**‘THERE SHOULDN’T BE A BARRIER TO EXERCISE’: STUDENT VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES WITH AN ADAPTED PHYSICAL EXERCISE PROGRAM**

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**Purpose/Objective:** Social engagement between persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and their neurotypical peers can encourage their participation in physical activity and sport. For student volunteers working alongside persons with IDD as their fitness trainers, this experience can challenge assumptions and common misconceptions about disability. The current research explored: (1) how volunteer interactions with persons with IDD in a fitness setting affected perceptions of disability, and (2) the factors associated with quality volunteer experiences.

**Methodology:** Ten student volunteer fitness trainers (mean age +/- 20.6 years, four males, six females) from the Adapted Physical Exercise (APEX) program participated in the study. Volunteer participants provided one-on-one fitness training for persons with IDD twice a week, for a minimum of eight weeks. Each volunteer fitness trainer completed two semi-structured interviews, pre- and post-program. These interviews were intended to gain a more detailed understanding of their attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge of persons with IDD, and probe their perceptions of APEX programming. Furthermore, using audio diaries, volunteer trainers' experiences were captured by answering questions related to their participation in the APEX program.

**Results:** Three major themes emerged: (1) building relationships, (2) personal development: comfort, confidence, and competence, and (3) seeing the ability. When volunteer participants described their APEX experiences with adults with IDD, it was frequently communicated that they were able to *build relationships* with the persons they were paired with. In addition, working with the APEX program allowed volunteer participants to grow their skill set. Most participants developed their *comfort, confidence, and competence* levels while working alongside adults with IDD. Lastly, volunteer participants articulated their experiences as rewarding and beneficial. This experience generated new and positive perceptions of persons with IDD where volunteer participants could *see their ability*.

**Discussion/Conclusion:** Overall, the APEX program provided a positive experience for volunteer trainers working alongside persons with IDD. This experience challenged participants’ previous perceptions of disability and fostered an inclusive mindset. This research is positioned to encourage engagement in future interactions with persons with IDD and promote social change in the community.

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