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The power of belonging: reframing notions of inclusion in sport

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ABSTRACT

Working within the Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society (CSJ) at Leeds Beckett University, UK, has provided opportunities for the authorship team to work with sports organisations on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion. What has become increasingly apparent is the need to conceive inclusion in ways that move beyond issues of access and participation, a policy or targeted programme. What emerges across our research projects is the significance of belonging to inclusion. Within this paper we offer insights into the embodiment of belonging through four processes – *feeling seen, heard, valued* and *known* which form our 'Anchors of Belonging' framework. We bring each anchor to life using examples from the CSJ's research portfolio. We pose several reflective questions organisations might use as a guide to leverage the anchors and adopt a more proactive *person-centred* approach to create an inclusive environment for their workforce.

Wallflower by Lang Leav (2013)

Shrinking in a corner,

pressed into the wall;

do they know I'm present,

am I here at all?

Is there a written rule book,

that tells you how to be -

all the right things to talk about -

that everyone has but me?

Slowly I am withering -

a flower deprived of sun;

longing to belong to -

somewhere or someone.

Introduction

This paper offers our collective reflections on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion, reflections that have encouraged us to conceive inclusion differently. Our thinking has led to the development of a conceptual framework centring on belonging. Within this paper we introduce the 'Anchors of Belonging' framework, explaining each anchor and bringing this to life using examples from various research projects we have been involved in. In essence, this paper serves as a starting point for others to come together and to meaningfully think through notions of inclusion and belonging within sport. But, before we focus on the 'Anchors of Belonging' framework and its development, it is worth acknowledging the journey that preceded it, and why we felt that conceiving inclusion differently was needed.

As an authorship team, many of us have experienced some form of discrimination, bullying, and/or violence linked to our identities. For each of us, these experiences have fuelled our interests in, and passion for, issues of equity, diversity and inclusion. Working for Leeds Beckett University in the UK, we are fortunate to be members of the Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society (CSJ), and this enables us to grapple with issues of equity, diversity and inclusion in our everyday thinking and practice, within work and our broader lives, as individuals and as a collective, through our teaching and our research. Established in 2020, the CSJ is grounded in the belief that sport is a powerful tool for social change. It can be a potential source of growth, development and fulfilment for participants, whether through playing sport at grassroots or elite level, officiating, spectating, in leadership roles, or acting in a volunteering and/or governance capacity. Sport can also be a space to challenge some common societal misconceptions, assumptions and stereotypes, as well as a site to raise awareness of broader social concerns.

Of course, the CSJ exists because such opportunities sport can afford are yet to be fully realised for all. Indeed, we recognise that sport is not the level playing field it is often espoused to be and that there are a number of social injustices embedded within the infrastructure of sport which compromise the welfare of those who (would like to) participate. The reality for many people wanting to engage in sport is that access to opportunities is not equal, equitable conditions do not exist for all, and human rights are too often violated, as these headlines attest.

Equity in Cricket report: Discrimination 'widespread' in English and Welsh cricket (BBC Sport, Stephan Shemilt, 27th June 2023)

17 former gymnasts take legal action against British Gymnastics over 'physical and psychological abuse' (Sky News, Martha Kelner, 26th February 2021)

Groped, marginalised, abused: The realities of being a woman in football – and what must change (The Telegraph, Tom Garry, 21st September 2023)

The CSJ's raison d'être has evolved because these kinds of social injustices exist in sport. More specifically, within the CSJ we take the approach that: sport should be socially just for all; everyone's perspectives in sport should be considered, and their contribution and identity valued; and systems and structures should be transformed to make sport fairer for everybody. In working together to achieve this vision, we undertake theoretically underpinned research with organisations by applying a critical lens to existing practices, identifying evidence-informed opportunities for change. What has become increasingly apparent through our involvement in equity, diversity and inclusion work with various organisations

is that we need to conceive inclusion differently. Inclusion needs to move beyond a compliance exercise (commonly referred to as 'box-ticking'), a one-off initiative, and/or a written statement in a policy document. We need to consider inclusion more holistically and intersectionally, moving away from siloed thinking that separates people into 'groups' based on common identity markers (e.g. women, disabled, ethnic minority) and attempts to address in/exclusion in disconnected ways. We acknowledge that labelling individuals into groups can operate as a source of identification and a mobilising mechanism to leverage support against forms of discrimination. Yet, it can also act as a tool to exclude, ignore differences within groups, and contribute to pernicious and negative stereotypes. We argue that inclusion needs to be an ongoing, mainstream concern, one that is considered in our everyday practices, interactions, behaviours, outlooks, thinking, and relationships with others. When this occurs, we begin to change the culture of an organisation; one where people feel secure and valued, where discriminations can be reported safely and get acted upon, and where people feel like they belong.

When we were recently approached by The English Football Association to contribute to its first open research conference, as a research team we saw this as an ideal opportunity to begin to shift the conversation and think through notions of inclusion in a way that more readily resonates with a wider audience. The focus of the conference was on improving diversity across football coach education and was hosted on International Women's Day 2024. As a Centre speaking at the event, our remit for the conference was 'How do we create a more inclusive culture across coach education ensuring people from historically under represented groups feel it is an environment they belong in?'. In preparing this presentation we reflected on the breadth of work that colleagues from the CSJ have engaged in over recent years, particularly around football, but also other sporting spaces, and its applicability to inclusion and coach education. This exercise strengthened our beliefs about inclusion – that it cannot be conceived of simply in terms of access and participation, measured through the quantifiable existence and integration of an individual in an organisation (Haegele and Maher 2023). Rather, inclusion should be conceived of as a subjective experience (Renwick et al. 2019). In other words, how spaces and people are experienced, the meanings attached to them, the thoughts and feelings they generate, their significance, and the (dis)satisfactions that emerge. Helpfully here, Haegele and Maher (2023) argue that feelings of belonging, acceptance and value are central to successful inclusion.

These kinds of understandings resonate with work by colleagues in the CSJ. Indeed, what emerges consistently across our research is the significance of belonging. Some common patterns emerge across our various research projects that contribute to understanding the ways in which people gain a sense of being part of something, or conversely feel excluded from, or marginalised within, a community. It was these kinds of understandings that informed our presentation at The F.A.'s research conference and led us to the development of a conceptual framework centring on belonging, and the focus of this paper. We begin this paper by exploring notions of belonging, particularly in relation to sport, culminating in an understanding of what belonging means to the CSJ. Then, we introduce the CSJ's 'Anchors of Belonging' framework, explaining each anchor and bringing this to life using examples from the CSJ's research portfolio. In so doing, we offer insights into what it means for those working in an organisation to experience, or not, a sense of belonging. To that end, we pose a series of reflective questions organisations might use as a guide to leverage the anchors in addressing issues of inclusion and to create a stronger sense of

belonging amongst their workforce. In essence, this paper serves as a starting point for others to come together and to meaningfully think through notions of inclusion and belonging within sport.

Belonging and sport: an overview

Belonging is a topic that has not only generated interest across multiple disciplines, leading to a diversity of perspectives and understandings, but one that appears to be gathering interest (Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013; Zhao et al. 2021). For example, within the UK, belonging is increasingly becoming a key focus in sports policy, training, job roles and strategies including the Youth Sport Trust's 'Inspiring Changemakers, Building Belonging 2022–2035' strategy (Youth Sport Trust 2022); England Netball's (2021) 'Diversity and Belonging' plan; and Women in Sport's (2023) work with young girls. To find a definition upon which all agree would be an impossible task, suffice to say that 'a fractured and inconsistent perspective on belonging' is in evidence (Allen et al. 2021, 95). One aspect upon which many agree is that belonging contributes to several positive life outcomes – enhanced social relationships, academic achievement, an emotional outlet, and identity constitution (Allen et al., 2018; Agnew and Drummond 2011; Renwick et al. 2019; Spaaij et al. 2023). Relatedly, a lack of belonging is linked to increased risks of mental and physical health problems, anti-social behaviour, social isolation, and reduced life expectancy (Allen et al. 2018; Moxey, Brown, and Parry 2022; Spaaij et al. 2023). Belonging has also been identified as a worthwhile focus for organisations as it is linked to positively influencing employee engagement, retention, job satisfaction, loyalty, productivity, wellbeing and reduced staff turnover (The Achievers Workforce Institute (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021; Coqual 2020).

In developing our framework, we wanted to capture an understanding of belonging that would appeal to organisations and their varying circumstances and needs, and act as a practical tool to enable change. As such, the open account from Aggerholm and Breivik (2021, 1146) offered a useful starting point because of its applicability across different contexts. In their research exploring the values that govern sport participation, they describe belonging as 'a particular way of being related to one's situation'. In other words, how people are connected to a place and/or people (Zhao et al. 2021), or as Lang Leav highlights in her poem at the beginning of this paper, 'somewhere or someone'. Here place can include, but is not limited to, physical surroundings, a house, city, school, work environment, an institution, online/virtual spaces, nature, and a nation. The people aspect considers the quality of one's relationships with others including, family, friends, work colleagues, sports and leisure groups, online communities, and cultural, political and religious societies, amongst others (Aggerholm and Breivik 2021; Allen et al. 2021; Harris and Dacin 2019; Renwick et al. 2019; Spaaij et al. 2023).

It is through the dynamic interactions that an individual has with these situations, and the interplay of social values, personalities, beliefs, norms, language, culture, traditions, identities, expectations, and obligations that a sense of relatedness and feelings about belonging emerge (Aggerholm and Breivik 2021; Allen et al. 2021; Haegele and Maher 2023; Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013). These ongoing interactions with a diversity of people across different spaces ensures that feelings of belonging and relatedness are complex, multi-

layered, relational, dynamic, situational, temporal, and subjective (Aggerholm and Breivik 2021; Allen et al. 2021; Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013; Renwick et al. 2019). For example, whilst an individual can experience a sense of belonging in one meeting with a particular group, this can quickly dissipate when they later join another meeting with different colleagues where they feel less valued and/or connected. As such, Antonsich (2010) notes that belonging should be conceptualised as a process of becoming rather than a finalised state of being.

Set against this backdrop, within the CSJ we believe that belonging involves ensuring that everyone's identity and experiences are valued, respected, accepted, and included. For us, creating a sense of belonging involves colleagues feeling comfortable, connected, safe, cared for and supported, enabling them to bring their authentic self to the workplace (Aggerholm and Breivik 2021; Allen et al. 2021; Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013; Renwick et al. 2019). Belonging moves beyond a written contract, subscribed role, and tacit agreement that binds members of a workforce together. It is an accumulation of how one's day-to-day experiences of a place and/or people, make an individual *feel*, mediated through a combination of mental, linguistic, and sensory processes (Haegele and Maher 2023). It is the ways in which belonging is both considered, embodied and established through these cognitive, linguistic and sensory processes that inform our 'Anchors of Belonging' framework, and which are elaborated upon and justified in the following section.

Why the need for the 'anchors of belonging' framework?

We see these cognitive, linguistic and sensory processes both as a critical starting point in engendering a sense of belonging, and a point of departure from other approaches. Others have focused on different contextual and/or personal conditions or prerequisites needed to belong. For example, Allen et al. (2021) offer an integrative framework with four components for understanding belonging: perception of connection to a group or place; motivation to build relationships; opportunities for interaction; and having the skills to connect. Renwick et al. (2019) similarly present a theoretical framework to explain young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and belonging to a community through four elements: engaging in social relationships; interacting with similar people; negotiating meaningful roles; and navigating norms and expectations. And Slaten et al. (2023) adapt Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological framework to explore the multiplicity of influences at different levels on athletic belonging. For example: personal characteristics and motivation at the individual level; team norms and shared goals at the meso level; and athletic culture and national policy at the macro level. Moreover, many initiatives or approaches aimed at addressing issues of in/exclusion and belonging do so through a 'group approach' (e.g. the 'athletes' in Slaten et al.s' (2023) study and the 'young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities' discussed by Renwick et al. (2019)). This paper, and the 'Anchors of Belonging' framework, focuses on how organisations can take a more involved and proactive approach that is *person-centred*. In so doing it considers the daily interactions, and opportunities to build meaningful relationships, between individuals and how these actions and relationships make people feel.

Indeed, our research demonstrates feelings as significant in the process of belonging. Individuals gain a sense of who they are, and relatedly, whether or not they belong, through their evaluations and feelings about a situation. The presence of others, and their efforts

and actions, are central to how these situations are read, understood and evaluated, and the sense of belonging that unfolds (Antonsich 2010; Harris and Dacin 2019; Moxey, Brown, and Parry 2022; Renwick et al. 2019). What emerges from across our various research projects is the ways in which belonging is embodied through four processes. We propound that understanding these can enable organisations to better influence the interactions and relationships between individuals and their subsequent evaluations of whether they belong. Moreover, in focusing on the lived experiences of belonging, and the efforts and actions of others, we contend, offers opportunities to make small but significant changes that move beyond a well-intentioned policy alteration or reactive adaptation to a programme. We have termed these four processes of belonging 'anchors' to reflect the different ways people gain a sense of connection, security, protection, support and refuge through a place and/or people. The four anchors – *feeling seen, feeling heard, feeling valued and feeling known* are presented in Figure 1 and elaborated upon next, in relation to how each can contribute to building a culture of belonging.
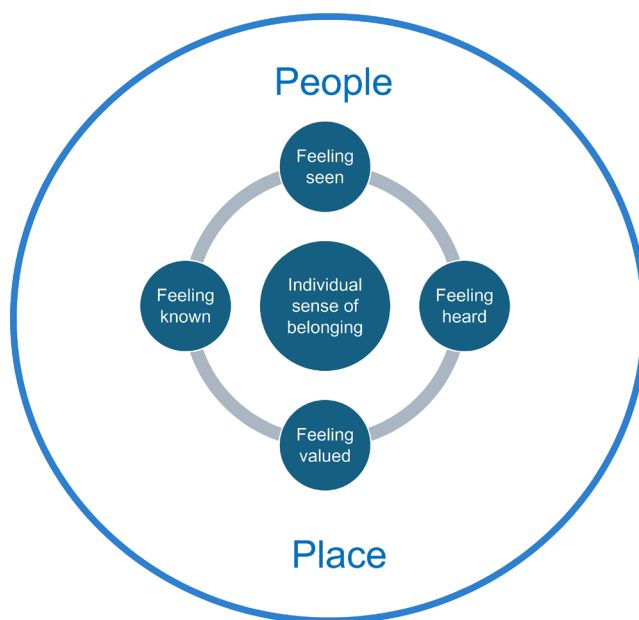
Figure 1. Anchors of belonging framework (Stride et al. 2024)

Building a culture of belonging

Whilst we elaborate upon the four anchors of the framework separately, clarifying the distinct features of each, it is important to note that these are interconnected and can be experienced simultaneously. Each of the four can positively (and negatively) influence and inform the others. For example, not being heard can lead to feelings of not being valued. The discussion of the four anchors is illuminated throughout using practical examples from our various research projects undertaken within the CSJ that enable these anchors to be brought to life. This is followed by a series of questions for organisations to reflect upon when considering how to make their workplace a more inclusive experience.

Feeling seen

This anchor considers the ways in which individuals are recognised within an organisation. This can of course start at the beginning of an individual's journey, in the ways they are introduced to colleagues, and acknowledged early on for the contributions they are bringing to the organisation. The Achievers Workforce Institute's (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021) report noted that when introductions are intentional, inviting and welcoming, people are twice as likely to feel a sense of belonging. The importance of early recognition is exemplified in our first case study from the CSJ.

CSJ case study 1

In Nicola Clarke and colleagues' (2024) evaluation of a positive action initiative for football coaches from historically marginalised groups, the importance of intentional approaches to welcome people are highlighted. For example, coaches with aspirations to move into professional roles were invited to observe training in professional clubs and were introduced to influential coaches in recruitment, contributing to their sense of feeling seen: 'Like I feel as if I'm now visible … like they can put a face to me.' For others, lack of purpose meant visits were experienced as tokenistic, contributing to further experiences of marginalisation: 'Even though we wore the same kit as them, they were very cautious of us. Don't get me wrong, we could speak to the staff, but they didn't seem – how do I put it? They didn't seem interested in wanting us to be involved.' These contradictory accounts highlight how signifiers of belonging including branded kit or being in the same room, are not enough. Efforts to enhance belonging can be effective when they are aligned to an individual's goals and expectations, and designed with a critical awareness of how existing structures and practices can exclude.

Mentors can play a critical role in ensuring a smooth transition into an organisation to develop early feelings of belonging (Moxey, Brown, and Parry 2022). Of course, it requires more than initial introductions to generate a sense of feeling seen. Feeling seen is also about being recognised and acknowledged (or not) on an ongoing basis as depicted through our second case study within the CSJ.

CSJ case study 2

Kate Marks' research (2023) exploring women's experiences of Rugby Union voluntary leadership roles highlights how feeling seen can take different guises, both physical and metaphorical. For example, one participant reported her feelings on seeing her name physically printed in gold leaf on her club honours board for the first time. As the first woman to be publicly acknowledged in this way she explained 'it really was significant'. However, being seen can also create moments of hypervisibility which can trigger prejudice and hate towards particular identities. This was evident when the same woman later reported how attempts had been made to scratch her name physically from the board, 'such was their objection to my femaleness' she added. Across this rugby research participants felt that being seen was integral to their sense of self-fulfilment and motivation to continue their leadership journeys. By offering women in voluntary rugby leadership roles on-going recognition throughout their journey, for example through branded kit or names on honours boards, organisations can better foster a sense of belonging within their workforce.

As both case studies illustrate, recognition can be facilitated through branded leisurewear which simultaneously signifies an affiliation with a group and differentiation from non-members (Moxey, Brown, and Parry 2022). Harris and Dacin's (2019) study into belonging in skateboarding crews, highlights the ways in which visibility of performance generates recognition, respect and a corresponding sense of belonging. Maher et al. (2023) also highlight the significance of performance to notions of (not) belonging for a young player with cerebral palsy playing in mainstream football. Thus, the ability to 'perform' in a particular way has both positive and negative consequences on belonging. Yet, being recognised need not be about physical performance. Other contributions and

accomplishments including unique perspectives and life experiences are also important to acknowledge (Harvard Business Publishing 2021). Recognition is also seeing others that look like you throughout the organisation. For example, seeing diversity at senior levels contributes to employees feeling that everyone has the same opportunities to succeed and advance, which can generate stronger feelings of belonging (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021; Coqual 2020; McKinsey and Company 2013). Being 'noticed' was also an important element of belonging raised by participants in research by Renwick et al. (2019). Here, being noticed moves beyond an invite to be 'included' in an event, group, or project. This can be a tokenistic gesture, leaving some remaining at the margins or feeling invisible. Being noticed involves being acknowledged for the unique contributions one brings. Of course, this requires individuals to be known which also requires people's stories to be heard.

Feeling heard

This anchor considers the opportunities people have to be able to voice their thoughts, opinions, concerns and ideas, and to offer feedback. For us, this moves beyond the physical act of being heard to the active process of being listened to – showing interest, paying attention, demonstrating curiosity, and having empathy (Weger et al. 2014). When people are heard and listened to, and feel supported in expressing themselves, they feel a greater sense of value and belonging (Renwick et al. 2019). Moreover, within an organisation they are more likely to remain engaged and committed, reducing the likelihood of them leaving (Spoor and Hoye 2014). Having thoughts heard and acted upon to influence and drive change can further strengthen feelings of value and commitment to a cause (Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013), as depicted in our third case study from the CSJ.

CSJ case study 3

Dan Bates and colleagues (2024) have led the evaluation of the Active Through Football (ATF) programme delivered by The Football Foundation across 25 localities. The ATF aims to work with target communities to address persistent inequalities in physical activity participation. The evaluation highlights the importance of taking time to engage with the local community, listen to different perspectives, and be open to how things could be delivered differently. In several localities this resulted in appointing 'non-sporty' programme managers who, while having limited or no sport qualifications, were ideally placed to engage with local people. These programme managers were fundamental in engaging, encouraging, and reassuring people that they would be listened to, and that provision could be moulded to meet their needs – in other words, this was a programme that could belong to them.

Of course, listening to others and encouraging them to express their thoughts may involve dissenting opinions and conflicting viewpoints, but this should be viewed as a healthy and positive process in exploring alternative approaches to addressing challenges and problems that an organisation may be facing. Yet, this is only possible by creating forums, channels, and opportunities for open, transparent dialogue in safe and supported spaces and time for reflection (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021; Harvard Business Publishing 2021). This has been a particular concern for colleagues in the CSJ whose research has considered how to best provide young people with opportunities to share their experiences of school-based sport. In the next case study from the CSJ we offer some

useful observations from our youth voice research that have relevance for a range of organisations wishing to be more inclusive.

CSJ case study 4

In their paper reflecting on their commitment to youth voice research, Annette, Hayley and Ruth note the importance of consulting with different individuals, especially those that have experiences of marginalisation and discrimination (Stride, Fitzgerald, and Brazier 2022). Relatedly, this involves recognising individuals as experts of their own daily lived social realities, including their experiences of education or employment. This can involve listening to some difficult stories, ones that might not reflect or align to the desired culture or philosophy of an organisation. This requires a sensitive approach, one that acknowledges the power dynamics that operate within any organisation and the ways these infiltrate communications to influence both what is said, and what is left unspoken. It also requires a commitment to act on those voices that offer an alternative reality to ensure change takes place, trust is built, and individuals feel empowered to be at the forefront of any future developments.

The advice provided here is particularly important in relation to providing opportunities for concerns regarding discriminatory behaviour being reported. For example, research identifies how race, gender and other social categories influence belonging (Coqual 2020; Maher et al. 2023; Spaaij 2015; Spaaij et al. 2023). Women are less likely to share a different opinion, feeling that their experiences will not be heard, listened to or valued (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021). Thus, providing spaces for marginalised groups to share their experiences of an organisation are important in fostering learning, understanding, and to identify where change is needed in relation to creating a better sense of belonging (Coqual 2020; Harvard Business Publishing 2021). Furthermore, providing opportunities for people and their stories to be heard and listened to also contributes to feeling and being known.

Feeling known

This anchor involves employees being understood as a unique individual including an acknowledgement of what they contribute to the organisation. For this to happen requires opportunities for individuals to connect with, develop, and maintain meaningful, positive working and personal relationships with a diversity of colleagues (Allen et al. 2021; Haegele and Maher 2023; Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013). Antonsich (2010) notes that weaker ties and/or occasional everyday encounters (such as those one might experience with work colleagues) are insufficient to generate the strong connections needed to create a feeling of belonging. Rather, relations need to be long-lasting, stable, significant and involve frequent physical interaction. This enables individuals to share interests and experiences, a critical aspect of belonging as identified by Renwick et al. (2019). Indeed, opportunities to share similarities in experiences, particularly across identity markers (e.g. gender, ethnicity, disability and sexuality), are strong facilitators of belonging (Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013; Maher et al. 2023). But, as we have discussed previously, these labels should be used with caution. As colleagues Lawrence, Fletcher, and Kilvington (2024) demonstrate in our next CSJ case study, reductionist terms, like BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic Community), tend to impose an imaginary consensus on the experiences of historically underrepresented groups and people, and fail to acknowledge an individual's multiple identities. In turn, this contributes to how individuals feel (un) known or misunderstood.

CSJ case study 5

Stefan and colleagues' work (2024) with British South Asian senior leaders and executives in professional football notes the importance of being known, and the dangers of labelling. Through critical conversations they observe the appropriateness of the acronym BAME, and the importance of 'being known', within the context of racialised terminologies. By problematising this term, they advocate for more nuanced language that recognises individuality and moves away from traditional policy discourse that relies on clerical shorthand to represent the complex lives of people. This approach aligns with the concept of 'being known' in a holistic sense, as it calls for an appreciation of the myriad of social differences related to gender, sexuality, class, religion, age, generation, geographical residency and familial migration histories. Such understandings are critical to the development of more effective diversity policies that fully acknowledge and address the specific needs and contributions of underrepresented groups.

Getting to know colleagues holistically can occur formally through teams with a particular remit, as well as more informally through affinity networks (e.g. LGBTQ*) and social clubs (e.g. sports leagues, reading groups) (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021). Of course, legacies of racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism continue to influence how comfortable some individuals will feel when encountering any new situation and this should be carefully considered and managed (Allen et al. 2021; Haegele and Maher 2023; Renwick et al. 2019; Walseth 2006; Spaaij 2015; Spaaij et al. 2023). In this regard, research suggests that organisations should support employees in these social activities, provide opportunities for a diversity of celebratory events, and connect them with colleagues across the workforce, which has been linked to enhanced self-efficacy, job performance, retention, and job satisfaction (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021; Coqual 2020). Of course, feeling known is not just about the person 'at work', but their life outside of the organisation to enable more holistic understandings – What is of interest to them? What drives them to do what they do? What are their values and strengths? What are their commitments away from work? And, how does this relate to their contributions and development within the organisation (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021; Coqual 2020). Discovering these kinds of details and using this information in positive, productive ways can have benefits for both the individual as well as the organisation, as reflected in the CSJ's sixth case study. Moreover, it can contribute to the ways in which people feel valued as discussed in our remaining anchor.

CSJ case study 6

Anna Stodter's work (2022) highlights how different aspects of a coach's biography (e.g. experiences, knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices) shape their lifelong professional learning and identity. Here, learning involves the interaction and complementarity of learning from formal, non-formal, and informal situations. Biography acts as a 'filter' for these learning experiences, shaping what coaches take on board and implement (Stodter and Cushion, 2017). Knowing a person's biography and recognising the influence on learning has several benefits including moving beyond 'one-size-fits-all' learning opportunities to tailor approaches that better support learning, progression, and career development for all coaches (Norman, Rankin-Wright, and Allison 2018). Moreover, getting to know your workforce in this way can harness the potential of diverse biographies to produce new knowledge, foster innovation, and improve the professional learning environment for everyone.

Feeling valued

This anchor considers the ways in which individuals are made to feel needed, accepted, respected and celebrated for their unique perspectives and authentic self without any exceptions or reservations (AWI 2012; Haegele and Maher 2023; Harris and Dacin 2019; Renwick et al. 2019). Feeling needed and valued is a positive emotion associated with not only how

an individual evaluates their contribution to and acceptance within a group, but how others in the group evaluate and recognise them. This is reflected in our next case study from the CSJ.

CSJ case study 7

Alice Hoole's (2024) study highlights how feelings of being an outsider can be an initial source of anxiety for participants entering into new football spaces. This was particularly pertinent for those who situated themselves outside of the gender binary which sport spaces often insist upon. Participants noted that being in an explicitly queer inclusive environment, where gender fluid bodies were openly recognised, accepted and valued served a number of purposes: alleviating concerns over their outsider identity; and minimizing anxieties about having to mask or hide their gender identities. This ultimately contributed to their body feeling less constricted and correspondingly enabled them to fulfil their sporting potential more easily. Additionally, by utilising the simple practice of acknowledging names and recognising pronouns at the beginning of each session, ensured that participants were able to express their gender identity in an affirming and comfortable way, adding to feelings of value.

To add to this complexity, what the individual thinks others think of their contributions is also important (Harris and Dacin 2019). Unique contributions can be in relation to the interplay of a multiplicity of factors – ability, identities, defined role, particular characteristics, qualities, skills, personality, experiences, thinking, and ideas (Haegele and Maher 2023; Harris and Dacin 2019; Renwick et al. 2019; Walseth 2006). Important to note here is the significance of having one's contributions acknowledged. In this regard, some form of external validation is significant, as depicted through the next case study from the CSJ.

CSJ case study 8

Scarlett Drury's (2023) discourse analysis of the transgender inclusion policies of UK based national governing bodies of sport explores the significance of language in conveying a sense of value towards trans participants. In a highly complex policy landscape, the study uncovers several inconsistencies in the way in which trans participants are positioned. The varied introductory paragraphs of the policies provide a notable example of this. For instance, the opening statement of the British Wrestling policy[1] (2020) states that the organisation is responsible for 'regulating' the participation of competitors within the sport. It continues by positing safety and fairness as a primary focus. Conversely, British Taekwondo[2] (2021) takes a different stance. Its introductory statement opens by outlining that the organisation is 'fully committed to the principles of equality of opportunity and the elimination of unlawful and unfair discrimination', followed by the organisation's commitment towards 'embracing diversity'. This subtle change in wording can have a significant impact on the extent to which trans people feel included and valued as participants in the sport.

Validation can of course happen in other ways – praise, a simple 'thank you', promotions, additional responsibilities, employee of the month awards, and public credit for contributions (e.g. feature in staff newsletter). This highlights the critical role that others – peers, colleagues, coaches, teachers, policy developers, and line managers can play in the constitution of value, and perceptions of belonging (Coqual 2020; Harris and Dacin 2019; Maher et al. 2023; Renwick et al. 2019).

Feeling valued also involves creating and maintaining a supportive culture that provides staff with regular opportunities to grow and develop both as an individual and as a member of the organisation. Indeed, as ability informs an understanding of value it is critical to offer opportunities for this to be enhanced, raising people's confidence and self-esteem and loyalty to an organisation (McKinsey and Company 2013). Opportunities for support and development can be varied including: mentoring/coaching; training and needs analyses; regular one-to-one meetings with line managers; consistent, timely and honest feedback; Continuing

Professional Development; and clear, transparent progression routes (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021; Coqual 2020; McKinsey and Company 2013). On this note inequities have been identified for particular groups, for example, women are more likely to report feeling less supported at work (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021). Being valued can also be linked to work-life balance, including flexible working arrangements, work-social events, and enabling working from home. Organisations that actively encourage a healthy work-life balance send a clear message to their workforce about the value they place on their mental and physical wellbeing (Achievers Workforce Institute 2021; McKinsey and Company 2013). Offering these kinds of support mechanisms fosters trust, which in turn helps to create stronger emotional bonds, leading to stronger feelings of value and belonging (Moxey, Brown, and Parry 2022).

Drawing upon the four anchors of belonging framework, we next pose some questions to encourage reflection and provide opportunities for organisations to identify where small changes that can enhance feelings of belonging throughout their sport workforce might be considered. These questions are followed by a short conclusion bringing the paper to a close.

Leveraging the anchors: considerations and strategies for belonging

Feeling seen

- How are new members welcomed and invited to be part of your organisation?
- What and who is recognised and celebrated within your organisation and how can this be extended and diversified (e.g. do you recognise and celebrate inclusive behaviours and/or people's unique biographies)?
- Is positive recognition a regular occurrence, and how does this take place?

Feeling heard

- How and with whom can *all* employees share their ideas around your organisation's development (e.g. new policies, programmes, initiatives)?
- How do you actively seek a range of perspectives and opinions on the challenges that your organisation faces?
- Who is not involved in decision making across your organisation and why?
- How are conflictual and dissenting voices encouraged to help enhance discussions?
- How often do you encourage 1:1 meetings with line managers to check how employees (e.g. coaches, national governing body staff) are feeling about their relationship with the organisation, and how is this information acted upon?

Feeling known

- What opportunities do you provide for colleagues across the organisation and at all levels to get to know each other and develop meaningful relationships?
- Do people in your organisation believe that they are holistically known, and that others are genuinely interested in who they are and their lived experiences?

- How does your organisation support a variety of social and leisure clubs and activities outside of work that encourage interactions between employees? (e.g. sponsoring teams, leagues and events, subsidising trips)
- How safe is it in your organisation to share personal information?

Feeling valued

- How are the contributions from each individual valued and acknowledged throughout the organisation?
- How are opportunities for growth and development actively and transparently communicated and encouraged with each individual?
- What initiatives within the organisation encourage a work-life balance and which do not?

Conclusions

Despite equity, diversity and inclusion being a pressing concern for a number of years, issues of inequality, lack of diversity and exclusion appear to be ever present in many aspects of sport. Within this paper we have presented a reconceptualization of inclusion that might offer sporting organisations opportunities to enable a broader range of people to be included in all aspects of sport and ensure a fairer and more equitable experience for all concerned. Our focus has been on reimaging inclusion in ways that move beyond the compliant including facilitating access to a programme or being 'written into' a policy. We propound that these are somewhat tokenistic and paternalistic attempts to consider historically marginalised groups, and ones that fail to make a difference in facilitating change. At the heart of our reconceptualization is belonging and four key elements – feeling seen, feeling heard, feeling known and feeling valued. We argue that adopting belonging as a starting point encourages organisations to consider inclusion more holistically in two ways. First, moving beyond the tokenistic measures identified earlier and second, moving away from focusing solely on specific groups. Rather, this is an approach that considers everybody and on an ongoing basis. It is an outlook that is rooted in people, their everyday interactions and relationships, and how these can be enhanced. Moreover, it is one that permeates through an organisation, moving responsibility for issues of equity, diversity and inclusion away from specific roles and job titles to everyone within the organisation. Indeed, to overcome the social justice challenges that continue to exist within sport, we need to understand how to work together better, to create a strong sense of belonging for all involved, and to move forwards as a collective to create a more inclusive culture in sport.

Notes

1. For more information see: https://britishwrestling.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Transgender-Policy.pdf.
2. For more information see: https://www.britishtaekwondo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/BT-Equality-Diversity-Inclusion-Policy.pdf.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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