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A Creative Non-Fiction Account of Autistic Youth Integrated Physical Education Experiences

Abstract

In the United States (US), the drive to integrate, or mainstream, disabled students into the same educational settings as their non-disabled peers has resulted in disparate opportunities and experiences. With that, more autistic youth than ever before are expected to assimilate into systems that are often not considerate of their needs and capabilities. We use a creative non-fiction narrative, crafted from qualitative interview data generated with eight autistic youth from the US, to explore subjective feelings of inclusion in integrated physical education contexts. Through Caleb's story, we explore the complexity of relationships and interactions between autistic youth and their peers and teachers in physical education, and how they may influence the ways and extent to which autistic youth experience feelings of belonging, value and acceptance in physical education spaces. We also consider the role of teacher expectations, curriculum decisions and pedagogical actions in shaping the PE experiences of autistic students.

Keywords: Inclusion; Belonging; Autistic Youth; Non-Fiction Narrative; Physical Education

Introduction

In America, more disabled students are being educated in integrated – known as 'mainstream' in the United Kingdom (UK) – schools than ever before (United States [US] Department of Education, 2018). The term *integrated* describes a *setting* in which all students, regardless of learning needs, are educated in the same physical space (Haegele, 2019). Movement toward integration in US schools – known as 'mainstreaming' in other countries – has been influenced by the belief that educating all students together is "a moral absolute that requires a single placement" (Kauffman et al., 2020, 5) and "the right thing to do" (Yell, 1995, 389). Concomitantly, there has been a drive for homogenous educational spaces, such as self-contained schools tailored to the specific educational needs and capabilities of disabled students, to be dismantled or phased out (Kauffman et al., 2020; Slee, 2018; Stainback et al., 1994).

Despite heterogenous schools occupying a higher moral ground in the US (Stainback et al., 1994), the education of disabled students in these settings is not without concern. For example, Kauffman and colleagues (2020) caution that the focus on the place of instruction rather than quality of instruction and support threatens the very nature and meaning of education for disabled students. They continue by asserting that the core of 'inclusive' education is individualized instruction, not placement, as it is impossible to meet all educational needs in a single environment selected *a priori* (Kaufman et al., 2018, 2020). Others have argued that integrated spaces can be discriminatory, often failing to facilitate full access to the curriculum and resources to disabled students (Shah, 2007). As such, while disabled and nondisabled students may be educated in the same space, disabled students are often denied the opportunity to have learning experiences relevant to their individual needs and capabilities (Norwich, 2008).

The tensions regarding integrated education found in other subjects (Kaufman et al., 2018, 2020; Shah, 2007) are also evident in physical education (PE) scholarship in both the US (e.g., Haegele, 2019) and UK (e.g., Fitzgerald and Kirk, 2009). For example, physical educators appear to be resistant to change and unwilling to rethink the nature of their activities (Kirk, 2010; Petrie et al., 2018) and expect disabled students to *fit in* to existing curricula (Haegele et al., 2020c). The PE teachers in research conducted by Dixon et al. (2021), which also gathered data from disabled students and their parents, attributed negative attitudes and an inability to develop more inclusive practices to inappropriate initial teacher education. When accommodations are initiated, they rarely move beyond simple or superficial cosmetic adjustments that "check a box" to communicate the appearance of *inclusion* (Fitzgerald and Stride, 2012; Haegele et al., 2020b). According to Haegele and colleagues (2020b), this behavior "may stem from the common belief that access and inclusion may be achieved by simply implementing 'inclusive strategies', or simple, observable changes, without ongoing input from those being 'included' regarding their perceptions of success and belonging within the space" (10). While making the basic observable adjustments which proliferate practice-based articles may be well intended, they can unintentionally contribute to forms of exclusion and reinforce inequities (Slee and Allan, 2001). As such, it is unsurprising that disabled students tend to report that, despite the seemingly good intentions of their teachers, obvious modifications to activities tend to highlight their inabilities rather than support their needs (Haegele et al., 2020a), and experiencing feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value within these settings is rare, both in US integrated (Haegele, et al., 2020) and UK mainstream PE spaces (Dixon et al., 2021).

The proliferation of integrated education coincides with increased interest in inclusive education (Obrusnikova and Block, 2020). Given challenges expressed about integrated

education, however, scholars have questioned whether education in heterogenous instructional spaces, including integrated PE classes, can provide *inclusive* experiences for disabled students (Atkins, 2016; Haegele et al., 2020c; Kauffman et al., 2020; Shah, 2007). The meaning of inclusion is contentious, and has been described as a "semantic chameleon" (Liasidou, 2012, 5) and "constantly changing and liquid" (Imray and Colley, 2017, 1) because it is "a word with multiple meanings" (Kauffman et al., 2018, 2) that appears to change depending on the context in which it is used (Petrie et al., 2018). Highlighting this, Slee (2018) asserts that "there is no general theory of inclusive education" (11) and that "it could be described as an assembly hall within which gather disparate and desperate postulations and propositions about the intersections of human and social pathology with education" (11).

Because of the multiple meanings of the term *inclusion*, and in alignment with recommendations from Graham and Slee (2008) to provide clarity on the term's use to flush out meaning, it was essential to explicate our use of inclusion. In this study, we adopt Stainback and Stainback's (1996) interpretation that the hallmark of inclusive education is the subjective experience of a sense of belonging, acceptance, and value understood from the perspective of the person who is being included. This is aligned with the position that the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of students themselves are central to interpretations of the inclusiveness of education (Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson, 2010; Goodall, 2020), and supports distinctions between what it means to be integrated into a setting and what it means to feel included within that setting (Haegele, 2019; Slee, 2018). That is, though disabled students may be physically present in the same space as their nondisabled peers, they may experience those spaces quite differently (Dyson and Slee, 2001; Haegele et al., 2020a; Haegele et al., 2020b; Slee, 2018).

According to Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson (2010), “inclusion understood as a subjective experience requires investigation from the perspective of the child who is to be included” (275). To date, though, few studies, which focused on blind, visually impaired, or physically disabled participants, have explicitly discussed feelings associated with inclusion in integrated PE contexts with disabled individuals (Dixon et al., 2021; Haegele et al., 2020a; Haegele et al., 2020b; Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson, 2010). Thus, we examine the perspectives of autistic students toward inclusion and their experiences in integrated PE. In this article, we use the terms ‘autistic students/youth/people’ because they were preferred by our participants and, as Catala et al. (2021) and Milton (2012) shared, are compatible with the identity-first language used by autistic self-advocates who view autism as an integral aspect of individual and collective identity.

Autism research has traditionally been conducted *on, about* or *for* autistic people, without the opportunity for their voices, and the unique insights these voices bring, to contribute to our understanding of their experiences (Chown et al., 2017; Crane et al., 2020; Pellicano et al., 2014; Goodall, 2020). This is reflected in PE research, where scholars tend to focus on the opinions of parents (Lee et al., 2020) or teachers (Obrusnikova and Dillon, 2011), and often make recommendations for practice (Grenier, 2014) without regard to the opinions of autistic youth themselves. This is problematic given the role that autistic students play in understanding their subjective experiences and interpretations of autism (Botha et al., 2020) and the inclusiveness of their education (Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson, 2010). By valuing, listening and amplifying the voices of autistic youth rather than those of parents, teachers, or scholars, salient features of educational experiences that contribute to feelings associated with inclusion

(Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson, 2010), or conversely marginalization and stigma (Botha et al., 2020), can be uncovered.

While there has been some growth in PE research in the US which recognizes the need for insider accounts by autistic youth, this area of inquiry has largely focused on exploring experiences in homogenous, self-contained PE settings (e.g., Blagrave, 2017; Pellerin et al., 2020; Yessick et al., 2020). It is important to note that in these studies, it appears that feelings associated with inclusion (i.e., a sense of belonging, acceptance, and value [Stainback and Stainback, 1996]) are available to autistic students, who report being engaged in meaningful activities and enjoying positive and supportive interactions with their peers and teachers (Blagrave, 2017; Yessick et al., 2020). While a small body of literature has emerged in this area of inquiry in other countries (Healy et al., 2013; Schliemann et al., 2020), where negative perceptions toward PE are abundant, and are primarily attributed to challenging peer interactions (e.g., bullying), sensory issues, and exclusion from activities, research examining integrated PE experiences of autistic youth in the US is absent from the extant literature. As such, we explore the perspectives of autistic youth toward the inclusiveness of their integrated PE experiences in the US.

Methods

This study was underpinned by interpretivism, with an emphasis on understanding the participants' interpretations of embodied experiences of integrated PE (Goodwin, 2020; Kiyunja and Kuyini, 2017). This paradigm assumes a relativist ontology, where multiple interpretations of experiences can be explored and meaning making is considered an embodied act by researchers and participants as they interact with one another, and others who are part of their wider relational networks such as teachers and peers (Goodwin, 2020; Sparkes and Smith, 2014).

Given that researchers' subjective beliefs, values, and inclinations inevitably shape the interpretive process, it is crucial that we explicate our positionalities so that others can consider how it may have shaped methodological decisions and interpretations of the participants' experiences and meaning making of those experiences. Both of us are white, heterosexual, cisgender men. [First author] has prior experiences as a physical educator teaching in a US school specifically designed for autistic students. Neither of us identify as having lived nor embodied autism, thus we may have been considered 'outsiders' by the participants we gathered data from. Collectively, our personal and professional interests are tied to a desire to gain an understanding of the educational experiences of autistic individuals.

Participants

Eight youth aged between 13 and 18 years with a diagnosis of autism participated in the research. All participants communicated verbally and were enrolled in an integrated public school in the US. In this respect, we note how we may have, albeit unintentionally, contributed to the silencing of those autistic youth who do not communicate verbally, and therefore encourage other scholars to disrupt what Bauman (2008) terms phonocentric orientations by engaging with autistic youth who use non-verbal modes of communication. While it was not our intention to use gender or race as part of our selection criteria, all participants self-identified as male and white. Thus, we, like others (e.g., Azzarito, 2009; Flintoff et al., 2008), acknowledge that the PE experiences our participants storied were inevitably gendered and racialised. Admittedly, we did not gather data relating to socio-economic status nor sexuality of participants and, thus, may have missed an important opportunity to explore how multiple identity markers intersected and influenced the ways our participants experienced and constructed meaning about PE (Azzarito, 2009). For transparency, we also note that [author 1] had a pre-existing relationship with all participants from

a previous research project [Authors, Date] that was used for recruitment purposes. We considered this as beneficial to our research because it meant that a relationship had already been established and rapport developed (Zitomer and Goodwin, 2014).

Recruitment involved the sending of an email to parents of prospective participants to re-establish a line of communication and describe the nature and purpose of the study, along with its ethical principles (e.g., anonymity). The email also described what their child's involvement would entail should they agree to participate, so that consent was fully informed (Bryman, 2015). Parents were asked to use our information letter to discuss the research with their child, and both were encouraged to email [Author 1] with any questions. Parent consent and child assent forms were completed electronically and returned to [Author 1] by all eight participants targeted for involvement. All consent and assent forms were completed prior to the scheduling of any interviews. At the outset of the interviews, [Author 1] further discussed the particularities of the study with the participants, encouraged and answered any questions about the study, and confirmed that the participants agreed to participate. During this conversation, participants were reminded of content presented within the assent form that explicated that their involvement in this study, and all data collected, were confidential, that data would be presented anonymously utilizing pseudoynms, and that they had the right to withdraw from this study at any time. All research protocols were reviewed and approved by [Author 1]'s university ethics committee.

Data Gathering

A semi-structured interview format was used that focused on centering and amplifying the voices of autistic students. Having worked with the participants previously, [Author 1] was aware that some experience anxiety during interview when asked questions they found difficult to process and respond to. Therefore, to alleviate potential anxiety, we followed the advice of Colombo-

Dougovito et al. (2020) by providing each participant with a copy of questions prior to the interview to allow them to prepare responses if they so wished. Furthermore, participants were given the option to conduct the interview by telephone or video calling technology, all of whom selected the latter. An in-person interview was not offered due to COVID-19 restrictions. It was explained to participants that their parent or guardian could be present during the interview to increase comfort and feelings of support. Both Casey and Brad (pseudonyms) elected to have a parent join them during interview. Interestingly, parents became involved in interview conversations, reminding their child about experiences relating to questions, which (unintendedly) resulted in deeper and more meaningful conversations about critical incidents and, in turn, the generation of thicker descriptions of experiences as a hallmark of quality in qualitative data (Tracy, 2019). These measures also served to diffuse (some) power from researcher to participants by giving the latter ownership over some of the decisions about data gathering.

Each interview began with [Author 1] reminding participants that the conversation would be audio-recorded. He continued by discussing the prior interactions that the participants had had with him to redevelop familiarity, rapport and set them at ease (Zitomer and Goodwin, 2014). Questions were open and followed by expansion, probing, and supplementary questions to encourage participants to tell stories about their lived and living bodies in PE (Smith and Sparkes, 2008). Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the relationships that participants had with PE teachers and other students given claims by Smith and Sparkes (2008) that stories are relational. The interview schedule and conversations were flexible, allowing the participants to dictate the pace and direction as another attempt to give them ownership (Howard et al., 2019). Interviews ranged from 35 to 65 minutes in duration, and all interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The stories were subjected to thematic analysis. The steps outlined by Braun et al. (2016) were used as a guide. Our analysis entailed [Author 2] listening to the audio recordings and reading the interview transcripts until they felt intimately connected to the storied PE experiences of participants. Next, labels were given to sections of the text that conferred meaning relating to the embodied experiences of participants and the objectives of our research. To aid sense making of initial themes, [Author 2] drew on [Author 1] as a critical friend. Through two Zoom conversations lasting over 90 minutes each, [Author 1] drew upon his experiences as a researcher and former teacher of autistic students to check and challenge the initial construction of knowledge. This supported [Author 2] to reflexively consider his interpretations of the stories of participants. Through these interactions and reflexive engagements, 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 the initial analysis (Braun et al., 2016). Here, [Author 2] tried to ensure that the storied experiences of all participants were represented so that no one was silenced. The themes constructed through this analytical process were: Inclusion as peer relationships; Inclusion as teacher relationships and teacher expectations; Inclusion as curriculum decisions; Inclusion as pedagogical actions. These themes and the associated direct quotes were used to craft a creative non-fiction story.

Data Representation through a Creative Non-Fiction Story

The potential of narratives has been embraced within disability studies (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) through: life stories (Goodley et al. 2004), ethnography (Smith, 2016), auto-ethnography (Neville-Jan, 2004) and oral histories (French and Swain, 2006). We drew upon guidelines offered

by Cheney (2001) and Caulley (2008) to craft a creative non-fiction account about Caleb, our main character, and his experiences of PE. Interview data were used to provide a concrete basis and verisimilitude to the story. Our story comprises of several scenes in order to illustrate experiences in motion, as life is (Miller and Paola, 2004), together with a few core characters (e.g. Mr. Jones, Mrs. Rice and Grant) to emphasize the relational dimension of Caleb's story. Moreover, we use the present tense throughout so that, as Caulley (2008) suggests, readers feel like they are eyewitnesses to a story as it unfolds. To draw our reader in and excite them emotionally, we offer rich descriptions of contexts and people, and write about and for the senses and about and for emotions. Informal and colloquial language is used, much of which was inspired by the verbatim words of our participants, to increase accessibility, credibility and authenticity as hallmarks of quality in creative non-fiction (Smith et al., 2015). In this respect, we recognize and acknowledge the ethics of speaking to and for the interests of silenced groups such as autistic students. Thus, we take our direction from Sparkes (1997) by drawing upon our power and privileges in the fields of PE, sport and physical activity to use a creative non-fiction account to fracture such silences and centre the experiences of autistic youth, hoping that this will compliment, though acknowledging that it may fall short of, the more participatory and emancipatory practices advocated by scholars of Critical Autism Studies (e.g., Chown et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2018). We believe that our thinking aligns with Milton (2014) and Woods et al. (2018) when we say that the stories that autistic youth live and tell are crucial; they, not us, are the autism experts because their knowledge and experiences of autism are lived and embodied.

Once the story was crafted, it was sent to [Author 1] in his capacity as critical friend. [Author 1] considered whether the story aligned with his memory of the interviews and his experiences working with autistic students as a way of exploring its resonance and believability.

[Author 1] also added reflective notes to the story that were conversational in nature and conveyed the ways and extent to which he connected with it emotionally. Given that data were gathered from US students about their experiences of PE in the US, but written by someone who lives and works in the UK, [Author 1] commented on the transferability of terminology, phrasing and believability of scenes. These comments shaped the re-crafting of the story because we wanted it to resonate with readers in both the US and UK, if not beyond. The final version of the story was sent to each participant to explore its generalisability, transferability and resonance (Smith and McGannon, 2018), but we save that for a future article.

Caleb's Story

It's 9am on a cold, bleak, Monday morning. That means one thing: time for PE. As the students stampede through the locker room and into the gym, knees knocking and teeth chattering because Mr. Brady, the maintenance guy, has been unable (again) to fix the heating, Caleb feels tired and apprehensive. He didn't sleep much last night. Thoughts were jumping around in his head. The harder he tried to sleep, the more sleep evaded him. He remembers looking at his clock, every hour, counting down the hours until 9am today. He really likes Mr. Jones, the PE teacher, but not PE. Not really. "Right everyone", says Mr. Jones, interrupting Caleb's thoughts. "Fitness testing today". "Yes!" exclaims Grant, the captain of the football team and a keen sportsman. Caleb's response is less positive. Standing at 5 feet 7 inches and weighing over 190 pounds at the last count, he isn't built for fitness testing, or at least that's what his elementary teacher told him. Plus, his arms are weak, at least compared to the other students. He never really thinks about his body. It's just, you know, a body. It looks a little different compared to other students, but not that much different. He thinks about it in PE though, especially during fitness testing. Caleb's stomach

is swirling about. His chest feels tight, and mouth dry. He tries to swallow, but there's nothing to swallow. He knows what happens next. It has become all too familiar.

"Ok boys. I have set up a series of activities. Push-ups, pull-ups, shuttle runs, and so on. Shuttle runs are up first. You know the drill. We are competing against each other. Fast as you can. Three, two, one, go", shouts Mr. Jones, the long blue vein in his neck protruding more than usual. I can't do this, thinks Caleb, as he runs within a crowd of bodies. He tries, though. He always tries. Mr. Jones has offered in the past to change this activity for Caleb, but he refused. He doesn't want to do it differently. He doesn't want to stand out. The guys already give him a hard time, especially about his weight, so imagine what they would say if they saw him not doing what they must do. "Well done Grant, first to finish again and you beat your personal best". A huge smile slowly creeps across Grant's face. How has he finished already? Ponders Caleb. I'm not even half-way through yet. One by one, they finish the activity. That is except for Caleb. Caleb's face is now bright red. Sweat is dripping down his forehead, into his eyes. Strawberry blonde eyebrows are offering limited protection and his vision is impaired. He stops. Exhausted. The cheap, royal blue, v-neck t-shirt that forms part of the school's PE kit is saturated. Combined with the freezing cold temperature of the gym, the PE kit is clinging on for dear life to his fleshy body, making running uncomfortable. Caleb feels embarrassed. And frustrated. Why am I so unfit? he wonders. Grant isn't even out of breath and my heart feels like it is trying to break out of my chest. He feels teary, but he won't cry. Not in front of the others. That would give them even more ammunition. PE shouldn't make me feel like this, he mutters under his breath.

It's 1pm on Thursday afternoon and Caleb walks through the heavy fire doors into the gym with a much warmer feeling. It's been a good day so far. He's had math with Mrs. Rice. He likes Mrs. Rice. She has a kind face and she asks how he is. She asks him what he did on the weekend

and they talk about sci-fi movies, which are his favorite. She says that they're her favorite too but she's just saying that, Caleb thinks. Caleb also likes math because he can sit on his own to do work. Sometimes he sits next to Scott, who also likes sci-fi movies, but Mrs. Rice often separates them because they spend too much time talking and not doing math. Caleb gets that. Math is important. He has something else to feel optimistic about too: no more fitness testing. Today, they are playing dodgeball. Caleb played it a few times in elementary school and really enjoyed it. Plus, he loves the dodgeball movie starring Ben Stiller. However, it's been ages since he last played. Mr. Jones selects the teams. He used to let the students select their own teams, but he doesn't do that anymore. I wonder why, ponders Caleb. Next, Mr. Jones explains the rules of dodgeball. Caleb tries to follow. He tries to concentrate. He tries to remember. He has played dodgeball before. However, there is a lot to remember. Caleb struggles to remember information, especially when people explain verbally, which is what Mr. Jones always does. Now, Mrs. Rice is different. She uses fewer words and writes stuff down. She even gives Caleb a handout to follow and comes to his desk to see how he's getting on. I should probably tell Mr. Jones what Mrs. Rice does, thinks Caleb, missing the final part of Mr. Jones' instructions.

The game begins. Excitedly, Caleb runs around the court, eager to avoid the balls thrown by the opposition; now his sworn enemy. There are balls flying everywhere and there is a lot of noise. "Ow", cries Ben, one of his teammates. Direct hit, shouts Grant, as he eliminates Zach, one of his football buddies and, for today at least, another teammate of Caleb. Caleb begins to feel anxious. His chest feels a little tighter, mouth slightly watery and breathing increasingly labored. There are too many people, too many objects flying about, and far too much noise. Caleb's eyes and ears feel overwhelmed. He tries desperately to block out the noise and concentrate. Easier said than done, though. It all feels a little overwhelming. He seeks refuge behind Ryan, a skinny

wimpish boy, half Caleb's size. Ryan's body-come-shield offers some protection, but not for long. One-by-one, players from each team, including Ryan, are eliminated. Caleb is one of only two players left on his team. Apart from having to avoid a couple of stray shots, it becomes clear to Caleb that the other students are not targeting him; they are targeting their friends and having a great time doing it. Caleb stands still, feeling dejected. "Mr. Jones", shouts Caleb, feeling emboldened: "No one is going for me. I might as well not even play. There's no point me even being here. I'm just making up the numbers". Before Mr. Jones has time to respond, the four remaining opponents, almost in sync, turn their attention towards Caleb. It's as if they had rehearsed the routine. In unison, they throw their dodgeballs with all their might in Caleb's direction. Two of the four strike his body with such force that he recoils, like a snail slowly slithering back into its shell. A moment later, a third ball hits him in the face. It's a perfect shot, as face-shots go. "I said no face-shots", bellows Mr. Jones. Caleb has to take a knee. He has to recover his glasses from the floor but more importantly he needs some time to recover himself. "Excellent shot", he hears from one student. "Thanks", Grant replies, gleefully. Grant. Of course, it was Grant. Caleb's eyes feel moist. He can feel the tears pooling in the corner of his eyes, desperately trying to escape his pupils. He's not sure if the tears are a result of the ball smacking into his face or if it's because of the anger and frustration he is feeling. He needs more time to compose himself. He cries often but never in front of other students. It'll just fuel the fire; give them more ammunition.

The changing room is not a safe space for Caleb. It is not a safe space for any student like Caleb. So, he changes clothing quickly, and does so in a stall. He doesn't want the others to see his pale, fleshy body. Once changed, he bends around a corner and darts towards the door; towards the exit and relative safety. Just before reaching the threshold: "Caleb, can we speak?". The net

has been cast and he's been caught. He wants to wriggle free but there is little room to maneuver. Caleb doesn't really want to talk right now. He likes Mr. Jones and they talk often, but not now. Nonetheless, he nods his head despondently and slowly shuffles into his office. "How do you feel, Caleb?", Mr. Jones asks cautiously. Caleb can feel his nose itching. His pubescent, slightly hairy lip quivers ever so slightly, and he prepares for what will come next. This feeling is familiar. A single tear is followed quickly by many others. His eyes are now red, very red, and his cheeks are saturated. Droplets fall from his slightly stubbled chin. He feels no shame, no embarrassment, only a release of tension. He likes Mr. Jones. He talks to him a lot. He often cries in front of him. Mr. Jones paces towards Caleb. He places a reassuring arm around Caleb's shoulder. It feels a little awkward because Caleb, to use his words, "doesn't do hugs", but he makes an exception. It is Mr. Jones, after all. He likes Mr. Jones. He likes him more than he likes most of the students. He can talk to Mr. Jones, unlike the others. And Mr. Jones keeps an eye on him. The other students usually don't mess with Caleb because they know that Mr. Jones is looking out for him. "What activities do you like, Caleb?" says Mr. Jones. "Kickball", Caleb responds immediately. "I have strong legs so I can kick it hard and far", he adds. Mr. Jones has never asked Caleb this question before. In fact, as far as Caleb can recall, Mr. Jones has never asked any student what they want to do in PE. Or maybe he has. Some of Caleb's memories get muddled up. "Ok", says Mr. Jones. "Let's have a go at that next week".

Analyzing Caleb's Story and Concluding Thoughts

Human experiences are complex, ambiguous, and contingent, and the task of constructing accessible and coherent accounts of such experiences is challenging (Carless et al., 2014). In this paper, we leveraged the genre of creative non-fiction in an attempt to highlight the complexities of experiences of autistic youth in integrated PE classes, and the associated particularities that

influence their understanding of the inclusiveness of their experiences. Before shifting from story teller to story analyst (Smith and Sparkes, 2008), we encourage our reader to pause and consider, as Ellis (1995) and Sparkes (1997) suggest, if Caleb's story illustrated patterns and connections between events; helped you to learn something about yourselves and/or the lives of others; was believable, conversational and connected with you emotionally.

The non-fiction narrative presents the story of Caleb, an autistic young person who is enrolled in an integrated PE class. Caleb's story was informed by the embodied experiences of eight autistic youth in the U.S. Similar to other reflections about integrated PE spaces (Haegele, 2019; Healy et al., 2013), participants provided accounts where feelings associated with belonging, acceptance, and value were rare. This is, notably, a clear departure from the generally positive feelings that autistic youth have reported about their experiences with practices in self-contained PE settings in the US (Blagrave, 2017; Pellerin et al., 2020). As such, Caleb's story provides an unapologetic depiction of what challenges within integrated PE classes may look like through the lens of autistic youth. Consistent with the participants' reflections of their integrated PE experiences, Caleb's story begins by introducing the reader to his 'learning' context, where he is expected to culturally assimilate (Maher, 2017) into an integrated PE class which appears to be designed without much consideration for his individual learning needs and capabilities. Stainback and colleagues (1994) have cautioned against this *dumping* of students into heterogenous groups and ignoring individual differences because of the potential for unintended and unnoticed consequences for disabled students. Against this backdrop, we viewed the depiction of Caleb's story as an opportunity to bring attention to the often unnoticed repercussions of *dumping* in integrated schools. This impacts Caleb's entire PE experience,

including his interactions with peers, the meaningfulness of his engagement in activities, and the (lack of a) sense of belonging, acceptance, and value he ascribes to his experiences.

While Caleb is clearly the central character in this creative non-fiction narrative, his experiences are inextricably linked to his interactions with other characters within the integrated PE space. Most notably, Caleb's interactions with Mr. Jones highlight a number of ways in which his teacher's behaviors impact his understanding of his integrated PE experiences. That is, throughout the narrative, Caleb exists in a pedagogical space, created and maintained by Mr. Jones, which appears to exemplify a "top dog" competitive culture where masculinities and gender codes are reinforced and boys are expected to be competitive, physically aggressive, tough, and enthusiastic team players (Bramham, 2003; Brown and Evans, 2004; Swain, 2006). This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the first scene of the narrative, where Mr. Jones celebrates the achievements of Grant, Caleb's hyperathletic classmate, while ignoring Caleb's – or, indeed, his own – shortcomings in the same activities. Prior scholarship has highlighted the challenges that those with non-ideal or alternative bodies experience in hypermasculine, ableist PE contexts (Haegele and Kirk, 2018; Swain, 2006), and Caleb is no different, where he questions the utility of his non-athletic body in sporting instances. The role played by Mr. Jones, and the importance of his relationship with Caleb, is reflected in the extant literature, which suggests that teacher-student interactions and relationships contribute significantly to disabled youth feelings of belonging in the spaces they find themselves (Haegele et al., 2020a; Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson, 2010).

While Mr. Jones' pedagogical decisions directly influence Caleb's experiences in integrated PE, a point highlighted by (Overton et al., 2017), they also indirectly exacerbate Caleb's relationships and interactions with his peers. As noted, curriculum decisions, and the

ways in which activities are presented, can promote (or disrupt) hypermasculine competitive cultures that may cast those with non-conforming bodies as unable, nonideal, or flawed (Swain, 2006). Consequently, bodies that are considered unable can act as a key perpetuate of bullying and other negative social interactions during PE (Haegele and Kirk, 2018). This phenomenon was keenly depicted in the second scene of Caleb's story, where his position as a student who was not competitive in dodgeball was exposed. Initially, he was ignored by his classmates until he called attention to himself and was aggressively dismissed (via face-shot) by his hyper-competitive classmates. These types of peer interactions, beginning with being ignored, then moving toward aggressive behaviors, while rarely depicted in other PE settings (e.g., Pellerin et al., 2020), have appeared in the literature examining PE from the viewpoint of autistic students outside of the US (Healy et al., 2013) and are largely informed by negative perceptions of difference. We would argue that teachers, like Mr. Jones, are the stakeholders responsible for constructing and supporting the learning environment and thus need to carefully consider their responsibility to providing an inclusive experience for autistic students, like Caleb, in their PE classes. Interestingly, this constrasts with PE teacher accounts of teaching autistic students in integrated PE, wherein self-initiated and self-regulated individual activities were said to be well received by autistic youth (Morley et al., 2021).

Despite the role that Mr. Jones plays in constructing a problematic, hypermasculine learning environment, and inadvertently exacerbating peer relationships for Caleb, Caleb still has an affinity for his teacher. This is indicative of the complexity of characters in stories, and relationships between people. From what we found, the positive aspects of their relationship are anchored to Caleb's opinion that Mr. Jones has good intentions and is someone who listens (Haegele et al., 2020b), but also because Caleb believes that Mr. Jones plays a role in reducing

peer bullying experiences. For instance, Caleb explicitly suggests that others ‘don’t mess with him’ because of the relationship he has with Mr. Jones. Whereas this interplay may communicate to readers that Mr. Jones has a protective role, we must also be mindful of the potential negative attention that a perceived ‘teacher’s pet’ role may have for students like Caleb, and the social repercussions that may follow. Indeed, prior research has demonstrated that close relationships with adult stakeholders during PE classes that take on protective roles may, in instances, bring unwanted attention, unintentionally magnify inabilities, and, subsequently, worsen peer relationships (Maher, 2017). While protective elements may therefore have some effect in public spaces with stakeholder supervision, students are largely ‘on their own’ in unowned or unstructured spaces that are less frequently monitored by adults (Migliaccio et al., 2017). This is evidenced in Caleb’s story, where he implicitly refers to social challenges he experiences while in a PE adjacent physical space, the locker room, and refers to it as ‘not a safe space.’ While this concept is not expanded upon in Caleb’s story, one may assume that Caleb was pointing out the challenges of being a student whose body does not *measure up* in a hypermasculine culture of PE, and having to share a changing space with those who view him in that way (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012). As such, Caleb elects to change in a stall to avoid this uncomfortable social situation and attempts to bend out of sight before being seen by his more athletic peers, such as Grant.

Caleb’s story is one that resonates as an example of an integrated PE experience that does not facilitate or support feelings associated with inclusion but, rather, may exacerbate stigmatization of autistic youth (Chown et al., 2017). It is important to reiterate, though, that experiences like Caleb’s are often perpetuated by stakeholders who champion integrated placements as a moral higher ground (Stainback et al., 1994). We assert that this includes those

who conflate *inclusion* with physical settings, and those that suggest that simple observational changes guarantee *inclusion* within integrated spaces (Lieberman et al., 2019), without concern for how those being educated within those settings are experiencing their 'education'. This perspective is problematic, as service providers may believe that students are *included* simply because they are in the same setting as those without disabilities (Haegele, 2019), and these one-size-fits all approaches to education can lead to unintended and often unnoticed consequences that are omnipresent in depictions of educational spaces, such as PE, from the viewpoints of those with disabilities (Haegele, 2019; Slee, 2018). Along these lines, Slee (2018) asserted that inequality and exclusion are "woven so tightly into the fabric of education, it often goes unacknowledged" (p. 12). Here, we offer the term *inclusion porn*, similar to the concept of inspiration porn coined by Stella Young, to characterize the exploitation of disabled people by subjecting them to unchanged or inappropriate heterogenous spaces so that non-disabled people can celebrate or be satisfied with their integration.

A primary suggestion for a teacher, like Mr. Jones, would be to engage in reflective teaching practices, where he engages in conversations directly with students to guide pedagogical improvements. In this regard, Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson (2010) suggest that by listening to the voices of disabled students, teachers can gain important insight into how spaces are experienced and what can be changed in order to enhance these experiences. By engaging with the voices of disabled students, teachers can reflect upon their pedagogical actions and curricular decisions to make attempts to enhance educational experiences for students. We argue that this would be a departure from teacher-centered approaches, such as Universal Design for Learning (Lieberman et al., 2020) or the utilization of observational checklists (Lieberman et al., 2019), where teachers make *a priori* decisions and expect students to 'fit in' to their classes. That is, we

encourage teachers to move past the conceptualization that meaningful, appropriate, or *inclusive* education is as simple as making superficial, cosmetic adjustments that ‘check a box’, or implementing strategies deemed to be ‘inclusive’ without ongoing input from students. Rather, teachers are encouraged to place the voices of students at the center of their decision making, and remain flexible within their pedagogical and curricular decisions in order to ensure feelings associated with acceptance, belonging, and value are available. In this way, we would encourage teachers, as well as academics, to focus more so on ensuring that *students feel included*, rather than center their attention on if *teachers feel like they are including* students. While it appears toward the end of Caleb’s story that Mr. Jones may be adopting this perspective, by asking Caleb how he is and what he’d like to participate in, what is unclear is whether this conversation will influence future pedagogical action, or if it is lip-service that will lead to unchanged pedagogical spaces.

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