

Still Outsiders: The inclusion of disabled children in Physical Education in England

Abstract

This study calls for the meaningful inclusion of disabled children within Physical Education (PE), by exploring the experiences of a triad of key stakeholders: (a) Disabled children and their families; (b) PE teachers; and (c) Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Providers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between September 2017 and September 2019 with a total of 34 participants from across these three groups. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed the following: (i) disabled children still face many barriers to participation in PE lessons in ‘mainstream’ schools in England; (ii) teaching professionals remain unprepared for including disabled children in PE; and, (iii) both parents and teaching professionals (teachers and ITT providers) cited recommendations to enhance the inclusion of disabled children in PE. It is concluded that disabled children are still outsiders to PE in mainstream schools in England and an intervention into PE teacher training is needed to promote strategies for inclusion.

Keywords: Disabled children, physical education (PE), parents, teacher training, teaching professionals, inclusion.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), as in many other nations throughout the world, disabled children and young people often experience school differently to non-disabled children (Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson 2010; Soorenian 2019). This is partly due to the implementation of the 1944 Education Act which led to the creation of the special school system in which many

(though not all) disabled children are educated completely separately from non-disabled children and young people. The placement of disabled children outside a performance based mainstream educational system has been regarded by disability equality activists, such as the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE), as a form of segregation. ALLFIE is an organization of disabled people which has campaigned since its formation in 1990 to bring legal changes to education for disabled people into UK Law. In July 2020 ALLFIE publicly voiced their dissatisfaction regarding the UK Government's plan to create more special schools:

We believe that the announcement is incompatible with the Government's UN [United Nations] CRPD [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities] and Public Sector Duty to protect and promote Disabled people (sic.) rights. This also demonstrates that the Government's failures to act on the recommendations of the UN Disability Committee in 2017 found our Government to be causing a "human catastrophe" to Disabled people. Between 2012 and 2019 we have seen a decrease by 24% in the number of Disabled children attending a mainstream primary and secondary school in England: Campaigners warn that special needs children have been forced out of mainstream schools. ALLFIE is concerned that the Government response is overly reactive and has not looked at the damage of exclusion and the long-term effect of segregation to society. We believe it is wrong that taxpayer's money is to be used to create and resource segregated education, which will disconnect and further exclude Disabled people from society.

The inclusion of disabled children into mainstream schools gained support in 1978 with the publication of the Department of Education and Sciences, *Report into the Education of Handicapped Children* (DES 1978). Whilst the title of this report is shocking as we observe it

today, the underlying ideas punctuated throughout signified the UK's commitment to the human rights movement that influenced much of Western Europe at this time (Maher 2010, 2017). Education migration and transference of disabled children into mainstream schools is underpinned by the philosophy that integration will benefit all disabled children and remove social and physical barriers between disabled and non-disabled people (Haliday 1993). This philosophy was officially embraced across international communities in 1994, when representatives of 92 governments, and 25 international organisations attended the first World Conference on Special Needs Education in Spain, from which the Salamanca statement was derived (UNESCO 1994). The premise of this statement called for inclusion to be the 'norm' in all schools, and for disabled pupils to be able to participate in classes and access teaching support in order to facilitate the full development of their potential (Hurtzlet et al. 2019). From an idealistic and philosophical standpoint, the sentiment expressed above is admirable. The political will for inclusion appears to be strong and enduring, yet the extent to which political will is reflected in practice remains unclear.

Despite the success of the London 2012 Paralympics, it has been recognized that many barriers persist in the UK for disabled people who want to participate in physical activity (Braye, Gibbons, Dixon, 2013; Braye, Dixon and Gibbons 2013, 2015; Braye 2016). Disabled people are still more likely to be sedentary than their non-disabled counterparts (Zwinkels et al. 2015) and experience their access to many services through charities, rather than mainstream institutions (such as schools) that others take for granted. Accessing the right equipment, coupled with a less than welcoming attitude in mainstream school PE, remain key problems for disabled children (Rekaa et al. 2019).

The UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS 2015) actively encourage young children to engage in physical activity and, via Sport England (2016, 2020), work with organisations such as the Youth Sport Trust (YST 2020), governing bodies

of sport and schools across the nation to enhance and maintain participation in sport, both in terms of compulsory PE as part of the National Curriculum and in optional extra-curricular sport. However, there has previously been an assumption that the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream school PE in England is taking place, despite 84% of PE teachers feeling under prepared for working with disabled children (Vickerman and Coates 2009, 137). Studies have also shown that student teachers feel that their compulsory initial teacher training (ITT) does not adequately prepare them to include disabled children in PE lessons (Coates 2011).

In 2013 the English Federation of Disability Sport (which became ‘Activity Alliance’ in April 2018) conducted a survey on disabled children in England, with the following results: 51 per cent of disabled children did not like participating in Physical Education (PE), despite 70 per cent saying that they would like to take part more often (EFDS 2013). This paradox reveals disparity between inclusive philosophy and inclusive action for disabled children in school PE. Recognising this hiatus, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) called for all educational establishments to ensure that inclusive, adaptive, and safe opportunities to participate in PE must be provided for disabled children (UNESCO 2015). Summarising the current situation for disabled children in mainstream school PE, Braye et al. (2017, 128) stated that: “The national curriculum for PE is established for non-disabled children and effectively positions disabled children as ‘outsiders’”.

Since previous research has suggested that many disabled children have traditionally experienced exclusion from mainstream PE, the aim of the current study was to assess the extent to which this situation has improved in English schools. This paper focuses on the nature of inclusivity in PE in mainstream English schools from the perspective of three key groups: first, disabled children and their families, who according to a recent systematic review into inclusion in PE, feature in only three UK studies on this subject (Rekaa et al. 2019); second, teachers’ of PE in primary, secondary and special schools in England, who despite a growing

literature addressing teachers' attitudes and beliefs with respect to inclusion (often using quantitative surveys), rarely feature in qualitative lived experience studies (Qi and Ha 2012); and, third, we explore the views and experiences of ITT providers whose role, according to Vickerman (2007), is central to the success or failure of the policy agenda for including disabled children in PE. The conceptualizations of inclusion provided by these three groups is desirable because of the ways in which they can influence future strategies for the effective inclusion of disabled children in PE settings (Maher 2018).

Research Process

Approach

A qualitative phenomenological approach (King, Horrocks and Books 2019) was employed to draw on the lived experiences of the three interconnected groups mentioned above. This was deemed the most appropriate means from which to critically assess the current situation regarding the inclusion of disabled children in PE in English schools. By centralizing the experiences of both disabled children and their families as well as teaching professionals (teachers and ITT providers) our approach sought to address the 'emancipatory research paradigm' that Oliver (1992) sets out in his seminal paper *Changing the social relation of research production*. As well as satisfying Oliver's paradigm, this emancipatory research adheres to the social model of disability which recognizes people as disabled by barriers in society, not by individual impairment (Oliver 1983, 1990).

Sample and Procedure

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Holliday 2016) was used in order to gather a suitable sample from each of the three desired populations. First, parents and disabled children who were participating in a summer sports school at Teesside University in Middlesbrough (UK) were invited to take part in ‘family’ focus group interviews between September and December 2017. This led to five family interviews that involved a mother and child, and one that involved a mother, father and child (n=13). Second, teachers of PE were invited to volunteer to be involved in semi-structured individual interviews by contacting the researchers directly following their completion of an online survey which was posted on the *Association of PE Teachers* website, and in the associated magazine *PE Matters*. The survey was ‘live’ between 20 July 2018 and 30 June 2019 and had 51 respondents (the findings from this survey are not reported in this paper). From these survey respondents 15 teachers of PE from across England volunteered to be involved in individual semi-structured interviews which took place between November 2018 and September 2019. The 15 teachers of PE in our sample had a range of experiences including primary, secondary and special school PE, with some having experience of more than one of these. Third, six Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers who were involved in the delivery of undergraduate and / or postgraduate teaching qualifications at six different institutions across England participated in individual semi-structured interviews between October 2018 and January 2019. Some of these ITT providers were contacted by the research team directly and others were introduced to the researchers by teachers of PE who had completed the online survey. In total, 34 participants were involved in interviews in this research project. We have used pseudonyms for all participants in order to protect their identities. We have purposely not cited the precise locations of the six ITT providers in our sample in order to reduce the likelihood of them being identified. For the same reason, we have not included the locations of PE teachers.

Interviews were conducted by the second and third authors either in person or online via Facetime or Skype. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were audio recorded on a Smartphone using a voice recording app. For the purposes of this study, participants discussed their personal experiences relative to disability and PE either as disabled children, parents of disabled children, or PE teaching professionals. All participants were encouraged to provide specific examples from their personal lived experiences.

Analysis of Data

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts served as the raw data to be analysed using the following framework of thematic analysis. First, each author independently engaged in a manual process of open coding to start reducing the data by categorizing significant patterns and commonalities into first and second order themes (Bryman 2015). Once the phased process of open coding had ended for each individual author, we then collaborated in a collective process of analysis that eventually led to an identification of an agreed set of themes. The aim of this analytical process was to produce what Geertz (1973) describes as ‘thick description’; that is, a thorough and accurate account of the range of responses articulated by participants. It is worth noting that this research does not claim to be representative of the experiences of all disabled children in PE, or indeed all PE teaching professionals in England. It does, however, provide real lived experiences from a sample of disabled children and their families and PE teaching professionals that can be used to provide a picture of the inclusion of disabled children in PE in England. Three distinct but related themes are discussed below from the perspectives of a cross section of all participants: (i) Disabled children are still excluded from PE; (ii) teaching professionals remain unprepared for including disabled children in PE; and, (iii) parents and teaching professionals recommendations to include disabled children in PE.

Results

Disabled children and young people are still excluded from PE

Stefan, a ten-year-old boy asserts:

I love playing football, but at school I don't because when I'm on the field no one passes to me. They ignore me because they think I'm rubbish because of my legs.

Peer exclusion is difficult for this football enthusiast to take. In this account Stefan expresses awareness that he is socially excluded because physical limitations impact on perceptions of his ability and willingness to participate (Carter and Spencer 2006; Fitzgerald 2005; Bourke and Burgman 2010; Bantjes et al. 2015). Paul, a 17-year-old boy describes similar experiences:

People saw me as different in PE and I didn't get picked because they think I'm really bad at everything. It's not fair but I understand, but it makes me sad.

Congruent with De Schauwer et al. (2021) who assert that we all desire to belong to the same world irrespective of the categories that we are placed in by society, our participants are simultaneously frustrated and yet accepting that their impairments mean they are not included by their peers. However, peer exclusion was only part of the problem experienced by disabled children in our sample. There were other contributing factors, including what disabled children and their parents view as exclusion instigated by PE teaching professionals. Below we provide a synopsis of some of the different forms of exclusion our participants had experienced.

First, when PE sessions begin and end, disabled students may require additional help to change their clothes, but experiences highlight that school procedures are not always accommodating to this need. One participant, Jesse, a 12-year-old boy, revealed that, post PE, he is left to wear his PE kit for the remainder of the day. His mother recounts:

I don't want him left in jogging trousers. So, at the moment, without my help he spends all day on a Tuesday in his PE kit whereas the other children don't. I had to go in and change Jesse every lunchtime because the school wouldn't help.

Second, the organisation of PE classes was also considered to exclude disabled children in various ways. For example, imposed segregation from non-disabled children was a feature for one child within our sample. Louise, mother to Bobbie (12-year-old boy) explains:

PE is administered by taking them (disabled children) out of other lessons, separating children that are disabled and doing something separate with them, but I don't particularly think it does any good. They just stand out as being different.

Louise's concerns resonate with the results of Egilson's (2014) research, which centres on the school experiences of Icelandic youths with physical impairments. As experts-by-experience Egilson's participants advise that disabled children ought to be given the opportunity to engage in activities alongside their peers. Moreover, they argue that an ongoing process of consultation between disabled children and teachers should occur as a matter of routine practice. Notwithstanding this, a third exclusionary aspect discovered within the current study was

concerned with feelings of segregation within mainstream classes. For example, Spenser, a 15-year-old boy, recalls that when he was in mainstream school, there were multiple occasions when his teaching assistant pulled him out of activities on the grounds of perceived danger. On many occasions, Spenser's experience of inclusive PE was 'me and another person doing stretching in the corner.'

Similar experiences have been reported in the findings of Haycock and Smith (2010) and Vickerman and Coates (2009) who indicate that teachers may be unwilling or may feel incompetent when attempting to adapt their teaching to the diversity of pupils' skills. Others, such as Fitzgerald and Stride (2012), have argued that even on such occasions when disabled children are included in PE classes, they are disadvantaged and somewhat dehumanized when they are placed into traditional competitive activities that are designed for non-disabled peers and taught by non-disabled teachers. Furthermore, all such experiences hamper the potential that disabled children have to be physically active (Svendby 2016).

Other common experiences of mainstream PE include taking on facilitative roles when staff decided that full participation was not possible. As a typical example, Jesse explains:

I just helped out today because they're doing athletics on the field. My wheelchair overturned last week and I'm wobbly on my feet, so they gave me a job of helping.

Officiating, setting up markers or cones, refereeing, and holding the stopwatch, were listed as common jobs that all our participants have experienced. Despite the framing of such jobs as 'important' by PE teaching staff, participants remained unconvinced. Conversely, they were aware that these contrived roles made them stand out as different, and as such, participants were able to demonstrate how it is possible to participate in PE lessons without experiencing

inclusion. And whilst they held a desire to experience a sense of belonging that restrictive participation cannot offer (Spencer, Cavaliere and Watkinson 2010), they perceived themselves as a ‘problem’ that PE teachers were either unable or even unwilling to solve.

This self-perception is not arbitrary. It is a product of experience and is in-keeping with attitudes expressed by some teachers in previous studies who, according to Rekaa et al. (2019), tend to view inclusion as disruptive to the majority of other pupils and to the professional identity of PE teachers. Understandably, then, when teachers perceive inclusion as antagonistic to their ‘real work’, it should not be surprising that disabled children pick up on these cues. Moreover, it should not surprise us when we hear that disabled children are expected to fit in with sessions planned for the majority, or else sit to the side and watch (Ammah and Hodge 2005; Fredrickson and Cline 2002). In some instances, there was no attempt to conceal or sugar-coat this issue at all. For example, when looking for a secondary school for Bobbie to attend, his mother recalls:

The inclusion officer from a school that he was considering rang and they said he wouldn’t be able to do PE. He would stay in what they called a ‘nurture’ group that he would never get out of... It’s writing someone off before you know them isn’t it?

When asked how he felt about this situation, Bobbie said: ‘I was sad about what they said but I couldn’t go somewhere I couldn’t do sport.’ Whilst the reasons underpinning exclusion in this instance are unclear, it is likely that at an organisational level, this school largely accepts the medical model of disability which, underpinned by an individual ideology of disability, casts the pupil as the problem, rather than any lack of appropriate social arrangements

(Amundson 1992; Oliver 1996). Of course, whilst this is speculative, it is clear that there are many challenges for disabled children and parents to overcome as they negotiate advancement through the schooling systems (Mann et al. 2015). In this instance, decisions that minimise participation in PE risk marginalising pupils by restricting the opportunities that they have to interact with peers and develop social skills. These are important aspects of the national curriculum for PE in addition to the physical benefits of physical activity which disabled children are being denied through processes of exclusion.

Teaching professionals remain unprepared for including disabled children in PE

The six Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers in our sample were able to reveal details of the content of courses with which they are currently involved. From those interactions, it was clear that a disability specific focus was lacking on both primary and secondary ITT courses with all providers interpreting ‘inclusion’ in the widest possible sense. As an example, Sally (ITT teacher from the north of England) asserted the following:

My definition (of inclusion) would be to make sure that all young people can be included within physical education, including all young people with additional needs or different needs. So, it could be those who are gifted and talented, it could be those who are temporarily injured, it could be those who maybe have a particular impairment, so it's inclusion of all young people within physical education. This is the inclusion model, trying to ensure that all young people can participate. The exception might be that we might have to have some parallel activities...So, we must look at the needs of all the other 28 in the class compared to perhaps a few who have an additional need and how we might manage that situation emotionally.

According to Morley et al. (2005), this is a common view expressed by PE educators who argue that inclusion environments must not impede more able students. Moreover, according to Vickerman (2002), the concept of inclusion allows for ambiguity in the interpretation of inclusion principles, and this is largely unhelpful to disabled people. After all, differential conceptualisations of inclusion inevitably lead to differential experiences of PE across schools as institutions enact their own interpretations in practice (Haycock and Smith 2010). Diverse philosophies delivered by current teacher trainers were indicative of lack of clarity in training on inclusion for disabled pupils in PE. According to Ted, a PE teacher from Huddersfield, ‘specificity is not something that ITT training deals in.’ In his view, teaching qualifications are designed to make trainees ‘jack of all trades, master of none.’

Here Ted implies that taught courses are designed to cover all bases in a limited time schedule ‘which ultimately leads to some failings.’ Other PE teachers agreed with this assertion. Lars, a 27-year-old PE teacher from Middlesbrough, recalls that when he was a trainee, ‘there was nothing specific to disability on the training course.’ The emphasis, he explains, was on ‘PE provision for underrepresented groups’. Jordan, a 37-year-old Head of PE, also explains that in training ‘the focus of lesson planning was to make sure that you were able to deliver for any issues within that group’; whilst Christina, a 28-year-old PE teacher from Durham, stated:

If I’m being brutal, inclusion was in the distant background on my course. It was more geared towards, “you will be in mainstream and this is what you will teach.”

To be clear, for teachers in training, the theoretical expertise of their lecturers (ITT providers) was never in question. But they did make reference to the shortcomings of the course structure to effectively educate on issues and practices relative to disabled children and PE. For instance, Grace, a PE coordinator for secondary schools said:

the tutor that had us, her subject knowledge was amazing but she just wasn't given the time to allow us to explore disability at any length.

Similar comments were made by most other PE teachers who raised particular concerns about lack of practical experience. June (PE Teacher, Manchester), explained how her course was 'all lecture based, not practical', and another said:

I think the issue with a PGCE is, yes, you do the assignments, and it gives you a lot of grounding and knowledge, but the practical element of actually carrying out the lesson with some disabled students, I think that's what was missing from my training (Jordan, PE Teacher, Middlesbrough).

This narrative has led, in the words of Gemma, a 53-year-old PE teacher from Newcastle, to 'many people feeling that they did not know how to effectively differentiate a lesson and as a consequence, did not feel confident teaching PE to disabled children.' It is worth noting that PE teachers have previously been reported to acknowledge that they feel unprepared in dealing with the needs of disabled students (Hersman and Hodge 2010; Simons and Kalogeropoulos

2005), with other studies reporting that teachers needed further support in terms of practice provision (Hurtzler et al. 2019).

Some ITT providers were aware that the confidence of newly qualified teachers to effectively teach PE to disabled students was lacking, as Anne, an ITT provider from the north of England, explains:

In ITT, whether you be School Directs, whether you be PGCE, whether you be SCITT, you've got two placements and you've got, in effect, without being too crude, probably two terms to grow your subject knowledge and unless you have a specific area of interest in disability, you're not likely to pursue or grow that because, again, whilst it sounds really derogatory, you are trying to prepare yourself to deal with what you'll face on a day-to-day basis... I taught for 22 years in school and rarely had to teach a disabled child.

David, a Specialist Inspector for PE in the north east of England who delivers on ITT courses, concurs with this statement and makes a more fundamental point about the current structure of ITT: 'In the past, a PE teacher training degree was designed over three or four years, providing significant amounts of time to look at key populations.' He continues:

Ironically I believe that while general attitudes towards inclusion have improved across the years and inclusion of disabled people is at the heart of all people who deliver these courses, the problem is, their hands are tied when it comes to spending quality time on this subject.

This, according to Ravenscroft et al. (2019), is an essential barrier to overcome if we are to encourage, teach, and increase pro-inclusion attitudes amongst schoolteachers. In their study, based on the inclusion of disabled children in Turkey, the authors emphasise that experiencing inclusive practice during initial teacher training is likely to lead to more positive attitudes towards inclusion within the teaching profession. Thus, all considered, this section can be summarised with four distinct points. First, PE teachers tend not to be disabled people and tend to base their initial vision of PE on their experiences of competitive mainstream sport. Second, PE teachers and ITT providers concede that inclusion of disabled children does not feature heavily in ITT, and this promotes a message of complacency in relation to inclusion. Third, without appropriate training, newly qualified teachers lack the confidence to effectively include disabled children in PE. Fourth, reflecting on points one to three, there is a willingness to better equip prospective PE teachers with the skill set, knowledge, and confidence to effectively include disabled children in PE sessions.

Recommendations from parents and teaching professionals to enhance the inclusion of disabled children in PE

Parents

In this section we emphasise the views of parents rather than disabled children themselves. Whilst this may appear to contradict Oliver's (1992) emancipatory research paradigm, let us briefly explain why we took this decision. It was evident from our interviews with disabled children that their verbal and physical cues to teachers are often ignored or overruled. However, when asked if they had any recommendations as to how schools could change to support them, those participants found it difficult to articulate their answers beyond describing their current

experiences. Parents were more vocal on this issue and were able to provide an overarching perspective. The children either nodded or said 'yes' when their parents made recommendations. Notwithstanding this, the advice offered to schools and teaching professionals was consistent: *listen to us!* Parents of disabled children emphasised their desire for schools to acknowledge that they 'are not experts in my son's disability' and that they 'could learn from him and me' (Stefan's mother). This participant demonstrated frustration with what she perceived to be an autocratic and inflexible school system that did not allow for differentiation in treatment based on their child's desire to participate in PE, and continued: 'school senior managers act like politicians, frightened to admit that they don't know it all and can learn from the very people most affected by their decisions.'

Parents of disabled children perceived their relationship with the schools as "fraught", and "frustrating". In their opinion, 'schools view us and our kids as problems to be solved or voices to be repressed' (Spenser's mother). This is further typified in the following account from Bobbie's mother:

They don't respect the fact that we, as parents know our child best. We know what he can and can't do. It's also frustrating because they don't listen to him and what he feels he is able to do on the day. Frustrating because they want him to sit in a corner and not be a problem.

One participant recounts such experiences as directly responsible for her change of persona when communicating with the school. She states: 'I evolved from a nice timid person, saying "would you mind?" into a beast that demands things' (Paul's mother). This was explained by Jesse's mother as a 'necessary evil, because if you are quiet (as we'd all like to be) your son or

daughter will be side-lined whenever it's difficult for the school to include them'. Inclusion was at the heart of all the views of parents in our sample who were imploring staff to find ways to allow disabled children to shine. Jesse's father summarised:

Tell me if I'm wrong, but inclusive PE is about enabling all students the opportunity to develop. So where our children are expected to adapt in football, perhaps more planning would enable others to adapt to wheelchair basketball. You know, let the other children experience what the game is like and let him shine at something he's good at.

In sum, and in support of the findings of Qi and Ha (2012), who emphasise the need for effective collaboration between the home and school, the consensus amongst parents of disabled children is that they tend not to be consulted on important issues of inclusion. And that by working with, as opposed to imposing decisions on, parents and disabled children, a more effective inclusion strategy would be realised.

Teaching Professionals

When asked how inclusive PE practice could be improved for disabled children in the future, teaching professionals in this sample tended to focus on how ITT could be amended in order to build the skill set of new teachers on this important issue. As stated earlier in this paper, all teaching professionals conceded that currently there is a paucity of attention on disabled students within compulsory ITT courses, and four broad solutions were suggested. One suggestion was to, where possible, include more time for prospective teachers to experience working practices in special schools, that is schools that are exclusively dedicated to the

education of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It was recognised that many ITT work placements do not introduce trainee teachers to disabled children, though it was thought crucial for this to be addressed. Reasons for changing ITT provision in this way included: ‘so that genuine connections are made with SEND kids because at the moment for many PE teachers in training they are theoretical words on a printed page’ (Sandra, PE teacher, Newcastle).

The second solution raised by participants was to consider altering the curriculum for ITT. For example, Alex (PE Teacher, Reading) suggests that there ‘should be a compulsory module on ITT that relates directly to disability sport and a commitment for more practical as well as theoretical assessments in this regard.’ The compulsory element that Alex refers to here is emphasised in response to, as he sees it, ‘the casual nature of disability content that currently exists in ITT, where scholars can pursue disability as a specialism if they wish’, but, as stated by Jimmy (PE Teacher, Leeds), ‘because it’s not recognised as something that is crucial to PE teachers, it has a less important feel to it.’ As Jimmy states, unless the status of PE for disabled children is raised in the curriculum by ITT providers as an important competency that all trainee teachers must achieve, then people will opt out and say ‘I’m not an expert in this field, let’s leave this to someone else.’

Third, participants acknowledged the need for input, in both theoretical and practical terms, from disabled people. When asked if, to the best of their knowledge, any disabled person had enrolled on ITT courses, one provider from the north west of England (Michelle) recalled: ‘Beyond learning difficulties such as dyslexia, I can’t think of any off hand, though we always encourage applications.’ When asked if they have ever worked with, been taught by, or known of a disabled PE teacher, most of the participants replied ‘no’ and added they had never thought of that before. This prompted Jane, a Director of Sport in a special school in Middlesbrough to state: ‘this is part of the problem isn’t it? ITT tends to be taught to new teachers by abled bodied

people, and PE is taught by able bodied people too.’ When asked to expand, she continued ‘we should have much more input from disabled people shouldn’t we? And we should aspire to encourage and incentivise disabled people to want to be PE teachers in the future.’ This finding resonates with the work of Ware et al. (2021) who examined the working lives of disabled teachers across England and concluded that if education is to be truly inclusive, then it is important to actively encourage and support the careers of disabled teachers. They argue that one of the most effective ways to disrupt disabling discourses within the education system is to increase the presence of disabled teachers in schools.

Dramatic aspirational change of this type was acknowledged and encouraged by a proportion of our participants, though the mood was cautious. Rita, currently employed as Director of Sport at a secondary school, captured the essence of this when she suggested ‘it’s what is needed but there’s so many barriers in place at the moment. Until we improve the PE experience for disabled children and make them feel as valued as other students, why would they want to pursue a career in PE?’

Finally, acknowledging that new teachers will be heavily influenced by school cultures over and above lessons learned on ITT courses, it was suggested that ITT providers should use their relationships with schools that do take on ITT in order to promote a consistent philosophy regarding inclusive PE. For instance, David, a specialist inspector for PE in the north east of England, states:

It will be a case of shaping for those schools that do take PGCE or ITT to make sure that they buy into the philosophy, and to do that it's about providing mentors who can support this.

Effective mentorship was mentioned on numerous occasions as a way to continue the learning experience for newly qualified teachers as they enter their new work environment. Moreover, some participants have articulated that mentoring must be extended to teaching assistants and other support staff whose role intersects with disabled children. Thus, it was largely accepted that where training is lacking (for teaching assistants as well as teachers) effective mentorship should be provided, with disabled people at the heart of this process, in addition to learning from experienced teachers of disabled children in special schools.

Discussion

In this paper we have examined the cultural and social issues experienced by disabled children and their families, as well as the professional cultural issues that await teachers in training, and in practice. Our findings have revealed the ways in which peer subordination for disabled children can be emphasised in PE lessons and how this can be accentuated by attitudes and practices of teaching professionals who tend to either expect disabled children to fully participate and adapt to specific sports, or else exclude them from practice altogether. These experiences have led some participants to express a nascent understanding, and in some instances, acceptance, of the attitudes that others have of them because of their impairment. This situation occurs at a crucial life stage, as disabled children begin to search for conceptions of self within school.

Whilst all teachers agreed that important theoretical and practical content is taught at ITT, it was revealed that, unless explicitly requested as a desired specialism, taught content relating to SEND and the inclusion of disabled pupils was limited. All participants agreed that this omission in content has implications for the confidence of newly qualified teachers to offer

truly inclusive PE experiences to disabled pupils. As Christina (PE Teacher, Durham) explained:

Lack of understanding of inclusive PE for disabled pupils inevitably leads to avoiding situations where teachers will be exposed as incompetent. This often results in SEND kids being separated out from the rest of the group to undertake different tasks.

Our findings demonstrate how the personal experiences of disabled children, and those of teaching professionals alike, generate the conditions that enable inequality to persist. According to our participants, teachers tend to have little experience of disability, and are not adequately trained, officially encouraged, or incentivised to increase their knowledge base. Concomitantly, this has consequences for disabled children who tend to experience exclusion from mainstream PE in practice.

Despite reflecting on a historical and enduring obstruction to effective teaching practice, all participants were congruent in their desire for meaningful change. And whilst they were aware that meaningful change often occurs slowly, they were able to offer considered solutions to issues thought to be pertinent. The following reoccurring solutions were presented. First, disabled children and parents simply asked to be listened to as experts in understanding disability in their own right. They argued that they have an important role to play in developing inclusive strategies. Second, teaching professionals argued that ITT for PE should be amended to allow trainee teachers to experience working practices of SEND schools. This, they insisted, should be compulsory, thus raising the visibility and importance of disabled children in this vocation. Third, it was forcefully argued that ITT providers must work closely with schools that take on newly qualified teachers in order to enforce a commitment to effective induction

and long-term mentorship specifically in relation to inclusive PE. Finally, ITT providers and teachers were aware that disabled PE teachers are conspicuous by their absence and argued that input from disabled sports teachers / sportspersons would be a valuable part of ITT. Not one of the teachers interviewed in this sample had been taught by or indeed knew of any disabled PE teachers.

Whilst the experiences of PE for disabled children in this sample might go some way to explaining this scarcity of expertise from disabled people, our participants were reflective enough to understand the importance of this omission. It is only when reflexive change is brought to the practice of new teachers via a long-term commitment by ITT curriculum regulators towards the importance of PE for disabled pupils, that effective inclusivity in PE can be realised. As one participant puts it, ‘the dream would be to stimulate the desire for disabled children to want a career teaching PE’ (Dom, PE Teacher, Bedford). We predict that this ‘dream’ will be realised, just as soon as disabled children receive quality inclusive physical education.

It is clear from these findings that an intervention is needed into compulsory ITT to improve the inclusion of disabled children in PE in English schools. In accordance with Oliver’s emancipatory research paradigm, such an intervention should not be led solely by non-disabled professionals, as is the case with many of the optional non-compulsory continuing professional development courses that exist for teaching PE to disabled children at present. We concur with Vlachou and Papananou (2014) who call for a more inclusive educational agenda that holds the views, concerns, and suggestions of disabled people front and centre. Thus, we argue that the proposed intervention would be most effective only if heavily informed by the real-life experiences of disabled children and their families, disabled athletes and perhaps injured ex-service personnel who have had to adapt to participate in physical activity themselves. Input from experienced teachers of PE in special schools would also be beneficial.

Such an intervention should initially be piloted and critically evaluated before being disseminated more widely. Until such an intervention is implemented, disabled children will continue to be outsiders to the PE curriculum in English schools.

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