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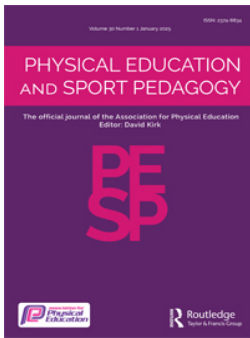
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## **‘There’s nothing wrong with me’: experiencing Physical Education at the intersections of disability, ethnicity and gender**

Ruth Brazier, Hayley Fitzgerald & Annette Stride

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# 'There's nothing wrong with me': experiencing Physical Education at the intersections of disability, ethnicity and gender

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** School populations in England continue to diversify, particularly in relation to ethnicity, language, and Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Yet research demonstrates that Physical Education (PE) often remains structured, organised and delivered in ways that privilege White, male, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled students. Whilst the experiences of those students marginalised within PE have been explored, a single-issue approach dominates. That is, disability, ethnicity or gender have often been researched in isolation. More recently an intersectional lens has been used to consider young people's multiple identities and how these simultaneously influence experiences of PE. However, much of this research has focused on two identities, for example, gender *and* ethnicity, or gender *and* disability.

**Purpose:** This paper offers insights regarding the ways that disability, ethnicity *and* gender intertwine to influence the PE experiences of five girls attending an English secondary school, Hillside High.

**Methods:** Data were generated over two years through focus group interviews and observations of PE lessons. Using a narrative approach to data re-presentation, five stories are presented to reflect the girls' experiences.

**Findings and Conclusion:** Following the narratives, three themes are discussed: the (ir)relevance of PE; the importance of peer relationships; and school-imposed labels. In concluding, we explore how privilege, inequality, and difference operate; the differences between girls who share identity categories; and consider the utility of adopting an intersectional lens.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Intersectionality; difference; PE; student voice; narratives

## Introduction: the heterogeneous gym

Over 30 years ago Hellison and Templin (1991) alerted us to the diversity of students in schools:

Billy wants to be there, Mary doesn't. Suzi is an exceptionally skilled athlete, Joey has difficulty with any activity. Danny is back to school after two suspensions, Karen has a perfect attendance record. Pam is epileptic, Larry is learning disabled, and Dave has a congenital heart defect. Tom constantly complains, and Don brings the teacher an apple every day. Andrew is a 4-foot, 5-inch ninth grader, and Jack is a 6-foot, 5-inch ninth grader. Kay's father is the CEO of one of the country's largest companies, and they live in the suburbs; Sue lives with her divorced mother in the inner city, and they are on welfare. (27)

In painting this picture, Hellison and Templin (1991) emphasised that Physical Education (PE) takes place in a 'heterogeneous gym'. Although much time has passed since this account, there evidently continues to be many different students in English schools. Recent statistics show that the percentage

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of secondary school students from diverse ethnic backgrounds has risen over the last decade – 21.4% in 2010 to 34.5% in 2022 (Department for Education 2022a). Moreover, 12.6% of school age children are identified as having a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND) (Department for Education 2022b). Despite the differences apparent in schools, Quennerstedt (2019, 615) observes that within PE ‘practices privileging norms that prioritise White, male, heterosexual and fit bodies restrict the experiences of many’. Thus, there appears to be a disconnect between the students served well within PE, and the diversity of students attending English schools. Whilst research has considered particular differences, and how these influence experiences within PE, a ‘single-issue’ approach has dominated; that is, one identity category has been focused upon (Penney 2002). Notably, those taking an intersectional approach have begun to explore the multiplicity of identity; however, often just two categories of difference have been considered. There are some exceptions within PE, for example, Hill (2015) considers the importance of age in framing Muslim girls’ experiences, and Azzarito (2020) discusses the influence of ableism, racism, sexism and classism. We build on this developing body of research to explore how disability, ethnicity *and* gender simultaneously intertwine to influence the PE experiences of five girls attending an English secondary school, Hillside High. Like Valentine (2007), we consider individual identity as a ‘situated accomplishment’ and challenge the essentialist notion that identity is fixed throughout life. Throughout this paper, when we refer to specific identity categories it is not our intention to homogenise a diverse group of people. Rather, they are used strategically and with caution (Collins and Bilge 2020). We begin by considering how notions of identity and difference have been understood in PE.

### Conceptualising difference in PE

According to Flintoff, Fitzgerald, and Scraton (2008), research in PE focusing on difference has largely adopted a ‘categorical’ or ‘relational’ approach. Categorical research groups people together based on a common identity category, enabling comparisons to be made between groups. For example, quantitative surveys on PE participation identify the differences between boys and girls, people from different ethnic backgrounds, and children with and without a disability (Youth Sport Trust 2022). This approach reinforces differences between groups of people, whilst implying a homogenous experience within the group (Flintoff and Fitzgerald 2012). In practice, categorical approaches have led to targeted provision towards specific groups with lower participation. For example, the Youth Sport Trust’s ‘Girls Active’ programme focuses on improving girls’ attitudes towards PE (Youth Sport Trust, n.d.). Although well intended, this kind of approach can accentuate these targeted groups as ‘the problem’. Conversely, relational approaches seek to understand why these participation patterns emerge, exploring how hierarchical relations between groups contribute to the creation of difference and inequalities (Flintoff, Fitzgerald, and Scraton 2008). For example, in exploring boys’ and girls’ participation rates in PE, questions are brought to the fore about the socially constructed nature of gender, and how masculinity is more highly valued in PE (McVeigh and Waring 2023).

By adopting a ‘single-issue’ approach, relational research has drawn attention to inequitable practice in PE, and the experiences of particular marginalised groups. For example, Maher (2016) identifies an over-reliance on team games that can alienate some young disabled people. In addition, Maher and Fitzgerald (2020) point to a lack of teacher preparedness when working with young people with SEND. Single-issue research focusing on ethnicity has highlighted how a limited range of traditional, competitive team games can marginalise students from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Barker et al. 2014; Tolgfors 2020). Gender-focused research has offered various explanations for girls’ disengagement from PE including clothing and feminine stereotypes (Metcalf 2018), and teachers’ beliefs and expectations (Stride et al. 2022). Although useful, single-issue research does little to recognise how young people’s multiple identities influence lived experiences of schooling and PE (Collins and Bilge 2020). In response, a growing number of scholars are beginning to grapple with the utility of adopting intersectional thinking.

Intersectionality emphasises that ‘different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands’ (Brah and Phoenix 2004, 76). It recognises the interplay between individual categories of identity on a micro level and social structures at a macro level (Collins and Bilge 2020). Intersectionality acknowledges how identity categories are enmeshed and experienced simultaneously, conflicting at times, and on other occasions complementing each other. Valentine’s (2007) vignettes expertly illustrate intersectionality in action and the ways in which one woman’s different social identities (gender, sexuality, class, motherhood, disability, and the cultural/linguistic identity ‘Deaf’) interplay to become salient at different times and in different spaces.

Intersectionality has been increasingly used as a frame of reference in research within education (Collins and Bilge 2020). For example, Gillborn (2015) explores the ways in which class, gender and disability intersect to disadvantage black students in relation to SEND support in the UK. More recently, Miller (2024) calls for a transformation of the USA educational system in response to the experiences of girls of colour with disabilities. This type of thinking has been useful for interrogating dominant educational structures and identifying the ways these contribute to creating disadvantaged conditions for particular students. Within the context of PE and sport, there is an increasing interest in drawing on intersectional thinking. For example, Van Doodewaard and Knoppers (2018) highlight how PE teachers’ interactions with students are simultaneously influenced by discursive constructions of migration and gender. In exploring the achievement gap in PE, Jansson et al. (2024) note the significant disparity for students positioned at the intersections of gender and migration. It is evident that some identity categories remain largely absent from discussions. Specifically, disability is often overlooked in PE research, within single-issue and intersectional studies; a situation that Watermeyer and Swartz (2023) describe as ‘selective intersectionality’. Some notable exceptions include: Azzarito’s (2020) work highlighting how ableism is not independent of racism, sexism or classism; and Haegele, Yessick, and Zhu (2018) and Haegele and Kirk (2018) who discuss how gendered norms influence visually impaired boys’ and girls’ experiences of PE. This paper joins these studies to extend intersectional understandings by foregrounding the experiences of five girls at the intersections of disability, ethnicity and gender.

## Methodology

The research presented in this paper forms part of a larger two-year study at Hillside High,<sup>1</sup> a secondary school in the north of England with 1800 students. Hillside High has higher numbers of students than the national average from diverse ethnic backgrounds (90% identify as South Asian Muslim, and English is a second language for 74% of students) and those with SEND (15%). Thirteen girls aged 11–12 with SEND, from different ethnic backgrounds (South Asian, White British and White Slovakian) participated in this research. All 13 students took part in mainstream PE lessons that followed a traditional multi-activity model and skills-based approach. PE lessons were gender segregated. Students with and without SEND participated in the same PE lessons. All 13 participants were in the same year group in Hillside High but were spread across 4 different PE classes, of approximately 30 students per class.

Data collection involved two connected strategies. First, each student participated in eight focus groups<sup>2</sup> where they discussed various topics relating to their PE experiences. Guided by student voice principles (Robinson and Taylor 2007), these topics were decided collaboratively. Students were also provided with a personal research book and invited to record their thoughts, opinions and observations in whatever way they chose. This elicited a range of responses including writing stories, drawing pictures, making mind-maps and creating collages. The second data collection strategy involved observations of a years’ worth of PE lessons (over 70 lessons for each student). These two data collection strategies took place simultaneously, each informing the other. For example, a girl sharing in a focus group that she was unable to see or understand the printed learning objectives in PE guided subsequent observations about the teachers’ communication style(s). Similarly, observing disengagement during specific activities led to some discussions in the focus groups about (not) valuing and understanding the games being played.

The research was granted ethical approval from the authors' institution. Before beginning the research, appropriate consent and assent was received from the students, parents/guardians, teachers and the head teacher. More broadly, and given the setting, young people participating, and desire to promote student voice principles we were also cognisant of other ethical considerations. These included recognising and challenging unequal power relations, seeking to support authentic and meaningful participation, and researcher positionality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these issues, but this is something we have discussed elsewhere (Stride, Brazier, and Fitzgerald 2022).

## Analysis procedure

A narrative approach to data re-presentation was utilised to foreground each girl's first-hand account of PE (Smith 2016). As part of the larger research project, we crafted 13 narratives – one to reflect the experiences of each student. However, for the purpose of this paper we have focused on excerpts from five narratives, these reflect each girl's 'situated accomplishments' at the intersections of disability, ethnicity and gender (Valentine 2007). The crafting of the narratives initially involved a process of thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016) of data generated from the focus groups, observations and material featured in the personal research books. Ruth familiarised herself with these data by reading and re-reading the information generated. This was followed by a cyclical process of coding, developing, refining and establishing themes (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016.). Each narrative was then crafted around these themes and the key constituents of a story – characters, context and plot (Smith 2016). The characters were based around the girls, their peers, and teachers. Contexts were informed by the real-life incidents observed or discussed during the focus groups. The narratives were finessed by weaving together direct quotes from the focus group discussions, and information from the personal research books. This added more texture to the plot underpinning the narratives. For example, situating a narrative within a rounders lesson allows the plot to centre upon a student's confusion regarding the rules of the game and this links to the theme concerning 'the (ir)relevance of PE'. The narratives are what Smith, McGannon, and Williams (2015) describe as 'creative non-fiction', in essence, they are grounded within the research findings but use creative practices in their construction.

Like Frank (1995) we use narratives in two distinct but overlapping ways – thinking *with* and *about* stories. By thinking *with* stories, we take a storyteller position (Smith 2016) and offer the narratives with no immediate commentary or analysis, foregrounding the students' voices. Mindful that stories can be read in different ways we also think *about* stories, and take a story analyst position (Smith 2016). Here, we analysed the narratives in combination to identify common themes: the (ir)relevance of PE; the importance of peer relationships; school-imposed labels. In doing so we aim to shed light on patterns of discrimination, marginalisation, privilege and inclusion which are evident across the narratives.

## Data presentation: student narratives

Next, we offer the narratives of five students from Hillside High – Elena, Fatimah, Aaliyah, Habiba and Isobel. All five girls are labelled by the school as having SEND, with different physical, sensory, intellectual, and/or emotional disabilities. Three of the girls are South Asian, one is White British, and one is White Slovakian. We preface each narrative with a short account of key aspects of each girl's identity. This description is based on the student's own words, except for the SEND classification which is the language used by the school.

### Elena

*White Slovakian, moved to the UK at age 4. Speaks Slovakian fluently and good English. She describes herself as 'girly'. Elena has a 'moderate learning difficulty', belonging in need range 2.<sup>3</sup>*

Miss sends us off to, I think she say field. That can't be right. But I go and stand at the back, on the edge of the big field with Jana ... Suddenly, something catches my attention. I look around and see the ball flying through the air towards us. I shield my eyes as it lands on the wet ground. Water and mud splatters. I look at Jana who ignores it, arms wrapped around herself to keep warm. I stroll over to the ball, pick it up and look around. A lot of girls do the same as me and Jana, just sit around or stand chatting. A line of people wait with a bat in their hand, most of them just lean against the fence and talk. Others shout. At me I think. Two girls even wave their arms around. They're the ones standing next to them poles. Someone is running round, hitting each pole with her bat as she passes. Miss shouts something over, but we are too far away to hear. I throw the ball as far as I can, get it away from me. I hate this ball. I hate PE. No idea what rounders is or what the rules are. We don't play it in Slovakia. Eventually Miss blows the whistle. Finally. I can't wait to get back inside and away from the lesson, this field, that ball. But as we walk back the trouble begins. Again. One of those mean girls pushes past me. 'Go back to Slovakia!' I can feel my fists clenching. My teeth are gritted. I stare at her as she walks past. They whisper. Hiss. Like a snake. All the Muslim kids. They hate Slovaks. They think the boys just want to steal the jobs and the women just want to steal their men. As if I would, I don't go for boys. Yeah, I like my hair pretty and my clothes nice, but that doesn't mean I'm some sort of ... whatever. But that's why. They think, because I am a Slovakian woman that all I do is go for boys. All the Muslim kids hate us.

### **Fatimah**

*British Asian and has lived in the UK since she was born. She calls herself a 'girly girl'. Fatimah has a 'moderate learning difficulty' belonging in need range 2.*

I step away from the mirror, finally satisfied with my look. I'm even looking forward to school today. It's not so bad, you know, lots of people complain about school but you just gotta fit in. You'll never have friends if you're one of them tomboys. Some people don't even try, so it's their own fault, you know? Like some don't wear make-up, or try speak English. They just speak their language. That's rude, you know. You live in England now. You're not back in your own country. You're in our school ... When we arrive into the hall the mad rush from the changing room continues. Everyone wants to grab their racket. There's a couple other kids in the way, but I give them a little shove to make sure I get first choice. One of them calls me a jerk, but I just laugh in her face. She's not worth the time, the little swot. The rackets are clanging together, there's people pushing and shoving, some even yelling at each other ... We run down to the far end of the hall. We gotta get the best court, right at the end. Furthest away so Miss can't see us. That's the way to have a great PE lesson. We play badminton, but we play by our rules, give out style points for cool shots, laugh when someone misses. The only time we have a straight face is when Miss comes near our court. When she is watching we play proper, but the rest of the time we play how we want. This is the main reason I don't mind PE. Like, the lesson itself is pretty boring. Why do I need to be able to play badminton properly, or run for ages? Muslim girls ain't gonna be PE teachers, are we? But I love being with my mates and having fun. That's what PE is good for.

### **Aaliyah**

*British Pakistani, having lived in the UK since she was born. She calls herself 'very girly'. Aaliyah has a 'cognition and learning difficulty' and a visual impairment linked to albinism. She is in need range 2.*

In the changing room I let my mind wander. Miss must just forget about me. Forgets my eyesight isn't great when she prints the learning objectives on that little piece of paper, 'cause she doesn't have to worry about it. But it doesn't matter too much when you get outside, you know ... Iman has the ball. She passes, looping high through the air to Faisal who makes a leaping catch. I stand, legs wide, arms up in the air, 'yes, yes I'm open!' And then, it happens so quickly. One bounce. There it is. Before I even saw it, the ball hits the end of my fingers and bounces away. I

look around frantically, struggling to see it. The yellow ball, man, almost invisible in the bright sunshine. I hear the ball before I see it. Bouncing to my right. I dive down, hoping to get it before someone else does. My hands scrape against the floor. I expect someone else to come, but no one does. I stand up straight, tall as a giraffe with the ball high above my head, looking for a pass. No one from the opposite team is even near me so I got loads of time. Everyone's marked real tightly. A blur of bodies in front of me, I'm not sure who is who but I keep looking for a free red bib. Parvan, I think it is her, it sounds like her, is near the net, hands out in front. Eventually I let the ball go, looping, soaring through the air, praying, hoping it goes to her. The blurry ball is in the air only for a second. Parvan moves towards it, blocks the defender out and makes a great catch. I do a little leap in the air. Yes! Before I know it, she turns, straightens up and shoots towards the net. Up, up, up and then down, down, down. I don't need to see the ball go through the net, I know from Parvan's celebration she scored. I rush to join in, a huge smile on my face. This is why I love working together, especially when I get a great team like this. We do really good teamwork, and when we score a goal, I feel on top of the world.

### **Habiba**

*Describes herself as British and Asian, having lived in England all her life. She calls herself 'girly'. Habiba has 'speech language and communication needs', a 'cognition and learning difficulty' and a 'four-year developmental delay'. She is in need range 3.*

I walk slowly, carefully into class. I'm starting all over again. New timetable, new lessons, new teachers. And most importantly, new classmates. Maybe this time it will be different, maybe they won't pick on me. Maybe I can make some friends? I'm just like them. I'm Muslim. I go to mosque, do my hair, my makeup and stuff. There's nothing wrong with me! I try and be nice to people. Sometimes I get mad, but that's their stupid fault for being mean in the first place ... It's bloody freezing out here. I wrap my arms around myself as I shiver, my teeth chattering. We are supposed to be working on passing the football but I hardly ever touch the ball. I shout for it all the time, it's obvious I want it. They're doing this on purpose! I hate this team! Suddenly, Jannat has the ball. She turns my way. Yes! She kicks the ball in my direction and I run to meet it. I'm so excited I completely miss it. As I lift my foot it rolls right underneath. I turn to chase after, a big grin on my face, but Aisha gets there first. She pushes me over, and I land with a thud on the floor. I scrape the palms of my hands on the hard, cold tarmac but I barely even notice. She picks up the ball and boots it away. Now I'm really, really mad. I get up. I yell. I don't even know what. I'm so mad. Aisha responds by giving me another shove, laughing at me and calling me a freak. I keep yelling, I can feel tears welling up in the corner of my eyes ... Miss has pulled me over to one side. 'Habiba, you know you can't react like that. Aisha is on your team, you can't just go yelling at her ...' I'm furious '... you have to calm down. Go and work in another group'.

### **Isobel**

*White British, has lived in England her whole life. She calls herself a 'tomboy'. Isobel has a 'cognition and learning difficulty' and is in need range 2.*

At the lunch table I drop my bag and sit down next to Poppy who is quietly eating her sandwich, hunched over her tray, eyes down. I give her a nudge in the ribs as I tear open my sandwich. 'PE next mate, didn't Miss say we were starting to do fitness?' Poppy nods enthusiastically. 'I proper hope we get to go in the fitness suite. It looks so cool! You ever been on a treadmill before?' I nod furiously, my excitement level rises as I think about the next lesson in the gym with those cool machines! Suddenly, someone knocks into the back of my chair. I bash forward into the table. I turn round. It's not an accident. There's five of them, like usual. The most popular girls. So perfect with their hair and make-up. 'Them girls' always try and make my life miserable. But before anything can start, my saviour comes out of nowhere. Miss H, the PE teacher, is on duty. She walks over to us, a forced



smile on her face. All of us know she has been watching, as she asks: ‘Anything wrong here girls?’. Not wanting to get in trouble, ‘them girls’ turn into angels. They smile sweetly, ‘No Miss we was just chatting’. And they leave. Just like that. Gone. Miss H smiles kindly ‘I’ll see you both next lesson, yeah?’ I nod enthusiastically. My anger has been replaced by excitement again. I turn to Poppy with a grin on my face ‘At least we ain’t still doing netball’. I like netball but it comes with one big disadvantage – I hate having to play with ‘them girls’. At least with fitness we can just work on our own.

### Discussion: the intersections of disability, ethnicity and gender in PE

In taking a story analyst position (Smith 2016), we next offer our interpretation and make more explicit the theoretical discussions emerging from the five narratives. These themes reflect the patterns and commonalities that emerged when analysing the narratives collectively.

#### *The (ir)relevance of PE: ‘why do I need to be able to play badminton properly?’*

PE at Hillside High mirrors traditional practice, employing a multi-activity model centred on skill-based teaching (Kirk 2010). This is experienced differently by each girl. For example, Isobel talks with excitement about her next lesson:

I proper hope we get to go in the fitness suite. It looks so cool! ... my excitement level rises as I think about the next lesson in the gym.

Her self-identification as one of the ‘sporty’ girls is strongly connected to her love of PE. Conversely, other girls were less enthusiastic about PE.

Why do I need to be able to play badminton properly, or run for ages? Muslim girls ain’t gonna be PE teachers, are we?

Other than an opportunity to spend time with friends and have fun, Fatimah’s narrative questions the purpose of PE. In part, her questioning of the subject’s relevancy is attributed to her religion. As she articulates, ‘Muslim girls ain’t gonna be PE teachers’. Whilst girls in other studies have also expressed similar concerns about the relevance of PE (Dowling and Flintoff 2018; Metcalfe 2018), Fatimah explicitly links this to her position at the intersections of gender, ethnicity and religion, as a feminine, South Asian Muslim girl. Her account reflects a disassociation from PE and she is unable, or unwilling, to embrace the kind of ‘sporty girl’ identity embodied by Isobel. In considering Isobel and Fatimah’s experiences, it appears that Isobel’s more positive feelings about PE are influenced by her identity categories (White, sporty, with no physical disability) which align with a White Eurocentric curriculum and practices that value sporty, non-disabled bodies (Flintoff and Dowling 2019; Maher 2016).

Whiteness has been identified as a key category of privilege in Western PE (Barker 2017), and it could be assumed that all White students will share similar kinds of experiences to those described by Isobel. However, the White girls in this research did not present similar kinds of experiences. Despite her White identity, Elena describes a very different kind of PE experience to that of Isobel. Here, a lack of familiarity with certain games is one factor that contributes to her dislike of PE.

I hate PE. No idea what rounders is or what the rules are. We don’t play it in Slovakia

Elena’s positioning at the intersections of Whiteness, her Slovakian identity, and migration background means she is not well versed in the traditional English games dominating PE at Hillside High (Flintoff and Dowling 2019). Critically, by moving beyond single-issue accounts and adopting an intersectional lens, this research brings to the fore different experiences of Whiteness. In this case, Whiteness and a non-British identity, coupled with migration, that intersects with the White, Eurocentric infrastructure of PE in the school influences some of the cultural challenges Elena is presented with. Lleixà and Nieva (2020) note that a contemporary concern in education

relates to the inclusion of students with different cultural backgrounds. These students have often been blamed for their lack of assimilation (Barker et al. 2014; Tolgfors 2020). Whilst this charge has been posited by teachers and policy makers (Barker et al. 2014), this research points to the ways fellow students contribute to the blaming and ‘othering’ of their peers. This outlook is reflected within Fatimah’s narrative:

Some people don’t even try [to fit in], so it’s their own fault, you know? ... You live in England now. You’re not back in your own country. You’re in our school.

More broadly peer networks were a key mechanism for positioning girls as different and this is discussed next.

### ***The importance of peer relationships: ‘you’ll never have friends if you’re one of them tomboys’***

Given the traditional structure of PE in Hillside High, in which competitive team games dominate (Kirk 2010), peer relationships are central. Thus, peer relationships and experiences of PE are very much interrelated. A feminine appearance is recognised as a key constituent needed for popularity amongst peers (Metcalfe 2018). Fatimah’s concerns to go to school with the right ‘look’ are premised on an appreciation that this will influence her acceptance to be a member of the popular group:

I step away from the mirror, finally satisfied with my look. I’m even looking forward to school today ... You’ll never have friends if you’re one of them tomboys.

Fatimah is cognisant that to be a tomboy does not hold value with the popular girls, which has repercussions on the lived experiences of school. In contrast, Isobel describes herself as a tomboy, and recognises this does not align to the notions of femininity espoused by the popular girls. Indeed, she is acutely aware of the consequences this has for her at Hillside High, an experience marked by taunting from her peers within PE and school more broadly.

There’s five of them, like usual. The most popular girls. So perfect with their hair and make-up. ‘Them girls’ always try and make my life miserable.

Whilst feminine and tomboy representations of self were valued in different ways this did not mean that femininity automatically secured credibility within peer groups in PE. Indeed, it is evident from the narratives that the material experiences of the girls exhibiting a feminine appearance were not the same. Like the vignettes offered by Valentine (2007), the girls’ different identity categories at Hillside High interplay to influence peer relations, networks and the girls’ status. For instance, the combination of her South Asian identity, and embodiment of femininity (Schippers 2007), alongside strong friendships, ensures that Fatimah occupies a privileged position which transfers into PE. For example, this enables her to assert a physical presence to select her preferred equipment – ‘[There’s] other kids in the way, but I give them a little shove to make sure I get first choice’. Such privilege also means she is not unduly concerned by the reactions of her peers – ‘One of them calls me a jerk, but I just laugh in her face’. There is much confidence in this interaction and this final verbal attack further reinforces Fatimah’s status.

Conversely, whilst Elena likes her ‘hair pretty’ and her ‘clothes nice’, like Fatimah, these expressions of femininity do not afford her status with other girls.

... all the Muslim kids. They hate Slovaks ... They think, because I am a Slovakian woman that all I do is go for boys.

In the predominantly South Asian space of Hillside High, Elena becomes marked as different because of her positioning at the intersections of femininity, and her White and Slovakian identities. Elena also highlights the influence of religion in her positioning. She is aware this leads to her becoming labelled as promiscuous, a position that is reinforced by stereotypes circulating

more broadly within the community about White Slovakian women. Having to participate in team games during PE, and interact with students that she would not usually choose to be with, provided further incidences where she was physically and verbally singled out as different by her peers.

One of those mean girls pushes past me. 'Go back to Slovakia!'

On the issue of team games, engaging in these activities seemed to bring a particular set of challenges and opportunities for the girls. For, Isobel this was challenging because she is forced to work closely with girls who do not react positively to her 'sporty girl' identity. Interestingly, while Fatimah is not generally positive about PE, team games are valued for providing opportunities to participate with friends. The findings of this research reveal contrasting experiences of PE and highlight how peers are a key conduit for mobilising popularity. Such status is simultaneously contingent upon the complex interplay of identity categories, and the practices of the school and PE. This is further explored next by considering Aaliyah and Habiba's stories, whose SEND identity is particularly pertinent in shaping their material realities of PE.

### *School-imposed labels: 'there's nothing wrong with me!'*

SEND is a label used within education to acknowledge that some students have additional needs. Whilst having the label of SEND can ensure appropriate support is put in place for a student, McMahon et al. (2020) also found that this can lead to negative repercussions. The five girls featured in this paper have all been labelled by Hillside High as experiencing SEND. Despite this shared label their PE experiences were not the same. Interestingly, Fatimah, Elena and Isobel do not acknowledge an identity associated with SEND, nor suggest this influences their experiences of PE. In part, this lack of recognition could be attributed to the nature of SEND each girl experiences. Fatimah, Elena and Isobel are categorised as experiencing 'moderate' learning difficulties. This kind of additional learning need may be less evident in PE where the physical body, and its movement, are given prominence and held in high regard (Maher 2016). In contrast, Habiba's less favourable experience of PE are rooted in her struggle with emotional control. Her narrative reflects frustrations and negative altercations with her peers:

Aisha responds by giving me another shove, laughing at me and calling me a freak. I keep yelling, I can feel tears welling up in the corner of my eyes.

This encounter does not go unnoticed by the PE teacher who swiftly reprimands Habiba for her reaction:

Habiba, you know you can't react like that. Aisha is on your team, you can't just go yelling at her ... you have to calm down. Go and work in another group.

Habiba's SEND relating to communication and cognition seem to become salient when PE activities are orientated towards team games and a competitive ethos within the lesson (Maher 2016). Yet, it is interesting to note Habiba's pointed comment that 'There's nothing wrong with me!', which could be read as a defence mechanism to distance herself from the negativity associated with the SEND label. It is also evident that Habiba does share some identity categories with other girls who are popular, and therefore sees herself as 'just like them'. For example, Fatimah and Habiba are South Asian, embody a feminine appearance, and both are labelled as experiencing SEND. An intersectional analysis helps to understand why they have different experiences in PE. That is, the particular nature of Habiba's disability means her feminine appearance becomes less valued. Her struggles to control her emotions and susceptibility to become angry are at odds with traditional notions of femininity, where women are expected to be quiet, passive and submissive (Schippers 2007). Unlike Fatimah, Habiba's attempts to embody femininity through her appearance does not hold sufficient credence to establish meaningful peer relationships with the popular girls and this negatively impacts her experiences of PE.

Aaliyah similarly finds PE challenging because of her SEND, although for different reasons to Habiba. We note Aaliyah's SEND encompasses a cognition and learning difficulty, and a visual impairment, and this combination of additional needs impacts on her PE experiences in different ways than the other girls. For instance, the fast-moving ball, its colour, and the weather affect her ability to participate.

the ball hits the end of my fingers and bounces in another direction. I look around frantically, struggling to see it. The yellow ball, man, almost invisible in the bright sunshine.

Aaliyah also notes that her teacher displays written learning objectives that are too small for her to read, making her feel like the teacher simply 'forgets' about her. This resonates with Fitzgerald's (2018) observation that PE teachers preserve a normative and ableist version of PE. Interestingly, some of Aaliyah's classmates act in more inclusive ways, for example, by giving her extra space whilst everyone else gets tightly marked. As a result of her peers' adaptations, Aaliyah experiences some of the key constituents of inclusive PE – success, belonging and enjoyment (Maher et al. 2023).

This is why I love working together, especially when I get a great team like this. We do really good teamwork, and when we score a goal, I feel on top of the world.

Differently to Habiba, Aaliyah's SEND does not conflict with traditional notions of femininity, and her 'very girly' feminine appearance contributes to the kinds of positive peer relationships displayed in PE.

It is clear from the narratives of the girls that SEND cannot be read in homogenous ways, nor be an indicator of similar PE experiences. Whilst we concur with others in acknowledging that PE can disadvantage students with SEND (Maher 2016; Maher and Fitzgerald 2020), it is evident that this occurs in different ways for these students. Through the simultaneous entwinement of SEND with other identity categories, and the backdrop of a traditional kind of PE practice (Kirk 2010), some aspects of identity become more or less salient, and this creates moments of inclusion and exclusion in PE for the girls.

## Concluding remarks

At the beginning of this paper, we note that PE takes place in a 'heterogeneous gym' (Hellison and Templin 1991). We have explored what this heterogeneity looks like for five girls attending Hillside High. By using an intersectional approach, we consider how disability, ethnicity and gender simultaneously intertwine to influence PE experiences. Three key themes were discussed relating to: the (ir)relevance of PE; the importance of peer relationships; and school-imposed SEND labels. We acknowledge these points of discussion have been well rehearsed in research adopting a single-issue focus. However, by using an intersectional lens and offering narratives from Elena, Fatimah, Aaliyah, Habiba and Isobel the uniqueness and fluidity of the girls' PE experiences come to the fore. Collectively much can be learnt from these girls, each experience moments of privilege, inclusion, marginalisation and exclusion, albeit in different ways.

These kinds of experiences are cultivated through multiple and intertwined structures within PE and schools. For a few of the girls, the content and delivery of PE was problematic and led to them questioning its purpose. It is also evident that being 'sporty' or 'loving PE' could offer some status and privilege. Yet this was not guaranteed, as peer relationships within PE add a further layer of consideration to the girls' experiences. Our analysis also highlights multiple differences amongst the girls, because of their differential positionings at the intersections of disability, ethnicity and gender. Indeed, the girls' narratives challenge essentialist notions of identity that homogenise people based on a shared characteristic (Collins and Bilge 2020; Valentine 2007). For example, although the five girls were labelled as having SEND, there were differences between the girls and the extent to which SEND was relevant to their experiences of PE. Moreover, while hegemonic

femininity is associated with popularity (Schippers 2007), by understanding this at the intersections of ethnicity and disability it becomes evident that for some girls' feminine appearance can be judged in negative, rather than positive terms. Importantly, these intersections and their influences on peer relationships, need to be understood within the context of Hillside High. Here, most of the student population are South Asian and negative stereotypes about White Slovakian women circulate within the school. In our view, it is critical that these kinds of school and context-specific insights are recognised and understood when difference is explored in PE.

Like others, we recognise that adopting an intersectional approach is not straightforward and less has been said within PE about how this understanding can inform teaching and learning (Flintoff, Fitzgerald, and Scraton 2008). We believe the starting point needs to be articulating the essence of intersectionality in a way that practitioners can readily digest. The intersectional message we want to convey is that young people's uniqueness and individuality stems from the interplay of their multiple identities. The significance of these identities changes as they navigate through life, including school PE. An intersectional lens brings to the fore how multiple identities interweave at different times and in different spaces to create moments of privilege and disadvantage. In seeking to promote this intersectional message we are cognisant that many teachers find it challenging to recognise the identities and embodied experiences of their students in this way (Kirk 2020). Practically, we believe a number of well-established approaches like practitioner reflection and student voice work offer much potential in helping to recognise intersectionality within PE. For example, engaging in self-reflection teachers can begin to acknowledge their own identities and related privilege and disadvantage. As Thorjussen and Wilhelmsen (2024) note teacher education has a key role to play in facilitating this kind of dialogue. Here the possibilities then open up for practitioners to explore how their biases, attitudes and beliefs influence opinions and actions in PE. And how their identities and privilege directly or indirectly (dis)advantages others. By adopting a reflexive approach centred around practitioner intersectionality, teachers will be better positioned to begin to understand and respond to the complexities of their students' lives. Relatedly, we advocate for PE teachers to engage in student voice activities to better understand students' situated accomplishments and how these contribute to their intersectional lives within and beyond PE. We recognise it may be challenging for teachers to reorientate to a position which values and is more attentive to students' individualities. However, without this kind of engagement the traditional nature of PE and dominant pedagogical approaches are likely to continue to prevail. Of course, practitioners also need to find ways of working collectively in order that student dialogue can inform the development of inclusive and welcoming PE environments.

In essence, by adopting an intersectional approach (Collins and Bilge 2020) we can establish a more intimate and nuanced understanding of students' experiences of PE. This offers a situatedness that evokes an appreciation of the complexity of students' identities and, simultaneously, how these become enmeshed, shaped and constituted by the structures and practices of PE. By tuning into this ebb and flow of young people's PE realities we will be better equipped to begin to understand how we can enable different students to thrive in a heterogeneous gym.

## Notes

1. The names of the school, and all individuals involved in the research have been changed to protect anonymity.
2. The focus groups took place in curriculum time, and were organised based on the girls' timetable.
3. Students with SEND are grouped according to the perceived severity of their needs, with 1 being the least severe and 3 deemed to be the most severe. Additional support varies depending on this classification.

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