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Male Autistic Youth Experiences of Belonging in Integrated Physical Education

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Abstract

The study examined the subjective experiences of autistic youth regarding the role of peer interactions and relationships in feelings of belonging in integrated physical education (PE) classes. The term integrated is used to describe a setting in which all students, regardless of educational needs, are educated in the same physical space. Eight autistic youth (all male, aged 13-18 years) who had received most of their PE in integrated classes acted as participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate qualitative data, which were analyzed using a reflexive thematic approach. Findings are presented in three themes: (a) bullying can lead to self-harm and self-isolation, (b) peer interactions and relationships in the locker room, and (c) peer relationships are based on shared interests and take time to develop. Even though autistic students were educated in the same spaces as their non-autistic peers, feelings of belonging were largely unavailable to them.

Lay Abstract

Recent years have seen calls to amplify the voices of autistic people in research about their subjective experiences. Despite this, we know little about how autistic youth experience integrated physical education, particularly in the United States. The term integrated is used to describe a setting in which all students, regardless of educational needs, are educated in the same physical space. In this study, we sought to explore the perspectives of autistic youth toward their experiences in integrated physical education, and the roles of social interactions and relationships with peers in those experiences. Findings noted that several factors influenced the ways and extent to which our participants interacted with their peers during physical education. Unfortunately, most of our participants recalled experiencing bullying, and that physical education offered an environment where bullying was most frequent and comparatively unique compared to other contexts throughout the school day. The locker room, a space linked to physical education, was of particular concern because of a lack of teacher presence. Despite the negative views of and experiences in physical education, there was evidence of participants actively pursuing to connect with peers in this context. However, most instances where participants recalled pursuing friendship were not welcomed from others, which stunted their sense of belonging in this space. Given the role that belonging plays in what it means "to be included", our research supports emerging ideas that even though autistic students were educated in the same physical spaces as their non-autistic peers, feelings of inclusion were largely absent.

Keywords: Autism; Inclusion; Belonging; Physical Education

In recent years, there have been calls to amplify the voices of autistic people in research about their subjective experiences (Milton & Bracher, 2013; Pellicano et al., 2014; van Schalkwyk & Dewinter, 2020). The voices of autistic individuals are often unheard (Pellicano et al., 2014), with research frequently "conducted *on, about,* or *for* autistic people and their families, without the involvement of those with insider expertise" (Crane et al., 2020, p. 1). This phenomenon is reflected in physical education (PE) research, where the voices of autistic students have historically been ignored or overshadowed by the opinions of teachers (Beamer & Yun, 2014) and parents (Nichols et al., 2019). As a result, recommendations for practice within PE contexts, which should logically be informed by empirical support, are largely made without input from autistic students. Only recently have researchers begun to consider insider accounts of PE by conducting qualitative research focused on the subjective experiences of autistic students (Blagrave, 2017; Healy et al., 2014; Pellerin et al., 2020; Yessick et al., 2020). It is important to note that most of this research has taken place in homogenous, self-contained PE spaces (Blagrave, 2017; Pellerin et al., 2020; Yessick et al., 2020). According to Pellerin and colleagues (2020), "self-contained physical education, typically offered in small group settings and composed solely of students with disabilities, is an alternative placement option afforded to a student who otherwise could not learn satisfactorily in general, integrated physical education" (p. 2). This line of inquiry has demonstrated that self-contained PE tends to yield generally positive feelings about pedagogical spaces and practices (Blagrave, 2017; Pellerin et al., 2020; Yessick et al., 2020). However, self-contained PE classes are becoming less common in the U.S., where a shift toward integrated education is now favored (Haegele, 2019; Wilhemsen et al., 2019). The term *integrated* is used purposefully here to describe a *setting* in which all students, regardless of educational needs, are educated in the same physical space (Haegele, 2019). Movement toward integrated educational

spaces has been influenced by the belief that educating all students together in neighborhood schools is "a moral absolute that requires a single placement" (Kauffman et al., 2020, p. 5) whereas homogenous educational spaces should be dismantled or phased out (Kauffman et al., 2020; Slee, 2018; Stainback et al., 1994). As such, autistic students are currently more likely to be educated in integrated spaces (Hurwitz et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2018), including PE classes (Obrusnikova & Block, 2020; Wilson, Haegele, et al., 2020), with their non-autistic peers than ever before.

To date, little research has sought the input of autistic youth about integrated PE, and the few studies available internationally have largely communicated troubling findings. For example, in research conducted by Healy and colleagues (2013), which centered on the experiences of twelve Irish autistic youth aged 9-13 years, participants recalled a variety of challenging and discriminatory experiences, including feeling incapable to participate in unmodified or unsupported activities, being excluded from activities by their teacher because of a perceived lack of ability, or requesting to be excluded because of discomfort with participating (Healy et al., 2013). Autistic youth (aged 12-15) from the UK viewed some aspects of their PE experiences favorably (e.g., opportunities to be heroic); however, feelings of trepidation, worry, and fear were experienced in a variety of integrated PE-related spaces (e.g., school corridors) (Lamb et al., 2016). As such, while well intended, it appears that the act of enrolling autistic youth in heterogenous PE spaces does not guarantee subjective experiences associated with inclusion (e.g., acceptance, belonging, and value) and may, instead, unintentionally create forms of exclusion (Slee, 2018). Issues like these illuminate the need for curricular reform, rather than making simple superficial changes that proliferate practice-based texts (Grenier, 2014) or simply expecting autistic students to "fit in" (Luddeckens, 2020; p. 6). This proposition is challenging in integrated PE contexts,

however, as some PE teachers may be resistant to change and unwilling or unable to rethink the nature of activities to facilitate access to appropriate learning opportunities (Kirk, 2010; Thomson & Sparkes, 2020; Wilson, Kelly, et al., 2020). Perhaps this is because physical educators, as well as PE teacher educators, seem unaware of challenges associated with integrated placements, as they believe that inclusion is successful (Atkins, 2016) and, as noted by Slee (2018), inequality and exclusion are "woven so tightly into the fabric of education, it often goes unacknowledged" (p. 12). In our study, we sought to extend research exploring the perspectives of autistic youth toward the inclusiveness of their experiences in integrated PE, by analyzing the role of social interactions and relationships with peers in those experiences.

Peer Interactions and Relationships of Autistic Youth

The development of friendship, and other positive peer interactions, between autistic and non-autistic students is well aligned with often suggested favorable potential outcomes of integrated PE (Seymour et al., 2009), and can have clear implications for feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value among the social group (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010). Conversely, engagement in solitary behaviors, as well as negative peer interactions which often take the forms of verbal aggression or physical bullying, are more frequently discussed (Healy et al., 2014; Humphrey & Symes, 2011). For example, Healy and colleagues (2014) reported that while camaraderie and positive rapport among classmates were recalled by some participants, negative peer interactions, including bullying, also existed in integrated PE of autistic youth in Ireland. This finding is consistent with recent reviews of literature, which suggest that autistic students experience a higher prevalence of bullying victimization in schools than their non-autistic peers, as well as disabled peers in general (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015; Maiano et al., 2016). At present, though, little is known about how peer interactions during integrated PE influence feelings

of belonging within these pedagogical spaces. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the subjective experiences of autistic youth regarding the role that peer interactions and relationships play in feelings of belonging in integrated PE classes.

Inclusion as Belonging

Despite assertions that integrated education is "the right thing to do" (Yell, 1995, p. 389), concerns have emerged. Notably, questions persist about whether education, including PE, in these heterogenous spaces can provide inclusive experiences (Haegele, 2019; Haegele, Kirk, et al., 2020). Inclusion has been described as a "semantic chameleon" (Liasidou, 2012, p. 5) that has been conceptualized in a variety of ways depending on the context in which it is used (Petrie et al., 2018). Highlighting this, Spencer-Cavaliere and colleagues (2017) summarized that, among other meanings, inclusion can present a view of equal opportunity, a focus on social justice, a placement within a group, or an emphasis on an individual's sense of belonging. Because of the multiple meanings associated with the term, Graham and Slee (2008) recommend explicating the meaning of the term to avoid conceptual ambiguity and provide clarity for use. In our study, we adopt Stainback and Stainback's (1996) interpretation that the hallmark of an inclusive education is the subjective experience of a sense of belonging understood from the perspective of the person who is being included. This conceptualization of inclusion is well-aligned with calls to amplify the voices of autistic people in research about their subjective experiences (Milton & Bracher, 2013; Pellicano et al., 2014), as "inclusion understood as a subjective experience requires investigation from the perspective of the child who is 'to be included'" (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010, p. 275). In addition, adopting this conceptualization of inclusion allows us to move beyond the common-sense propensity of considering inclusion as an educational setting (i.e., integrated settings) or mode of pedagogical practices (i.e., what and how PE is taught) so that we can

problematize the inclusiveness of those settings and established practices (Haegele, 2019). We focus on peer interactions and relationships specifically because they significantly influence, positively and negatively, feelings of belonging in schools among youth (Mahar et al., 2013; Milton & Sims, 2016; Salmon, 2013).

Methods

According to Maher and Coates (2020), it is necessary to acknowledge the philosophical underpinnings that provide the foundation for research because "it is through such ontological and epistemological considerations that researchers are better able to make appropriate decisions about their research methodologies and the tools they use to understand phenomena" (p. 83). In this study, an interpretivist ontology was adopted, where we, the researchers, attempted to make sense of our participants' interpretations of their lived, embodied experiences within integrated PE classes. To ensure philosophical alignment (Tracy, 2010), we embraced the notion that there may be multiple ways in which autistic youth interpret and make sense of their embodied experiences of integrated PE. Thus, the 'realities' that we as researchers endeavored to capture are socially constructed and mind dependent (Maxwell, 2012). Given the role that researchers' personal beliefs, values, and inclinations have in this interpretive process, it is crucial that we divulge our positionality so that we and others can reflexively consider how it may have shaped methodological decisions and presented interpretations of the participants' embodiment of inclusion and belonging. Both members of the research team identify as white men whose lived bodies claim to be working-class, despite our living bodies having the economic, social, and cultural capital of the middle class. Importantly, neither of the researchers identify as autistic adults. Instead, our personal and professional interests are tied to a desire to gain an understanding of and improve experiences in integrated PE for autistic youth. Thus, we were cognizant that our

own embodied experiences formed the prism through which we made sense of and constructed meaning about the views and experiences of our participants.

Participants

Participants were recruited through an email invitation containing the purpose, time commitment, and data collection procedures, that was distributed to parents of autistic youth in a MidAtlantic state in the U.S. For transparency (Tracy, 2010), it is noteworthy that [author] had a prior relationship with participants and parents from a previous unrelated research study. Autistic youth were eligible to participate if they were 13-18 years of age, had a formal autism diagnosis, communicated verbally, and were enrolled in integrated PE classes during their public-school education. Parents who received the email were asked to discuss participation in the study with their child(ren), and those who were interested emailed [author]. Parental consent and child assent documents were completed electronically and were again confirmed verbally at the start of each interview (Bryman, 2015). The institutional review board at [author affiliation] reviewed and approved the study protocols.

Eight autistic youth (aged 13-18 years) participated in the study. Whereas the recruitment procedures were inclusive of potential participants of any gender, only male youth completed participation in this study. The participants received most of their PE in integrated classes, however several participants discontinued their enrollment in PE at some point during their schooling for a variety of reasons. For example, Tucker was excused from PE during middle school (grades 6-8; ages 11-13 years) because of consistent and persistent bullying, whereas Brian opted out under his own volition after the completion of 8th grade, which was aligned with options provided by his school district. Notably, only three participants (i.e., Stewart, Tom, and Tucker) attended

integrated PE throughout all 13 years of formal schooling. Table 1 provides detailed biographical information for each participant. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect identity.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, which centered on amplifying the voices of autistic youth participants (Howard et al., 2019), were used to generate data. Several interview procedures were implemented to attempt to alleviate potential anxiety associated with the interview for the participants. For example, prior to the interview, each participant was provided with a copy of the interview questions to allow them to prepare responses (Colombo-Dougovito et al., 2020). In addition, participants were provided options to complete the interview via either video or telephone call, of which each participant elected to use video calling technology. During the video interviews, only audio data were recorded. Participants were also notified that they may invite their parent or guardian to sit in on the interview conversation if it would make them feel more comfortable. Several participants, including Louis and Tucker, elected to ask their parents to join them. Interestingly, some parents joined in the interview by reminding their child about incidents relating to questions, which helped the interviewer to explore experiences in rich detail that may have otherwise been missed. Finally, participants were able to answer questions on their copy of the interview schedule and submit those answers if they were more comfortable providing additional information in a written format than during the verbal interviews. Louis and Tucker each elected to submit this form of supplemental data.

Each interview began with the interviewer reminding participants about the purpose of the study and that the conversation would be audio-recorded. He continued by discussing the prior interactions that the participants had had with the interviewer to redevelop familiarity and described himself and his personal and professional position in relation to the study (Zitomer &

Goodwin, 2014). Interviews then followed a schedule that included open-ended questions together with expansion, clarification, probe, and supplementary questions to generate rich, thick descriptions of subjective experiences of inclusion and belonging as a hallmark of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Interview probes centering on the meaning that participants ascribed to their experiences were conceptually aligned with inclusion as a subjective experience associated with feelings of belonging (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Stainback & Stainback, 1996). Example probes included: (a) please describe what your experiences in PE are like, (b) please describe your experiences with your peers during PE, and (c) how do your peers make you feel during PE? Interviews ranged from 35 to 65 minutes in duration, and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure a complete record of data.

Data Analysis

[Author] led data analysis, which was inspired by the reflexive thematic analysis approach advocated by Braun et al. (2016). The first step entailed data familiarization. Through reading and re-reading interview transcripts and participant typed answers, [author] developed an intimate familiarity with participant subjective experiences of inclusion and feelings of belonging in PE. Next, [author] assigned semantic (what was said), conceptual (relationship to concepts of inclusion and belonging), and analytical (significance of what was said) labels to chunks of the interview text as part of the initial interpretative process. To aid sense-making, [author] drew on [author] as a critical friend to check and challenge the initial analysis and deepen [author]'s reflexive engagement and understanding of the knowledge he was generating (Tracy, 2013). Step three involved the clustering together of labels of sameness and similarity in order to establish initial themes. Themes were then reviewed by [author] and [author] to ensure coherence within each theme and that the content was reflected by theme title. Through this reflexive engagement,

participant extracts were shifted within and across themes, so they were more adequately represented. Once themes were more firmly established, interview transcripts were harvested to identify extracts that aligned to established themes that may have been missed during step two of the analysis (Braun et al., 2016). Here, attention was also paid to ensuring that all participant voices were represented, and that minority views and experiences were captured and represented to ensure that no one was silenced.

Community Involvement Statement

This research was inspired by conversations with parents of autistic teenagers, that took place during a prior unrelated study. The parents discussed the need to highlight the experiences of their children in integrated PE, and how typically PE did not appear to be reflective of their needs or opinions. Autistic youth were active participants in this study, and their views toward PE were central to the understanding of belonging in PE in this work.

Findings: Voices of Autistic Youth

The themes generated during data analysis have been used to structure both the Findings presented below and the Discussion thereafter. In keeping with our aim of amplifying the voices of autistic youth, the Findings ‘show’ the words of the participants before we offer our analytical ‘tell’ in the Discussion. Here, we invite the reader to make sense of and construct meaning about subjective views and experiences of PE, inclusion, and feelings of belonging, before making naturalistic generalizations by considering the extent to which these words resonate (Smith, 2017). Prior to proceeding to the first theme, readers should be aware that the following narratives include detailed accounts of lived trauma, bullying, and self-harm that may be distressing or triggering for some readers.

Bullying can Lead to Self-harm and Self-isolation

Nearly all our participants had experienced bullying in PE, both of a verbal and physical nature. Some of Glen's peers, for instance, would throw balls at him:

[author]: So could you tell me things you don't like about PE?

Glen: When people are just messing with me a lot.

[author]: What do you mean by messing with you?

Glen: Like when they're throwing balls at me.

[author]: Oh, does that happen in PE?

Glen: Sometimes. They just throw the balls at me and then they don't say sorry or nothin'.

[author]: How does that make you feel?

Glen: Bad, I feel really bad. They [peers] would just hit me in the face a lot and then they [peers] would tell me to go kill myself.

For other participants, the bullying was more physical and, arguably, violent:

> He [a pupil] choke slammed me once. He shoved me into a steel fence while we were running around the field. Yeah. I remember that there was a third incident that happened, but I think while we were playing flag football, he kicked the side of my leg, where my knee is and it caused me to trip and fall on my face. Yeah, that's what I remember about PE (Tucker).

Cleveland's experiences of bullying were so traumatic that he tried to self-harm as a result. This story was teased out during a conversation between Cleveland and his mother:

Mom: Hey Cleveland. He [author] wants to know some stories. What about the one last year, um, or have you had the incident in it actually was in your next class that you had to take back to PE or something that had happened.

Cleveland: Oh boy.

Mom: Can you share that now? That would be a good example.

Cleveland: Basically someone bullied me and I chased them and I slipped in mud and they laughed at me some more. And later in the day I started choking myself with my thumbs right here because that's apparently where your esophagus is. If you push down you'll start choking. And eventually my mom got there 30 minutes later, they were trying to pry me... basically, I'm pretty strong. When my mom got there, she was like, "stop, stop!" She started crying basically, I saw like a minute later.

[author]: And that happened because you were bullied earlier?

Cleveland: Yeah. Twice basically. In PE. Yeah. And then later in the locker room everyone stole my money and started laughing at me.

Tucker stopped going to PE because of bullying:

Tucker: Yes. I stopped in sixth grade, so I haven't done PE in a while.

[author]: Why'd you stop PE?

Tucker: There were bullies in PE that I didn't want to deal with and I benefited from quitting PE in sixth grade. And yeah, I haven't done PE since.

For our participants, bullying was something that they had experienced all their lives. According to Louis, bullying was a consequence of others not understanding autism:

I've been bullied pretty much all my life and then there are sometimes that people cuss at me, they call me names, and sadly they don't understand what autism means, especially for people with disabilities. I couldn't get the idea of people not understanding people with autism, you know? And then there are some people that know each other well, but I've been bullied lately in PE, not just being me, but everywhere I go, I'm always bullied. People just don’t understand autism.

Incidentally, Louis did not want to educate his peers about his autism because he feared that it would exacerbate bullying:

> And if I did tell them [peers] about my autism, they're going to use that to trigger somebody. They're going to use the trigger that can target me. It's just not worth it.

Peer Interactions and Relationships in the Locker Room

While bullying was not confined to PE, it was a curriculum subject in which it manifested most frequently and in comparatively unique ways. The locker room, a space separate from the gymnasium designated for changing into PE attire, was a physical space that was particularly problematic in this respect:

> I guess I'm a little healthy because, well in terms of like not getting bullied, I like, I haven't really experienced harassment of any kind except if you consider the locker room, which I see as ample opportunity for unwanted physical contact and certain kinds of harassment (Brian)

A lack of surveillance, either through teacher or video camera presence, was identified as one reason why the locker room was a space where bullying was most likely to occur. This is illustrated in comments made by Stewart, who labelled himself as overweight, when he discussed peer judgements about each other's bodies in the locker room:

> People get bullied if they're overweight, very underweight, if they, just anything really. Because I feel like that's the time [in the locker room] where the kids like to try and mess with each other. Because of course there's no cameras because that's a violation of privacy and the teachers are usually not there.

Similarly, Tom suggested that there were 'no rules' in the locker room because of teacher absence:

> Well, most of the time, it's just mostly people talking, horsing around, you know, the standard procedure. Even though the rules say don't horse around, I guess you could say at this rate, with no teacher, there's possibly just no rules, especially with students.

Some of our participants endeavored to find a safe space in the locker room, away from unwanted attention:

> Everybody else gets changed in the locker room. I do it in the bathroom (Glen)
>
> I usually try to just distance myself a little bit from the other kids and probably try to use the showering room as an opportunity, as a more comfortable opportunity to get out of my regular clothes and into my PE uniform (Brian)

While most participants considered the locker room a space to be feared, Brian and Tom had used it to interact with peers and develop meaningful relationships. For example, Brian recalled that:

> There are some people in my other classes that I used to recognize and sometimes talk to them whenever we were in the locker room. There were a few times in the locker room I had this friend but he's in another PE class. His name was Jonathan Rocker [pseudonym] and honestly he was a pretty cool kid, we would like hang out in seventh before social studies class would start and how we converse about things like, like Pacific Rim.

Similarly, when asked about his relationships with his classmates, Tom noted that:

> It's fine. Most of the time we just, we mostly talk to each other in the locker room cause they can either A talk to others or B they might as well just be participating.

Peer Relationships are Based on Shared Interests and Take Time to Develop

Some of our participants believed that they had different interests and preferences compared to other students, which made it difficult to develop meaningful relationships with peers. Stewart, for example, said:

> I am just not into a lot of the things people like nowadays or talked about. In high school it was all about Snapchat, Facebook and a lot of other social media platforms, dating, sports, cars, trucks. I just wasn't really into all of that. So, I wasn't really any good in a lot of conversations when it came to any of that stuff, because I don't have any social media accounts. I'm not really fond of trucks and cars like a lot of guys are. I don't like drag racing and all that. I don't keep track of sports, or the sports teams, of all the different types of sports. The only teams that I know are the ones that my parents like. And, overall, I just feel like I wasn't exactly in with what they like to do. Cause of course some of them were the bad kids who want, who thought they were tough, invincible, do any, do anything that would get them in trouble, that nothing can hurt them. They'll smoke, they'll do drugs, they'll sometimes drink if they're able to. And of course I'm definitely not into that even if I didn't have autism.

One participant, Cleveland, said that PE class grouping were changed so often that it was difficult to develop friendships in PE.

> [author]: Okay. Do you have a good relationship with your classmates while you're in PE together?
>
> Cleveland: Sometimes. I had a really good relationship with the first class and now that the class is like all different, I have...I get worse relationships the more students that exist. They're like kids I barely know.
>
> [author]: So you can't build meaningful relationships?

Cleveland: Well people who keep on leaving and coming back and leaving and coming back. It's like this: how would you get a relationship with someone fast? Like so fast that they run past you?

[author]: That's a good point. How do you feel about that? That you don't have the opportunity to build good friendships in PE?

Cleveland: This year PE has been worse than all the other years in my opinion. And it's just because, and it's mostly because of that one reason.

[author]: What's that reason?

Cleveland: It's too fast. Everyone just leaves and comes.

It was clear that despite the significant issues associated with developing relationships with peers, some of our participants were still trying. Louis, for instance, said:

> Yeah. If I feel like I'm trying my best to prove to others that I want to be friends with them. I just want to make friends. I mean by that is, that I can't do it. You know what I'm saying? I'm always invisible to them.

Chris' experiences do not appear to match those of other participants, as he seemed to have developed strong peer relationships in PE:

[author]: Do you feel like when you're in PE, you're accepted by everybody in the room?

Chris: Yeah, definitely, cause like I'm not really left out. And just like with everybody where they're at and stuff.

[author]: You mentioned this earlier but do you think part of that has to do with you being a good athlete?

Chris: Sometimes. Not really. I'm not sure. I think that would be more like a group thing. It's like there's a group feel of like being athletic maybe. Yeah.

Discussion

There were several factors influencing the ways and extent to which our participants interacted with their peers in PE. Most experienced bullying, both verbal and physical in nature, which has been identified as a significant threat to interpersonal relationships and feelings of belonging among young people (Frederickson, 2010). Name calling and teasing, the throwing of objects at our participants, usually balls or other PE equipment, and punching and (unwanted) ‘wrestling’ were the main ways that bullying behaviors manifested in PE. This is especially problematic given that research suggests that peer harassment has been associated with depression, and lower self-esteem, grade point average, and school attendance among youth (Crouch et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2016). In this respect, it is important to note that one of our participants self-harmed because of experiencing bullying behaviors. According to the participants, PE was a subject where such negative behaviors manifested most frequently and in comparatively unique ways, perhaps because of its unstructured nature, corporeality, and masculine culture. Indeed, boys’ PE has been said to exude a traditional “top dog” competitive culture (Brown & Evans, 2004) in which traditional masculine power is earned and demonstrated through physicality, including acts of violence (Anderson, 2012; Swain, 2006). According to Swain (2006), a strong focus on corporeality and masculine culture in boys’ PE can be problematic for students who do not convey idealized sporting bodies, which may include autistic students. It is important to note that these findings may be unique to male autistic students, and research including female participants may yield separate and unique issues surrounding these phenomena.

The locker room was a space parallel and inextricably linked to PE that was particularly problematic in this regard, mostly because of a lack of teacher presence and thus students having the freedom to engage in bullying behaviors unchecked. This is consistent with assertions by

Migliaccio and colleagues (2017), who note that "unowned spaces" that are infrequently monitored by adults, like locker rooms, are more likely to house instances of bullying. According to Mahar et al. (2013), feelings of belonging are fluid and dynamic; they are contextual and situational. From our research it seems that for most autistic youth, the locker room was a contextual space within integrated PE where the development of a sense of belonging was most under threat. Consequently, several participants engaged in self-isolation, even self-marginalization, by changing in the showers or other spaces as a way of avoiding unwanted attention in the locker room. This may have contributed to their ostracization, stigmatization and, inevitably, had a negative impact on the development of belonging to peer groups (Salmon, 2013). For one participant, locker room experiences were so negative that they contributed toward the decision to withdraw from PE entirely, something that is not uncommon among autistic youth (Salmon, 2013). Our findings support Morrison et al.'s (2020) claim that belonging has a strong spatial dimension, for autistic youth especially. Interestingly, some participants in our study suggested, for the first time in research terms, that the lack of PE teacher surveillance in the locker room provided ample opportunities to develop a sense of connectedness with peers, which is identified by Robinson and Notara (2016) as a crucial step towards feelings of belonging, through conversations.

A lack of understanding of autism and the ways it influences behaviors was identified in our research as a barrier to the development of peer relationships. This finding aligns with research conducted by Milton and Sims (2016), who suggest that non-autistic people have difficulties understanding the viewpoints of autistic people, resulting in mistreatment such as bullying, social alienation and marginalization. The fact that non-autistic youth do not have the empathetic capacities (Coplan, 2011) to cognitively and affectively imagine themselves (Cooper, 2011) as an autistic youth in order to 'understand' autism is of little surprise given that they have no lived nor

embodied experience of autism. Interestingly, one participant was concerned that knowledge of autism could be used as ammunition to exacerbate bullying behaviors in PE. This finding extends some prior existing literature, where disabled youth have hesitated to voluntary disclose aspects of their impairment to peers or teachers because of threats of exclusion or marginalization (Moola et al., 2011). This purview perhaps conflicts with the prevailing wisdom that education and experience of interacting with 'disabled Others' (Maher et al., 2019) will lead to more positive attitudes and behaviors towards people with disabilities. Similarly, this finding perhaps compels us to problematize the view proffered by Mahar et al. (2013) that a shared understanding aids the creation of a sense of belonging.

Our research discovered a perception that our participants had different interests and preferences vis-à-vis other students, which again made it difficult to develop meaningful peer relationships. The significance of this is clear if we accept claims by Mahar et al. (2013) and Wood (2019) that the formation of collective identities and an associated sense of belonging to a community of peers in a school is tied to, among other things, shared values, beliefs, and interests. Thus, whether these differences between our participants and their peers are perceptual or actual, they are yet another issue that may prevent feelings of belonging (Milton, 2012, 2014) in schools generally and PE especially. Here, it is noteworthy that this concern was not anchored to our participants' views of their 'own' autism, or the ways autism shaped their behaviors. Instead, it was a factor that, when combined with others, prevented the development of meaningful friendship in PE among autistic youth and other students.

Despite such negative views of and experiences in PE, there was evidence of participants wanting and actively endeavoring to connect with peers and develop friendships. However, in most instances such overtures were not reciprocated. Reciprocity is vital to the development of lasting

friendships and feelings of belonging (Milner & Kelly, 2009). In this regard, it is noteworthy that a lack of reciprocity contributes towards the development of friendships of a hierarchal nature between youth with disabilities and their peers, with the former often occupying a position of lower social status when compared to the latter (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). Nonetheless, friendships take time to establish and develop, especially if they are to become long-lasting (Milner & Kelly 2009). According to one of our participants, the transitory nature of PE, whereby class groups changed frequently, prevented the development of lasting friendships. This concern also applies to the locker room, as a liminal space that is inhibited by autistic youth and their non-autistic peers prior to and immediately after PE classes. Transitionary environments and practices such as these, according to Crouch et al (2014), create a dynamic tension that may impact negatively on peer interactions and a young person's sense of belonging to a peer group. This may be notably problematic for those autistic youth who often prefer stable, repetitive, and patterned environments and behaviors, and may experience negative emotions when this is not provided in school contexts (Baron-Cohen, 2008).

Conclusion

Our research has extended traditional conceptualizations of inclusion by thinking about it in more nuanced and sophisticated ways. Traditionally, inclusion has been equated to places, spaces, policies, and pedagogical practices (Spencer-Cavaliere et al., 2017). We have extended these modes of thinking and lines of inquiry by focusing on the ways in which the peer interactions and relationships of autistic youth are tied to feelings of belonging. If we accept Baumeister and Leary's (1995) claim that belonging is a fundamental human need, that is especially crucial for the well-being of youth (Anderman, 2002), it is noteworthy that our research found that that need is not being fulfilled in integrated PE for autistic youth. Specifically, PE as a subject and the locker

room as a parallel and linked space are notably problematic for connecting with peers and developing a sense of belonging. There is perhaps a requirement, here, for a stronger teacher presence in locker rooms to prevent bullying behaviors from manifesting. It is worth remembering, though, that some of our autistic youth use the locker room and other spaces in the school to develop social bonds exactly because of the limited teacher surveillance. Moreover, while teachers in the locker room may reduce opportunities for and instances of bullying in schools, it is not a proactive approach for connecting students, developing friendships, and increasing feelings of belonging among (autistic) youth. Thus, there is a need for future research to explore strategies that can be used in PE, where there is typically a high focus on groups of students working together, to foster a sense of belonging. In this respect, we draw on the work of Heasman and Gillespie (2018) to call for the exploration of autistic youth intersubjectivities, and how those forms of intersubjectivity can flourish as autistic youth interact and develop relationships with non-autistic youth. For us, this work is imperative.

Given the central role that belonging plays in what it means "to be included", our research supports emerging ideas that even though autistic students were educated in the same physical, integrated spaces as their non-autistic peers, feelings of inclusion were largely unavailable to them. These findings, somewhat ironically given typical rationales for integrated education, contrast with those generally found when exploring autistic youths' experiences in self-contained settings (Blagrave, 2017; Pellerin et al., 2020; Yessick et al., 2020). As such, we support further problematizing ideas that inclusion is successful (Aktins, 2016) simply because autistic and non-autistic youth are enrolled in the same classes or teachers adopt superficial pedagogical recommendations that proliferate practice-based tests (Grenier, 2014). Here, it is also important to remind the reader that all our participants were white, male, autistic youths who communicated

verbally. These identity markers inevitably intersected and shaped their experiences of PE and the ways they constructed and articulated meanings about them. Therefore, we repeat calls for research that centers the experiences and amplifies the 'voices' of non-verbal autistic youth of color, including those who identify as female, to gain a stronger sense of how these identity markers intersect and influence peer interactions and relationship in PE. With that, we hope that we have gone some way to amplify the voices of male autistic youth (Milton & Bracher, 2013; Pellicano et al., 2014) and galvanized our academic colleagues to, among other things, consider autistic youth as having expert knowledge because of their lived, embodied experiences (Nichols et al., 2019). Only young people themselves know how they feel when they are thinking about and when they experience PE. Thus, we leave you with the words of Tucker:

> When I found out I had autism I guess I felt really different cause I always felt like there was something that made me different apart from the other kids in my class. And I guess when I found out [I had autism] I felt lonely and I didn't feel like I fit in with any of the other kids in my class. I guess in middle school I got beat up a lot and quit PE soon after.

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Table 1. Participants demographics.

Name	Gender	Age	Age of Diagnosis	Race/Ethnicity	Years in Integrated PE	PE Notes
Brian	Male	14	5 years	White	K-8	Grades K-3 he had a one-to-one aid in PE. Opted out of PE after 8th grade.
Chris	Male	14	5 years	White	All	Had an aid assigned to his small group.
Cleveland	Male	13	11 years	White	All	-
Glen	Male	14	11 years	White	All	-
Louis	Male	18	3 years	White	K-10	Specialized school 11-12.
Stewart	Male	18	4 years	White	K-8	No PE 9-12
Tom	Male	17	16 months	White	K-8	No PE 9-12
Tucker	Male	16	9 years	White	K-5	Excused from PE 6-8 because of bullying, high school PE is online.

Notes: PE is physical education; K is kindergarten; Brian and Chris are fraternal twins; Stewart and Tom are brothers.