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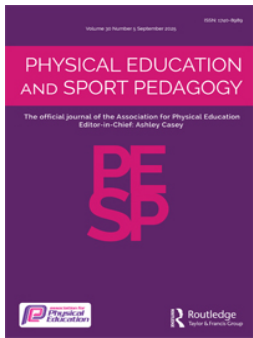Alexandra Consterdine & Imogen Dhanda

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An uphill struggle: an exploration of parents', carers', and support workers' impressions of inclusivity for pupils with learning disabilities in Physical Education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Universal access to inclusive Physical Education (PE) is a fundamental right for all children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). However, children with learning disabilities have much lower participation levels in PE, experience prejudice from peers, and encounter societal pressures that adversely affect their PE experience. Barriers to inclusivity range from teachers' expectations of inclusivity and degree of difficulty to attain, inadequate teacher training and professional development, limited school resources and school support, and prejudiced social attitudes.

Purpose: We explored parents', carers', and support workers' impressions of inclusivity for pupils with learning disabilities in school PE. Our aim was to privilege the voices of this underreported group in an attempt to add to the body of knowledge around both barriers to participation and recommendations for schools.

Method: Eight parents/carers/support workers with links to Mencap, took part in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were automatically transcribed and manually checked for accuracy. We took an interpretivist approach to accommodate inter-subjectivities and multiple social realities in the generation of co-constructed knowledge. The dataset was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA).

Findings: Our analysis resulted in four inter-related themes that demonstrated participants' lack of faith in the PE environment being inclusive for pupils with learning disabilities. Concerns clustered around the type of school and teachers' approach, perceived impressions of teacher and peer attitude towards SEND pupils, the macro-cultural context focused on teacher training and curriculum breadth, and finally, recommendations to school governing bodies and educational professionals about how their concerns could be addressed with realistic suggestions for future consideration. These encompassed developing the quality of professional learning, improving knowledge and empathy towards SEND pupils, and inculcating allyship and making inclusivity more viable.

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Conclusion: This paper prompts reflection of the social complexity and lived perceptions of inclusivity from the perspective of parents/careers and support workers of children with intellectual learning difficulties. Attaining inclusive PE for all pupils requires further insight and new application to reduce the risk of continuing to alienate pupils who exist outside the 'mainstream' further. This has connotations for lifelong physical activity engagement. By addressing concerns of parents/careers/support workers who routinely care for children with learning disabilities, education in general could benefit from their contributions. Schools, teachers and PE professionals need to improve the quality of inclusive PE provision to ensure that they meet the diverse needs of every child. This could be realised with future research being extended to participants from other organisations, including the perspectives of SEND pupils themselves, and differentiating between primary and secondary education.

Introduction

Physical activity (PA) habits developed through childhood exposure to sports appear to be critical for developing long-term PA patterns into adulthood (Zick et al. 2007). In addition to physical benefits, the psycho-social benefits of PA and sport are similar for disabled and non-disabled populations (Goodwin 2016). These effects include reduced clinical depression, enhanced self-esteem, improved family and social interactions, and a sense of community belonging (Goodwin 2016). However, there are significant differences in sport participation levels at school, with only a quarter of pupils with special educational needs and disability (SEND) reporting that they take part in sport and PA all the time, compared to 41% of non-SEND pupils (Activity Alliance 2020). Given the contemporary emphasis on inclusive education in schools, many studies have shown that SEND pupils do not thrive in Physical Education (PE), have much lower participation levels, experience prejudice from peers, as well as encountering wider societal pressures that together adversely affect their PE experience (Freer 2021; Gobbi et al. 2024; Makopoulou et al. 2022).

Specifically, PE provision for SEND pupils has been roundly critiqued as mixed, discordant and sub-optimal (Karamani et al. 2024). Thus, for many SEND pupils, PE is not a welcoming space, characterised both by peer marginalisation, and teaching professionals' (un)conscious exclusionary practices (Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2021). If participation can be seen as a marker of inclusion, and if school-based PE is considered to be the vehicle where young people can gain the benefits of PA, then the question of why pupils with disabilities are excluded from and 'failing' PE needs to be more carefully considered (Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2021).

Inclusion/exclusion and a right to participate in PE

Since the start of the twenty-first Century, there has been a burgeoning interest in the inclusion of SEND pupils in relation to PE (Bertills, Granlund, and Augustine 2019; Fitzgerald 2005; Pocock and Miyahara 2017; Rekaa, Hanisch, and Ytterhus 2018). Far from being a simple term, inclusion is a multifaceted and disputed concept, encompassing

many interpretations (Penney et al. 2018). To conceptualise the complexity of inclusion, Spaaij, Magee, and Jeanes (2014, 12) offer that we need to ask questions such as, 'inclusion into what? On whose terms? In whose interests?'. Karamani et al. (2024, 2) take a philosophical approach suggesting that 'In line with social justice goals, inclusion means that children and young people are treated equitably and with dignity, regardless of their background, identity or circumstances'. Others focus on the practical implications for face-to-face delivery of lessons involving modification and adaptation of equipment, space, and tasks so that all children are able to engage regardless of their ability/disability (Coates 2012). Specifically, we adopt a perspective of inclusive education as a proactive approach that encourages and supports diversity amongst all learners and the eradication of social discrimination based on ability/disability (Penney et al. 2018). We also link this broad definition of inclusive PE and the eradication of discrimination as a universal concern and fundamental human right for SEND students according to the UNESCO guidelines for Quality Physical Education (UNESCO 2015). Nonetheless, Makopoulou et al. (2022, 245) warns that '…whilst inclusion appears to form the ethical substrate of educational rhetoric, there are concerns that lip-service is being paid to the notion at the level of educational policy and practice'. It appears that anxieties over inclusive education 'promising more than it delivers' (Florian 2014, 286) are still relevant, adding to its contested nature.

Despite PE being framed as a powerful means of expediating social integration, it can be deeply problematic in its enactment, resulting in *exclusionary* practices that may serve to deepen inequalities further (Karamani et al. 2024). Indeed, Fitzpatrick offers that PE occupies '…a highly contested and conflicted space' in young people's minds' (2018, 1129).

This may, in part, be attributed to the inflexibility of the PE curriculum, and its operation and assessment is geared towards certain pupils being more likely to encounter more positive PE experiences (Penney et al. 2018). Thus, far from being recognised as quality inclusive PE, researchers have frequently recognised and debated the contradictory effects of professional practices that are exclusionary in nature (Karamani et al. 2024; Rekaa, Hanisch, and Ytterhus 2018). PE is often structured and delivered in ways that (re)create exclusionary discourses that advantage pupils who are white, male, and demonstrate high sporting or technical ability (Penney et al. 2018). For SEND pupils who are more likely to be positioned as outside of the mainstream, PE can be an unwelcoming or even a hostile place, exposing these vulnerable pupils to low expectations, exclusion, or bullying (Haegele et al. 2021). We join others in a call for inclusivity in PE to be an achievable objective for all pupils (Erhorn, Wirszing, and Langer 2023; Gobbi et al. 2024; Hutzler et al. 2019).

Barriers and constraints

Numerous studies have explicated some of the interrelated barriers and constraints affecting participation in PE for pupils with learning disabilities (Allen et al. 2022; Darcy and Dowse 2013), pupils with disability (Pocock and Miyahara 2017), and SEND pupils (Fitzgerald 2005; Morley et al. 2020; Tarantino, Makopoulou, and Neville 2022). These constraints range from the attitudes of others, availability of appropriate activities, lack of facilities and classroom aids, and lack of knowledge surrounding the

different types of learning disabilities (Darcy and Dowse 2013). Karamani et al. (2024) identified three major barriers to inclusion including teacher perceptions that SEND pupils pose greater challenges, inadequate professional training, and systematic barriers and constraints around limited resources and inadequate school support. Similarly, Coates (2012) and Maher et al. (2021) critique initial teacher training, deploring the quality and quantity of provision and arguing that it fails to adequately prepare neophyte teachers to the nuances and practice of inclusive practice in PE. Bertills et al. (2018) further posited that teachers' confidence and demeanour towards disability actively shapes SEND pupils' perceived participation in PE. Thus, participant restriction may be experienced if the activity is not adapted, and the SEND pupil is further excluded (Coates and Vickerman 2010).

To build on some of these concepts, our research aims to explore the perceptions of parents/carers/support workers of children with learning disabilities and their experiences and understanding of school PE and inclusivity. Rather than focusing on teachers or pupils, this provides an alternative perspective, where we build upon Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons (2021) work to privilege these hitherto unheard voices. Exploring multiple subjective experiences and perceptions of inclusivity for SEND pupils, this research has three objectives where we (1) explore the implications of the teacher-pupil relationship as it relates to inclusivity, (2) investigate the barriers and constraints on attaining inclusive PE, and (3) seek insights into how best achieve inclusivity with PE.

Methodology and methods

Philosophical positioning and positionality

In trying to make explicit our understanding of human meaning in (co)constructing our dynamic social world, we selected an interpretivist paradigm in allowing us to shift between multiple social realities and accommodate inter-subjective perspectives (Markula and Silk 2011). We take the relativist ontological position that individuals forge multiple interpretations of reality (Guba and Lincoln 2005) and to give voice to individual parents/carers and support workers of children with SEND and their perceptions of inclusivity in PE (Sparkes and Smith 2014). Furthermore, our research takes a constructivist epistemological stance that knowledge is subjectively created as individuals make sense of their lived experiences and actions through individual lenses, but in concert with others (Bryman 2012). As interpretivist researchers, we co-construct rich abstractions of multiple social realities in collaboration with participants, methods, and our own subjectivities (Bryman 2012). In addition, one of us (Imogen) has links to Mencap and has 'insider' knowledge due to her role as a support worker. This provided an opportunity to recruit and retain participants, potentially inculcating a more trusting relationship (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

Setting, participants and recruitment

The sample consisted of eight participants (five female/three male), of which four (two female/two male) were parents/carers and four (three female/one male) support workers. The participants were aged between 21–56 years old. The parents were based in various locations around the UK. All participants cared for children under the age

of 18 years, who attended either a primary or secondary mainstream school, or special needs school. The support workers were employed by Mencap for a range of 5–16 years, but also had experience of working as teaching assistants in a school setting.

Purposive and opportunity sampling were initially used to recruit participants (Tracy 2024). After approval was given by the area manager Mencap organisation, we contacted parents/carers and support workers within Mencap, providing them with a participant information package, and participants could elect to opt into the study or decline. Further participants were then recommended by the original participants, thereby employing a snowballing sampling technique (Tracy 2024).

Research design and data collection

We chose semi-structured interviews as a way to construct rich and textured representations of reality that go beyond superficial understanding (Smith and Sparkes 2016). We also position the interview as ' … a negotiated practice involving contestation, cooperation, and persuasion as a complex social dance between protagonists' (Consterdine 2024, 7). Specific questions were constructed around three key areas: the relevance of the teacher-pupil relationship as an influence on inclusive PE; the constantly changing barriers to inclusive PE and the effect these have on SEND students; and developing inclusive PE through implementing interventions with concomitant benefits to SEND students.

Eight interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams over four weeks between January and February 2023. In total, 6 hours and 42 minutes of interview data were drawn, with each interview lasting an average of 50 minutes. Each interview was conducted by the same researcher (Imogen) and followed the same structure, with questions remaining consistent throughout the study. Each interview was automatically transcribed through Microsoft Teams. This presented some challenges due to inaccuracies of the transcripts in relation to the verbatim audio and required extended engagement with both the audio and the transcription in order to rectify errors (Patton 2015).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and approved prior to the commencement of this study. This included the creation of a risk assessment, Participation Information Sheet (PIS) and Informed Consent Form (ICF) (Bryman 2012). Participants were made aware of the inclusion/exclusion criteria which indicated that they must be a parent/carer/support worker of a child under 18 years of age in education with learning disabilities.

To maintain the privacy of participants, all participants were assured of the steps that had been taken to strive for anonymity and confidentiality of their data. Thus, participant lists and contact information, signed ICFs, and all forms of interview data were stored using encrypted and/or password protected systems. We carefully chose pseudonyms to match participants' and their children's gender, age, and culture whilst holding similar representativeness of their ethnicity that their actual name holds (Lahman et al. 2015).

Data analysis

Based on our philosophical positioning, we implemented the involvement of a-priori knowledge and used an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) to

analyse the data and draw out specific themes and patterns. We were concerned with how the sociocultural contexts interacted with the personal to produce a variety of meanings and interpretations which led to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2019; 2022) being selected. A key component of RTA is the appreciation and incorporation of the researcher's standpoint as a political element that permeates the research process, influencing how we read *into* the data and draw interpretations (Braun and Clarke 2022). The paired research team consisted of a Mencap support worker with two years' experience of working with young people with learning disabilities and an experienced senior lecturer in sports pedagogy/sociology with a background in PE and sports coaching. Together, we brought sensitive reflexivity to data analysis, acknowledging that our personal experiences, beliefs and values intersect with social positioning and knowledge. For example, both of us remain committed to the notion of social justice and are sensitised to both unequal and egalitarian practices in PE. This critical reflexivity encouraged us to interrogate our sense-making, enriching the research process as we examined how these factors influence insights drawn (Braun and Clarke 2019). This was illustrated in the form of inter-researcher meetings where we discussed ongoing data collection, reflexive fieldnotes and collaborative comments on manuscript drafts explored below.

First, we conducted an immersion into the transcripts and audio data, encouraging a familiarity with the dataset, leading to the identification of stimulating statements. These informed the generation of initial codes as the data was interpreted and allocated categories into meaningful groups (Braun and Clarke 2022). Next, these codes were scrutinised and organised into similar themes, which evolved and contributed to the inductive process, where both descriptive and interpretive aspects were considered (Braun and Clarke 2022). The descriptive aspect related to what the participants said, and the interpretive feature related to researcher subjectivities, thoughts and feelings that documented the first three phases. We were mindful, however, that researcher bias towards certain themes might arise, as our a-priori knowledge, agenda and notions of social justice influenced our analysis (Terry et al. 2017). Subsequently, we embarked on a broad review process, fine-tuning the previous themes identified by eliminating themes with insufficient supporting evidence and combining some themes into one broader overarching theme due to parallels across the two (see Table 1). Of the four themes that developed, we continued to edit, refine and read into the dataset further using a hermeneutical process that provided the meaning behind each subtheme and theme, connecting them, allowing us to tell a story (Terry et al. 2017).

Trustworthiness and quality

In order to strive for quality research, methodological transparency and rigour are vital to the reflexively aware qualitative researcher (Finlay 2006; Smith and Sparkes 2016). Although we have attempted to be egalitarian, difficult ethical decisions about what to leave unsaid does not sit easy with us. These intersecting features have implications for trustworthiness, credibility and honesty, especially during data analysis, sense making, and representation of the text (Finlay 2006). From inception to dissemination, we have engaged in a continuous, iterative, non-linear, collaborative enterprise, and agree

Table 1. Selected parent/carer/support worker quotes, codes, initial themes and final themes.

Parent/carer/support worker quotes	Codes	Initial themes/ subthemes	Final themes/subthemes
'Its (mainstream school) just a really bad environment for my child' (Zander, parent).	Doesn't cater for needs	Types of school • Classroom environment	School set up, organisation and approach • Teaching and learning environment
'There's just so much more support there' (William, parent).	Good relationships	• Teacher support	• Teacher support
The teachers just think the SEND kids are naughty' (Heather, support worker).	Negative notions of SEND pupils	Beliefs and attitudes towards SEND pupils • Teachers	Social attitudes and perceptions towards SEND pupils • Teachers
'Bullying is always going to exist in one form or another' Zander, parent.	Oppression of SEND pupils	• Peers	• Peers
'You'd be surprised at how little training teachers in schools get (on inclusion)' Heather, support worker.	Inadequate training	Barriers and constraints • Teachers' training and knowledge	Macro-cultural context influencing teacher training and curriculum • Teachers' training and knowledge
'The curriculum should definitely be broader' (Jane, support worker).	Limited opportunities in curriculum	• Curriculum depth	• Curriculum scope
'School need more communication with families' (Jane, support worker).	Lack of communication	Recommendations for inclusivity • What can the school governing body do?	Recommendations for inclusivity • School governing body interventions
'Teachers just need to learn how to cater to SEND students' (Alice, support worker)	Developing knowledge	• What can the teachers do?	• Teacher interventions

with Markula and Silk (2011) who view data analysis as an integral imbricated element, and not as an 'add on' process at the end. Rather we have pursued a form of inter-investigator reliability via teams and vis-à-vis meetings, phone calls and writing sessions that keeps data analysis front and centre (Markula and Silk 2011).

Findings

This section evokes the sensibilities, emotions and perspectives of the participants who have acted in concert with us to craft a story that explicates some of the interconnected and multifactorial elements of inclusivity in PE. Our analysis resulted in four themes that contributed to a reading of our broad research aim to investigate perspectives of parents/carers/support workers of children with learning disabilities, perceived barriers to inclusivity and recommendations for improving quality in school PE.

School set up, organisation and approach

The interviewees indicated that the type of school the children they cared for went to was instrumental in influencing the type and quality of PE experienced by the pupils themselves. Some referred to the differences between mainstream schools (MS), where there was a mix of SEND and non-SEND pupils, and special educational schools (SES), which cater for children with learning or physical disabilities. Participants emphasised the importance of the teaching and learning environment being critical in shaping the experiences of these children, and involved the structure, layout and facilities of the institution:

> … since September he has been at a special school and there are a number of fantastic things there. So, they've got a pool, and they've got a climbing wall. They've got a mile long elevated walkway (…) It's just a really good environment for them. (William)

In addition, some parents had direct experience of the differences between the two types of schools, with Phoebe asserting: 'My child that does go to a special educational school has that ideal environment compared to my child that goes to a mainstream school where they are just ignored and put to the side'. Despite the push towards educating SEND in MS and a philosophical move towards inclusivity across all social domains (Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2021), there is a perceived lack of provision of inclusivity for SEND pupils in MS. This lack of confidence amongst the participants is mirrored by the findings of Klavina et al. (2017) who purports the necessary classroom environment to learn and support the needs of SEND students cannot be provided by MS. As a consequence, SEND pupils are often 'othered' leaving them alienated, eroding their self-assurance and self-worth (Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2021).

The learning environment dovetails with teacher support and has significant ramifications to how SEND pupils experience PE (Bertills, Granlund, and Augustine 2017). According to Zander, parents point to a lack of teacher support in MS:

> There are a couple of instances where you know, teachers didn't understand. Teachers didn't get that she has different learning requirements, because physically, she looks like she doesn't, and they just aren't supporting her like they would if she went to a special education school. (Zander)

These perceptions find consensus in other studies where participants have highlighted that teachers are ill-prepared to consider and respond to pupil's invisible learning disabilities (Coates 2012; Hutzler et al. 2019; Karamani et al. 2024). In addition, instead of supporting SEND students, teachers sometimes overlook them in classes or reprimand them if they are not on task. With emotion in her voice, Heather relates some of the poor-quality teaching she has witnessed: '(SEND) children are actually just left to do whatever they want, and sometimes punished for not paying attention and for being different. I think that's really upsetting'. We join Maher et al. (2021) in calling for prospective PE teachers to gain experience teaching PE in a special school as a vehicle to inculcating empathy and practical skills to adapting their practice, expectations and perceptions of SEND pupils.

Without appropriate support being apparent in a SEND students' education, inclusion can only weaken further, negatively impacting the child (Falkmer et al. 2015). The debate about whether SEND pupils should be educated separately from mainstream children is,

however, more complex, with a concerted push towards true educative inclusivity being considered the most appropriate approach from a social justice and egalitarian perspective (Penney et al. 2018; UNESCO 2015).

Social attitudes and perceptions towards SEND pupils

We posit that the quality of the provision is predicated, in part, to underlying social attitudes and perceptions towards SEND pupils themselves, directly influencing their self-perception, confidence and attainment in PE (Bertills, Granlund, and Augustine 2017). Specifically, this theme explores both teachers' and peers' predispositions and prejudices, which have critical effects on SEND pupils (Coates and Vickerman 2010). Heather picks up the thread:

> If you're not good at sports, then you get picked on. Or if you can't run or hold your body in a certain type of way, then you're weak. That's what students are told from a young age, even by teachers.

These sensibilities jar with the lived reality of SEND pupils, as Phoebe relates in her interpretation of teacher attitudes towards her daughter: 'With Amara, she's had difficulties to build relationships with teachers because her teachers just have these beliefs about her before even knowing her. They know she had learning difficulties, and they think she just won't try'. In their work on the politics of disability, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2014) attempt to disrupt notions of intellectual disability by reframing underlying assumptions about labelling and categorisation. It appears that the teachers above reflect the damaging dominant discourse of labelling theory, with associated limitations that permeate their pedagogy.

By way of contrast, some participants display positive perspectives, with William stating: 'My son has had such great help from the teachers, and you can tell they really do care about how he is doing. It's just a shame that not all teachers have the right attitude towards SEND students'. This interview was emotionally charged as William expressed dismay that his passionate commitment towards equality and inclusion was not always consistent in the teachers he encountered. Similarly, Phoebe radiated a positive outlook, praising the teachers of one of her children: 'She has a good relationship with all of the teachers, they make an effort to teach her, and it's nice that they don't just give up because of her learning differences'. This range of perspectives suggests that despite challenges to inclusion, positive, adaptive and supportive attitudes from teachers can have powerful pedagogical effects.

These considerations also intersect with how the participants interpreted the attitudes and perceptions of SEND pupils' peers. Echoes in the transcripts point towards themes of alienation, bullying and harassment that have been identified in previous work (Freer 2021; Haegele et al. 2021). Support worker Joseph outlines his perspective:

> The judgment from all the children makes them feel alone. If a child does have a meltdown, they will feel judged by the other children looking at them because these other kids just have ideas about the SEND kids before even knowing them.

This can have a snowball effect, effectively incapacitating SEND pupils further as they find it difficult to navigate the social maze with confidence: 'SEND kids are more sensitive as well, like in the way that they they're watching out to see who's looking, who's

commenting when one child starts being mean; they all do, and it just means they are never included' (Phoebe). Zander goes on to discuss that his child 'hates going to school' due to bullying and how it is truly 'soul destroying'. This reflects that inclusion within PE could be improved by the management of bullying and introducing the concept of SEND needs to other pupils at earlier stages (Coates and Vickerman 2010). This is corroborated by Freer (2021), who suggests that negative attitudes from peers have an inhibiting effect on SEND pupils, instead arguing that actively improving awareness may lead to improving attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Macro-cultural context influencing teacher training and curriculum

Consideration of society's micro- and meso-level operations also needs to be viewed in relation to broader terms that encapsulate macro-level politics and processes. We position that teacher-class/pupil interactions and school culture is interlinked and dependent upon the wider sociopolitical topography of national teacher training and the National Curriculum which, in turn, is influenced by governmental and educational policy on inclusion. Many scholars have exposed the limitations of policy and provision, where the philosophical underpinnings of inclusivity are often unclear and the frameworks for delivering inclusive PE counterintuitive (Karamani et al. 2024; Makopoulou et al. 2022; Penney et al. 2018). A pertinent refrain that ran through the interviews was that teachers displayed inadequate professional learning, which the participants identified as poor-quality teacher training and professional development. This was characterised by Alice, who laments that: 'there's not enough knowledge' and substantiated by Joseph's remark: 'I feel like mainstream teachers might just need that extra additional training for them to be able to create an inclusive PE session, as they will be taught how to include everyone and make sure that everything is accessible'. Zander echoes the perceived lack of teacher knowledge on quality provision as he posits that 'the restriction on sport is, you know the amount of training the PE teachers have'. Whilst the participants did not demonstrate particular insights into policy or legislation, they repeatedly attributed their child's difficulties to shortcomings in teacher training. Phoebe argues that her child 'always has stresses because of the school and because of them (teachers) not being trained'.

This perceived failure of teacher training to provide inclusive and adaptive pedagogies in the delivery of universal PE is reflected in the literature (Coates 2012; Tarantino, Makopoulou, and Neville 2022). Our findings suggest that teacher's limited knowledge and understanding can be traced to insufficient teacher training where there were calls for more targeted and comprehensive training and development. We argue that this could potentially better equip educators in providing high-quality, differentiated and flexible teaching for inclusive practice (Erhorn, Wirszing, and Langer 2023). In reality, depending upon how inclusivity is framed and delivered, teachers may not alter their practice if they perceive it to be a 'bolt-on', or tick box exercise without pedagogical merit (Hutzler et al. 2019).

A second element to this theme relates to challenges around curriculum depth and breadth. Several interviewees identified these issues, with Jane observing: 'It tends to be limited to football, rugby, netball, rounders. And whether that meets the needs of children with a variety of SEND needs I would be surprised. So (…) yeah, the curriculum

should definitely be broader'. Despite the National Curriculum being set up to allow schools flexibility and choice in what and how they deliver PE (Department for Education 2024), participants did not have confidence in educator's skills in crafting differentiated lessons that motivate, and support SEND pupils. Nonetheless, questions around the accessibility of the activities quoted by could be met by adopting an inclusive pedagogy that is structured around the universal right to access PE (UNESCO 2015) and incorporates a positive approach that promotes and supports diversity amongst all learners (Penney et al. 2018). By varying teaching styles, incorporating flexibility and utilising adapted practices, activities could meet the varied needs of pupils across all levels of dis/ability (Chatoupis 2018).

Recommendations for inclusivity

In the spirit of promoting egalitarian concepts of voice and social justice, this theme provides participant recommendations for inclusivity in school PE. We posit that as people who are carers, parents and support workers of SEND children, they are ideally situated to make informed suggestions that may benefit future practice (Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2021). One such suggestion, which resonated across the cohort, was the importance that the school governing body could place on improving ongoing professional development and training amongst teachers to promote inclusivity:

> So, every school has a set amount of money for sports funding … So, they apply for funding from the government. So, if a school has a lot of SEN children, they can supply that funding to those teachers that need that training to be on those courses and to get that certain equipment in. (Joseph)

By improving access to SEND funding from local authorities, the governing body could make much needed changes to the curriculum, improve specific teaching materials, provide extra teaching assistance and develop SEND locations in schools. Despite this, there seemed to be a pessimism toward the status of school PE being valued enough for SEND monies to be spent (Karamani et al. 2024). With passion, Phoebe exhorts, 'The school boards just don't care enough about inclusion for SEND pupils [in PE] as they are a small percentage of the school'. She further indicates, 'The schools need to introduce more of a plan when it comes to inclusive PE'. Nonetheless Heather is optimistic as to the potential for the PE department to support change, 'There are so many sports and different ways to move your body that can be adjusted. Adjusting the rules to a sport could really help or having inclusive equipment'. This contrasts against the dismay that others felt when their suggestions were ignored. These frustrations also play out in the wider socio-cultural context as Fullan (2015) cautions that it is very difficult to make educational change due to numerous intersecting and overlapping practical, political and philosophical challenges.

Participants also had potent suggestions for teachers themselves to act as positive agents for change, which if adopted, may produce a significant shift in the school ethos and culture educationalists create within their teaching environments:

> I think teachers can really include inclusion in their lessons by getting those SEN children to work with an excelling child of PE … Pairing children up with people they are usually not going to talk to allows for them to make those connections and go out of their comfort zone. (Joseph)

Splitting up predictable cliques and developing sessions involving reciprocal teaching styles or discovery style methods have been promoted as ways to foster inclusivity in PE (Chatoupis 2018). This corresponds to our interpretation of inclusivity that fosters social integration and the transmission of social values like compassion and understanding of difference (Penney et al. 2018). Such recommendations, however, are predicated on the teachers' openness to change and the extent to which they buy into such pedagogical approaches. Participants suggested that these approaches would be more effective if teachers were to broaden their knowledge of SEND children along with providing more information on learning disabilities to their peers: 'The teachers need more awareness and more acceptance of learning disabilities' (Phoebe). Heather echoes this idea: 'Teachers often only really know the surface of learning disabilities, and if they take the time to learn more about them it would definitely help with inclusion'. Support worker Joseph recommends allyship and promoting awareness of different forms of learning difficulties/disabilities via bespoke assemblies on SEND issues. This was enacted by William's son's school in their assembly on World Down's Syndrome Day: 'I think it really helped people understand him better', encouraging empathy. From our perspective, participants were able to draw upon their own lived experiences, opinions, and histories to advocate a variety of pertinent and thoughtful practical ways to promote inclusivity from which schools could learn.

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored perceptions of inclusivity from the perspective of parents/carers and support workers of children with intellectual learning difficulties. We join with UNESCO (2015) in acknowledging that inclusion remains a significant issue in conceptualisation, enactment and practice for the field of physical education and practitioners. We suggest that SEND pupils do not receive parity of education with non-SEND peers as participants reported that PE provision does not accommodate the individuated needs of the pupils (Coates 2012). Although previous research has regarded inclusive PE as being meaningful, with all children having a universal right to quality PE (Bertills, Granlund, and Augustine 2019; Rekaa, Hanisch, and Ytterhus 2018; UNESCO 2015), our findings are in concert with others (Darcy and Dowse 2013) where PE provision often perpetuates ' … a rhetoric of exclusion' (Karamani et al. 2024, 2). This runs counter to ethical notions of fairness, entrenches ideas of 'otherness', and propagates problematic discourses about dis/ability. For us as researchers committed to notions of social justice, this does not sit well and join with others (Makopoulou et al. 2022; Penney et al. 2018) by positing that the PE profession has a significant challenge in tackling exclusion. If we are committed to the ideals of inclusivity, then this needs to be visible in the PE classroom in multiple contexts. This includes modifying the environment and teaching approaches to ensure authentic and valued full participation of all children. Not only does this mean differentiating practices and adapting resources or equipment for SEND pupils, but ensuring that diversity is celebrated to support the learning journey of all pupils. Our findings suggest that schools, PE educators and peers demonstrate a lack of knowledge around inclusivity, with participants demonstrating frustration and anger at the lack of opportunities for engagement of SEND pupils in PE.

Having access to these hitherto silenced groups, this research gives voice to the social interiors and perceptions of people closest to children with learning disabilities, namely their parents, carers and support workers. They have intimate knowledge of their child's lived experience, offering novel insights and personal reflections that may have positive ramifications for both veracity and transferability of the research findings (Sparkes and Smith 2014; Tracy 2024). In terms of social justice this focus and approach privileges these marginalised groups, adding to the work of Allen et al. (2022) and Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons (2021).

Overall, this research reveals that both teachers and schools demonstrate a piecemeal and discordant approach to both general notions of inclusivity and the way in which inclusion is practiced. Although we cannot claim insights into the specific way that inclusion is conceptualised by participants, they had strong impressions of how their child has been failed by PE provision, resulting in prejudice, disengagement and exclusion (Freer 2021; Gobbi et al. 2024). Participants spoke to a range of views on how children with intellectual disability were treated by teachers which was directly related to the various ways that inclusion/exclusion was operationalised. Although variations in pupil-teacher relationships are predicated on a range of socio-cultural, educational, and political factors that intersect with policy, programmes and curricula (Coates 2012), there was a lack of consistency in the way that inclusivity was enacted by educationalists. Furthermore, we found a range of barriers to inclusivity that included negative social attitudes, the school set up, teacher training and development, funding, resources, and the breadth of the curricula and policy. Given these limitations and constraints, we wanted to explore possibilities for developing inclusion in PE from the perspective of parent/carer and support worker recommendations. Specifically, participants made repeated calls for better ongoing professional learning to promote inclusivity as an immediate action. They wanted teachers to improve their knowledge and empathy towards SEND pupils, improving allyship and making inclusivity more viable. Furthermore, they argued that if the needs of SEND pupils were given greater credence in school boards, with more investment into facilities and resources, all pupils could be better supported.

In summary, we add our voices to those who have called for the PE profession to embrace and embody improved inclusivity in PE provision, ethos and practice (Hutzler et al. 2019; Karamani et al. 2024; Penney et al. 2018). Whilst our findings privilege the voices of support workers', carers' and parents' perceptions, we have not sought the views of teachers themselves which could have added to the breadth of the research. Consequently, as our article focuses on participants with links to Mencap, future studies could extend the selection criteria to parents/carers/support workers of SEND pupils within multiple organisations. This may improve the diversity of voices and lead to greater insights. Furthermore, adopting methodologies such as action or emancipatory research, and interviewing SEND pupils themselves could be fruitful in initiating change (Allen et al. 2022). Finally, future research could differentiate between primary and secondary school PE, as there are many differences between the two settings (Tarantino, Makopoulou, and Neville 2022). If we are committed to the ethical ideals of inclusivity but continue to see exclusionary practices within the PE environment, then we will continue to fail SEND pupils.

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