment of positive social interactions and friendships with peers with disabilities (Li et al., 2022; Makopoulou et al., 2019). Conversely, peer rejection can limit social learning opportunities for students with disabilities, and may therefore negatively impact academic achievement, as well as interest in physical education, physical activity, and sport throughout the lifespan (McKay et al., 2019; Wang, 2019). As such, it is unsurprising

that a considerable amount of scholarship in adapted physical education has explored the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of peers without disabilities toward disability, students with disabilities, and the integration of students with disabilities in sport and physical education spaces and contexts (Kozub et al., 2020; McKay et al., 2019; Perez-Torralba et al., 2019).

Given the importance of peer attitudes in the aforementioned context, peer education approaches have emerged as an essential means of supporting the education of students with disabilities within integrated spaces (McKay et al., 2019). With that, several programs, such as the Paralympic School Day program (McKay, 2013) and the Inclusive Sport at School program (Perez-Torralba et al., 2019), have developed and published empirical support of their efficacy in enhancing peers' attitudes toward students with disabilities. Other programs have emerged and garnered attention for their potential to enhance attitudes of peers without disabilities toward those with disabilities in a sport context, but do not yet have published empirical data supporting its efficacy in enhancing attitudes. One such program that fits this description is the Prime Time Games®.

The Prime Time Games®, developed in 2003 and implemented by a nonprofit organization in Southern California named Team Prime Time, is a "full-inclusion, afterschool sports model" (Straus, 2017, p. 32) that pairs low-income youth with youth with disabilities to participate together in high school sports leagues. This initiative began with an interest in designing a program utilizing sport to demonstrate to low-income youth that they were capable of making positive contributions to society, if given the opportunity to do so. Through partnership between special education divisions, athletic directors and administration at high schools,



and Team Prime Time, today the Prime Time Games® are an on-campus, after-school program where students without disabilities (coaches) and students with disabilities (athletes) from the same school practice together and then compete against other schools in their league (Clement & Freeman, 2023). At the beginning of each 10-week season, peer coaches are paired with a peer with a disability in a 1:1 ratio. Peer coaches and athletes then practice together twice a week for four weeks and after that participate in games that occur twice a week (in place of practices) for the next four weeks (Clement & Freeman, 2023). The final two weeks of the season constitute playoffs. Throughout the 10-week season, the pairs practice and play together as a unit, allowing opportunities for both individuals to have support and learn from one another (Strauss, 2017). Sport specific drills are created and implemented for each pair to engage in, and rules are modified for game play to meet the needs of the peer mentors and athletes.

Despite the clear promise that the Prime Time Games® has in enhancing the attitudes of peers without disabilities, there is little published empirical data to date that has explored the efficacy of this program in enhancing attitudes. Thus far, only one study (Clement & Freeman, 2023) has explored the effects of participation in the Prime Time Games®, and demonstrated that the program was believed to be feasible, and that students without disabilities felt that they had a better perspective toward people with disabilities after participating. The goal of the current study, which is focused on participants without disabilities who acted as peer coaches in the Prime Time Games®, was to extend this line of inquiry and explore what impact participation as a peer mentor would have on their attitudes toward disabled people. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore peers without disabilities' perspectives toward students with disabilities and the impact of participation in a season of the Prime Time Games®.

Methods

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample of 38 young people without disabilities who were enrolled in, and completed, a session (full season) of the Prime Time Games® as a peer mentor in a large, urban school district in Southern California. Among the 38 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 16$ years), 24 (63%) identified as female, and 14 (37%) as male. For 25 (66%) participants, this was their first time participating in a Prime Time Games® event. For four participants (11%), this was their second time participating, whereas each of the other participants ($n = 10$, 26%) had completed 3 or more events. Eight participants (21%) reported that they had a family member with a disability, whereas six (16%) noted that they were unsure if they had a family member with a dis-

ability or not. Similarly, 12 (32%) participants noted having a friend with a disability and three (8%) were unsure. The remaining participants reported not having a family member ($n = 24$, 63%) or friend ($n = 23$, 61%) with a disability. Recruitment of participants was executed through the Prime Time Games® program, with eligibility criteria being limited to participants who were enrolled in and completed a session (full season), of the Prime Time Games®. Consent and assent were obtained from all participants and their guardians, respectively. Ethics approval was processed at the first author's university.

Data Collection

A 13-item questionnaire was used in this study. Participants completed the questionnaire at the conclusion of participating in one session (full season) of the Prime Time Games®. The questionnaire began with five demographic questions, which asked participants to report their age, gender, if they had a family member with a disability, if they had a friend with a disability, and the number of times they had participated in the program. Following, four multiple choice questions exploring the participants' opinions about the Team Prime Time Games were provided. These multiple-choice questions were inspired by contact-based questions created and validated by McKay and colleagues (2018) and utilized in previous contact-based research (McKay et al., 2022). Slight modifications to the questions included specifying "Prime Time Games®" instead of "Paralympic School Day" or "Paralympic Skill Lab," providing contact-based context to the location of the experience. The first multiple choice question asked participants: "After taking part in the Prime Time Games®, I feel that peers with disabilities are" with response options of (1) superior to me, (2) inferior to me, and (3) equal in status to me. Second, participants were asked to identify the competitiveness of the games and could select that the games were (1) competitive (cut throat and focused on winning and beating others), (2) cooperative (I



worked with others to achieve group goals) or (3) independent (I worked alone; there really weren't any goals). Third, participants were asked about interactions with students with disabilities during the games, with response options of (1) limited meaningful interactions with peers with disabilities, (2) no interactions with peers with disabilities, or (3) numerous interactions with peers with disabilities. Finally, the fourth multiple choice question asked about the social acceptability of spending time with students with disabilities in their school, with response options of: (1) socially acceptable to work with and include individuals with disabilities, (2) sometimes socially acceptable to work with and include individuals with disabilities, or (3) not socially acceptable to work with and include individuals with disabilities.

Following the multiple-choice questions were four long-response questions, where participants were asked to consider their experiences taking part in the Prime Time Games®, and reflect on their experiences within the program and as a peer mentor. The questions, which were inspired by prior work by McKay et al (2020) and constructed by members of the research team to remain purposefully broad, included (1) What impacted you most?, (2) What surprised you?, (3) What was challenging for you?, and (4) How has the Team Prime Time program influenced your actions and behaviors throughout your school and life? Participants were asked to voluntarily complete the responses, with the understanding that providing full, rich responses may not be feasible for each participant.

Data Coding and Analysis

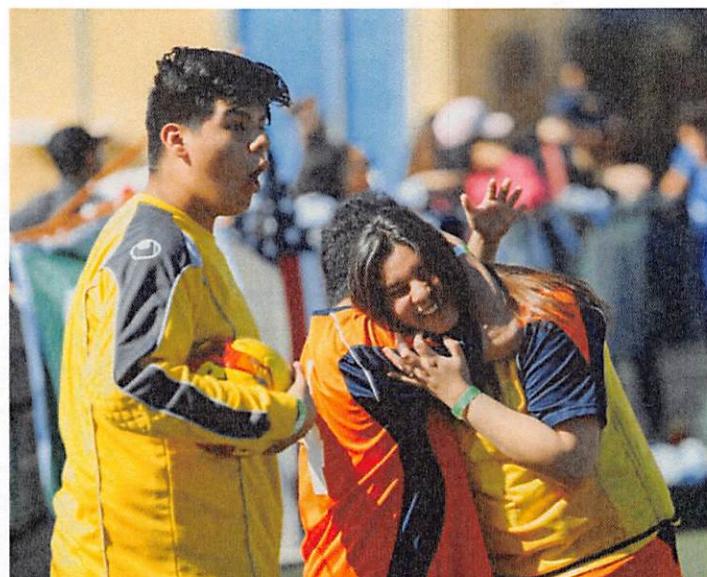
After data collection was complete, data were compiled into an excel spreadsheet. Long-response questions were analyzed via descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies). Long-response data were coded using a two-step approach that has been recommended for and used in instances where researchers are interested in coding in relation to several categories (McKay et al., 2020; Shields & Synnot, 2014). During this process, the second, third, and fourth authors independently open-coded each long-format question separately within an excel spreadsheet. That is, first, for each long-format question response, the coders were tasked with grasping the major idea of the response and distill the response into a one- or two-word code that captured the essence of the response. Second, each code was grouped under one of 12 categories. The first 10 categories were adopted by previous work from McKay and colleagues (2020), and included: (1) changed attitude (participants altered their mental outlook), (2) people with disabilities are able (participants reflected on the ability instead of disability), (3) equality (participants felt a sense of parallelism), (4) emotional (participants demonstrated a variety of feelings), (5) gained new knowledge (participants increased their understanding and cognition), (6) inclusion and disability sport are important (participants saw the value of inclusion and adapted sport programs), (7)

inspirational (participants were filled with thoughts or in-spirit and encouragement), (8) not interesting (participants were unstimulated or bored), (9) personal (participants felt the experience impacted them interpersonally or behaviorally), and (10) respect for people with disabilities (participants held disabled people in high esteem). During the analysis, two additional categories were added that were reflective of the data. Category 11 was “no change,” where participants reported no change or impact, and category 12 was “people with disabilities need help,” where participants described that people with disabilities were in need of assistance. After all codes were entered into categories independently by the three coders, a fourth research team member (author 1) reviewed the data and categories to explore consistency across coders. When at least two of the three coders agreed upon a category, responses were entered into that category in the final dataset. In instances where disagreements were found across coders, author 1 reviewed the response and assigned it to one of the codes provided initially by the three coders. This occurred five times for question 1 (13%), three times for question 2 (8%), and two times for question 4 (5%). No responses from question 3 had disagreements among coders.

After the coding procedure, descriptive statistics, including frequency counts of the categories, were presented. Demographic findings were characterized descriptively, and descriptive statistics for the codes created from the four long-format questions were compiled.

Results

For the first multiple choice question, asking participants to reflect on their feelings about the social status of peers with disabilities, 34 (89%) participants reported that people with disabilities were equal to them, two (5%) reported that they were inferior, and two (5%) reported that they were superior. For multiple response question two, which focused on the competitiveness of the Prime Time Games, all 38 (100%)



participants reported the games to be cooperative in nature. For question three, which asked participants to describe their interactions with students with disabilities during the games, 31 (82%) participants reported having numerous meaningful interactions with peers with disabilities, six (16%) reported having limited meaningful interactions with peers with disabilities, and one (3%) reported not having any interactions with peers with disabilities. Finally, for the fourth multiple choice question, which focused on the social acceptability of spending time with students with disabilities in school, 30 of the 38 (79%) participants reported that it is socially acceptable to work with and include students with disabilities, whereas 8 (21%) reported that it is only sometimes socially acceptable to do so.

In total, 38, 38, 37, and 36 participant responses were coded and categorized from the four long-format questions for questions 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. As Table 1 shows, responses categorized as emotional ($n = 14$, 37%) and people with disabilities need help ($n = 9$, 24%) were the most commonly reported responses to Question 1 (i.e., what impacted you the most?). Following were responses categorized as equality ($n = 4$, 11%), gained new knowledge ($n = 4$, 11%), and no change ($n = 3$, 8%). Five additional categories were used one time. For Question 2 (i.e., what surprised you?), only five categories were used, with people with disabilities are able ($n = 17$, 45%) and emotional ($n = 12$, 32%) as the most frequently used. No change ($n = 4$, 11%), gained new knowledge ($n = 3$, 8%), and inspirational ($n = 2$, 5%) made up the additional responses. For Question 3 (i.e., what was challenging for you?), four categories were used. Most responses were coded into the category, gained new knowledge ($n = 20$, 54%). Following, 12 responses (32%) were coded as no change, four (11%) as personal, and one (3%) as changed attitude. Finally, for Question 4 (i.e., How has the Team Prime Time Program influenced your actions and behaviors throughout your school day and life?), three categories (i.e., changed attitudes, emotional, personal) were each used seven times (19%), the most for that question. Following were respect for people with disabilities ($n = 5$, 14%) and inclusion and disability sport are important ($n = 4$, 11%). Finally, three categories (i.e., gained new knowledge, no change, and people with disabilities need help) were used two times (6%) each.

Category	Frequency (percentage)	Response Example
Emotional	14 (37%)	<i>How happy these games make the kids to just have fun</i>
Disabled People Need Help	9 (24%)	<i>Helping students in need to play</i>

Table 1 (continued)

Equality	4 (11%)	<i>Playing with them</i>
Gained New Knowledge	4 (11%)	<i>Learning to interact with them</i>
No Change	3 (8%)	<i>Nothing</i>
Changed Attitude	1 (3%)	<i>They impacted me in a good way because it made me have a better perspective on them and how they are. I learned how they are individually and just knowing about them.</i>
Disabled People are Able	1 (3%)	<i>What impacted me the most was being able to partake in the games and see how much people, especially my peers, are capable of and how spiritfual they can be.</i>
Inspirational	1 (3%)	<i>What impacted me the most was influencing our athlete</i>
Personal	1 (3%)	<i>What impacted me the most was that the kids were nice and patient that it made me a better coach/person</i>
Respect for Disabled People	1 (3%)	<i>How nice and cool the athletes are</i>

Note: Percentage of 38 responses.

Category	Frequency (percentage)	Response Example
Disabled People are Able	17 (45%)	<i>How good a lot of the athletes were in certain possessions. I wouldn't expect that</i>
Emotional	12 (32%)	<i>What surprised was the fact everyone was having fun even with the opposite team</i>
No change	4 (11%)	<i>Nothing really</i>
Gained New Knowledge	3 (8%)	<i>Something that surprised me was how easy it became to understand and communicate with the athletes</i>
Inspirational	2 (5%)	<i>What surprised me is how much their success would affect me</i>

Note: Percentage of 38 responses.

Category	Frequency (percentage)	Response Example
Gained New Knowledge	20 (54%)	<i>Working with my peer athlete was often challenging if they didn't want to go after the ball. But with the proper motivation he did and it allowed him to excel</i>
No change	12 (32%)	<i>Nothing it was all good</i>

Table 3 (continued)

Personal	4 (11%)	<i>Coming to practices because I had a low grade in my classes</i>
Changed Attitude	1 (3%)	<i>The most challenging thing for me was trying not to play hard defense or contest the shot too much 'cause I didn't want to hit the athletes</i>

Note: Percentage of 37 responses.

Table 4
Categorized Responses and Examples for Question 4

Category	Frequency (percentage)	Response Example
Changed Attitudes	7 (19%)	<i>I got to see how fun it was to play with them</i>
Emotional	7 (19%)	<i>Prime Time has helped me become a more communicative, open, empathetic person.</i>
Personal	7 (19%)	<i>It gave me a lot of energy then am used to having</i>
Respect for Disabled People	5 (14%)	<i>The team prime time program has influenced my actions and behaviors throughout my school day because I now know new people and I greet them when I see athletes through out the day.</i>
Inclusion and Disability sport are Important	4 (11%)	<i>It makes me want to do sports which I don't normally do</i>
Gained New Knowledge	2 (6%)	<i>To learn about the athletes</i>
No Change	2 (6%)	<i>They haven't changed.</i>
Disabled People Need Help	2 (6%)	<i>Helping them</i>

Note: Percentage of 36 responses.

Discussion

In this study, we explored peers without disabilities' perspectives toward students with disabilities and the outcomes of participation in the Prime Time Games®. Generally, the findings from this study extended those of prior work from Clement and Freeman (2023) and demonstrated that participants found their experiences in the Prime Time Games® to be meaningful, and that the games had a mainly positive impact on their perspectives toward peers with disabilities. As such, this study contributes to the existing preliminary empirical support for the Prime Time Games® as a valuable learning and engagement experience for peers without disabilities.

When reflecting on their experiences during the Prime Time Games®, the participants characterized their interac-

tions with students with disabilities as meaningful (82%), cooperative (100%), and including partnerships of equal status (89%). These features of the Prime Time Games® are well-aligned with those associated with Allport's (1954) contact theory, which asserts that social contact can improve relationships between members of majority (e.g., people without disabilities) and minority (e.g., people with disabilities) groups when meaningful contact that allows individuals to get to know one another as individuals is available. To do so, Allport (1954) has suggested that specific categories of interactions must be available, including those where participants are of equal status, where they are pursuing common cooperative goals, and where intimate and meaningful interactions are occurring. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the participants' open-ended question responses were inclusive of statements that were indicative of improved attitudes, either directly (e.g., improved attitudes) or indirectly (e.g., learning that people with disabilities are capable), given that the participants' experiences were well-aligned with characteristics described by Allport (1954) and McKay (2018) to facilitate attitude change. While the Prime Time Games® have been described as following an ecological/transactional theoretical framework which focuses on the social and environmental contexts of the games (Clements & Freeman, 2023), our preliminary findings may support the use of Allport's contact theory in future research that continues to explore the impact that participation in the games can have on the attitudes of youth without disabilities toward peers with disabilities.

Peer education programs, like the Prime Time Games®, can help to contribute to the formation of new knowledge in order to enhance attitudes and perceptions toward people with disabilities (e.g., Kozub et al., 2020; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013; McKay et al., 2015). This assertion is supported by empirical evidence characterizing the impact of a variety of peer education or disability awareness programs, including those using documentary films about disability to enhance attitudes of undergraduate students (McKay et al., 2020) as well as others exploring the effects of the Paralympic School Day program (McKay et al., 2015). Consistent with these prior findings, among the most commonly reported perspectives of our participants across open-ended questions were 'people with disabilities are capable', 'gaining new knowledge', and 'changing attitudes', each of which can be interpreted as being related to the formation of new knowledge and changed attitudes. While these findings are encouraging, further research is needed that more deeply explores these perspectives and phenomenon, using more rigorous qualitative research methods (Shields & Synnot, 2014) to gain a richer understanding of the influence that participation in the Prime Time Games® can have for peers without disabilities acting as peer coaches.

Several limitations should be considered while interpreting the findings of this research. First, as noted previously,

the collected data were used to identify topics for further exploration and were not intended to replicate the richness of data that could be derived from other qualitative methodologies (Shields & Synnot, 2014). As such, further qualitative research would be needed to gain a rich understanding of the particularities of the participants' experiences, including research that explores different theoretical frameworks related to disability, sport, and social interactions. Additionally, since our methodology focused on peers without disabilities, we are unable to ascertain what experiences students with disabilities have within the Prime Time Games® at this time. Moreover, a limitation to this research is the narrow scope of findings related to the Prime Time Games®, that do not necessarily extend beyond the program to other peer mentorship programs, and to concerns related to the peers in "helper" roles not aligning with equality in sport. Future research should interview students with disabilities, alongside peer coaches, to explore their (inter)subjective experiences within the Prime Time Games® (Haegele & Maher, 2023). Finally, the participants in this study may not be representative of the entire high school population, and therefore the transferability of these findings are limited.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore peers without disabilities' perspectives toward students with disabilities and the impact of participation in a season of the Prime Time Games. The findings were supportive of the Prime Time Games® as a peer education model that can help high school-aged students without disabilities gain new knowledge and enhance attitudes toward students with disabilities. Additional research is needed to extend these findings that utilizes more rigorous qualitative methodologies to explore and understand the subjective experiences of students without, and with, disabilities participating within the Prime Time Games® to gain a deeper and more rich understanding of these phenomena.

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