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# Assessing the learning of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream school physical education

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## Abstract

In the UK, one consequence of neoliberalism has been the development of test cultures in schools and standardised assessment strategies used to judge all pupils against within and across curriculum subjects. Few studies to date have explored the influence of this on assessing the learning of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and none have centred physical education (PE). This study used the concept of ableism and semi-structured interviews to explore mainstream secondary school PE teachers' views and experiences of assessing the learning of pupils with SEND. Based on the findings, we discuss the importance of schools disrupting hegemonic, ableist modes of thinking that cast pupils with SEND as being of inferior ability when compared with their peers and thus being disadvantaged by standardised, normative assessment practices. Specifically, we identify a need for senior leaders and teachers in schools to recognise the needs and capabilities of pupils with SEND, through more holistic assessment approaches that focus on social, affective, cognitive and physical learning and development. We end by discussing the significance of initial teacher education and teacher networks to support this endeavour and advocating for the amplification of the voices of pupils with SEND, given that they have expert knowledge about the perceived inclusivity of assessment in PE because they can draw upon their lived and embodied experiences.

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**KEYWORDS**

assessment, disability, physical education, special educational needs

**Key insights****What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

Hardly any of the research about assessing learning in PE focuses on pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Therefore, our paper uses the concept of ableism to explore mainstream secondary school PE teachers' views and experiences of assessing the learning of pupils with SEND.

**What are the main insights that the paper provides?**

Schools need to actively disrupt standardised, normative assessments and ableist modes of thinking because they cast pupils with SEND as being of inferior ability when compared with their peers. Senior leaders and teachers in schools need to recognise the abilities of pupils with SEND through holistic assessment approaches that focus on social, affective, cognitive and physical learning and development.

**INTRODUCTION**

Within the UK, statutory assessments are conducted in primary and secondary schools via Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, respectively. These high-stakes assessments, which are a formal process of learning that benchmark pupil learning against peers and national standardised expectations, can be viewed as Assessment of Learning (Hay & Penney, 2009). Conversely, Assessment for Learning (AfL) is a more informal measuring process used by teachers to influence curriculum and pedagogical decisions so that what is taught and how it is taught align with the needs and abilities of learners and thus support their learning and development (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Opportunities for AfL, viewed as low-stakes assessments, are often integrated within lesson time by teachers to illustrate what has been learnt and to help teachers provide effective feedback and structure subsequent learning. When they have autonomy and expressive freedom, a teacher's agency—that is, their capacity to act—can be demonstrated through their ability to select and implement AfL strategies suited to what and who they are teaching, i.e. subject, the age of the children and the abilities of the children. However, over the last three decades in the UK, policies and agendas have been positioned towards a marketised educational system (Pratt, 2016), in which schools are compelled to compete against each other, which has seemingly disrupted the will of teachers to implement assessment processes that centre the needs, abilities and expectations of learners (Dinan-Thompson & Penney, 2015).

The formation of a marketised educational system involving standardised, high-stakes assessments, which align with neoliberal discourses, has enforced competition between schools via normative comparatives such as league tables and school rankings (Forrester & Garrett, 2016). Such school systems, prioritising performance monitoring and management,

have led to a culture of performativity and ‘the possibility that commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance’ (Ball, 2000, p. 6). This has ultimately contributed towards perceptions that teachers are solely teaching to the test, owing to the reality that their overall performance as an educator will be judged upon measurable outcomes via nationally standardised and normative-graded assessments (Pratt, 2016). In this respect, we take up the call by Pratt (2016) for research exploring the effect of market-orientated education policy on teachers’ assessment practices at the in-school level by focusing on assessing learning in physical education (PE).

There is an ever-growing body of research that has debated the use of assessment in PE (e.g. Dinan-Thompson & Penney, 2015; Hay & Penney, 2009; MacPhail & Halbert, 2010; Tolfors, 2018). Borghouts et al. (2017) proposed that for assessments to be ‘authentic’, opportunities must be provided for pupils to be fully integrated in the assessment process. Yet, traditional forms of PE, focusing on movement, sport, and participation, result in many teachers concentrating on a selection of abilities and skills that relatively few pupils can excel at performing (Penney & Evans, 2013). This emphasis on a narrow spectrum of assessment opportunities is exemplified by the popular use of tests for physical fitness, motor skill and sports performance in the subject (López-Pastor et al., 2013).

A narrow bandwidth of assessment domains presents issues around the inclusion of pupils with broader attributes. Some pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are particularly at risk when the physical domain of learning dominates, which is often the case, considering that the resources that they bring to PE are not always physically framed. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015), which provides statutory guidelines for education settings in the UK that work with pupils with SEND, stipulates that ‘high quality teaching that is differentiated and personalised will meet the individual needs of the majority of children and young people’ (p. 25). According to Vickerman and Maher (2018), contextualised assessments are crucial to personalising the learning of pupils with SEND. Yet, little is understood about assessing the learning of pupils with SEND in PE contexts, despite the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) insisting that schools should track their progress. Penney (2019) suggests that for assessment in PE to be inclusive for all pupils, teachers need to be given choice and flexibility to adapt the task, environment and approaches that they use. In the same manner, the issue with using standardised approaches to assessing learning in PE is that it could disadvantage some pupils with SEND as their needs and capabilities—that is what they are good at—are typically not considered nor valued (Haycock & Smith, 2010), especially when viewed through an ableist lens (Lynch et al., 2020). In this respect, though, modifying PE activities has not been well received by some pupils with SEND because this can do more to highlight differences, resulting in some of these pupils being marginalised by their peers (Haeghele et al., 2020). Given the perceived nuances surrounding the assessment of pupils with SEND in PE, it is imperative that we develop a stronger sense of current practices in this area to ensure that the learning and development of pupils with SEND are being appropriately supported.

The research relating to assessment in PE that is currently available focuses mostly on: how ability in PE is assessed (López-Pastor et al., 2013); learning about assessment through PE teacher education (MacPhail & Halbert, 2010); connecting curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in PE (Dinan-Thompson & Penney, 2015); and strategies and barriers to assessing learning in PE (Ní Chróinín & Cosgrave, 2013; Tolfors, 2018). There is empirical evidence related to assessing the learning of pupils with SEND in schools generally (Cumming & Dickson, 2013; LeRoy et al., 2019; Rasooli et al., 2021), but none of this research focuses on pupils with SEND in mainstream PE. This is problematic given that many mainstream teachers feel under-prepared to assess learning and effectively teach pupils with SEND in PE (Haycock & Smith, 2010), resulting in recommendations for changes in initial teacher education (ITE) provision and more continuous professional development

(CPD) opportunities for teachers (Morley et al., 2021). Hence, the purpose of this paper is to draw upon the concept of ableism to explore mainstream PE teachers' views and experiences of assessing the learning of pupils with SEND.

## Ableism

Our conceptualisation of ableism is inspired by the work of Fiona Kumari Campbell. For the purposes of this article, ableism relates to a network of ideologies, values, traditions and behaviours (in school and PE) that (re)produce a hegemonic, normative, mind–body–self that is projected and celebrated as perfect, species typical and therefore essential to being fully human (Campbell, 2019). From this purview, disability—and we add special educational needs—are cast as 'diminished state[s] of being human' (Campbell, 2001, 44) because they are perceived as not conforming to ableist expectations. It follows then that ableism in schools and PE permeates social relations and interactions, producing processes and systems of entitlement for pupils without SEND and disadvantage and exclusion for pupils with SEND. According to Goodley et al. (2019):

schools are built upon highly regulated principles and policy discourses of individual achievement and progression. They are inherently individualistic and reward the entrepreneurial achievements of self-governing learners. The school is a literal and metaphorical ableist playground.

(p. 987)

Accordingly, ableist systems such as school and PE, and standardised practices such as assessing learning, involve the 'differentiation, ranking, negation, notification, and prioritization of sentient life' (Campbell, 2017, 287–288). While this brief discussion falls short of exploring the theoretical complexity and sophistication of ableism, we hope it sufficiently explains the lens through which we considered PE teachers' views and experiences of assessing the learning of pupils with SEND.

## Context

These data were captured as part of a broader re-visit study (Morley et al., 2021), which sought to explore teachers' perceptions of a range of aspects pertaining to their ability to educate pupils with SEND in PE. Teachers' perceptions of assessing pupils with SEND in PE were, therefore, explored alongside: (1) the mechanisms for identifying pupils with SEND; (2) the ways in which pupils with SEND are categorised; and (3) the role and responsibility of learning support assistants and special educational needs coordinators, all of which have shaped the culture of mainstream school PE (Vickerman & Maher, 2018). In this paper, we present and discuss the sub-themes that underpinned the overarching theme of 'assessing the learning of pupils with SEND in PE'.

## Participants

Thirty-one PE teachers from state secondary schools across three cities in the north of England agreed to be involved in the research as a part of a purposive, convenience sample

(Robson & McCartan, 2016). Participants were selected to provide balance in terms of gender and teaching experience and given a pseudonym to protect their identities:

- female teachers with fewer than 3 years' experience (Gail, Trish and Kate);
- male teachers with fewer than 3 years' experience (Brad, Leslie and Paul);
- female teachers with 3–7 years' experience (Isla, Susan and Diane);
- male teachers with 3–7 years' experience (John, Peter and Caleb);
- most experienced male teachers within the school (Eric, Thomas, Samuel, Frank, Chris, Norman, Richard, Ryan, Callum and Phil);
- most experienced female teachers within the school (Lisa, Terri, Anya, Rachael, Harriet, Chloe, Charlotte, Fiona and Sarah).

The participation of all teachers was voluntary, with all being made fully aware of the study's focus, the procedures that would be undertaken, the nature of their contribution and the confidentiality of their responses. They were also made aware that they could end the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time and that there would be no implications for their school or themselves if they did so. The access to and sharing of data was confined to the research team and managed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations, using an approved data management plan. Ethical approval was granted by (Leeds Beckett University's, following review) ethics committee (ER13499520).

## METHOD

A team of seven researchers met at regular intervals prior to the beginning of the interviewing process to discuss the construction of the interview schedule, in relation to the research aims. Drawing on our knowledge of the research literature and experiences in the field, we developed an interview schedule that comprised five sections: (1) inclusive PE, definitions and purpose; (2) resourcing and support; (3) initial teacher education and continuous professional development; (4) the PE curriculum; and (5) teaching and assessment strategies. While the themes discussed below draw data from many of the areas of focus, it is the fifth section that is of most relevance to this study. Here, we asked several key questions, including: 'What do children with SEND learn in PE?', 'What strategies do you use to assess the learning of children with SEND in PE?' and 'Why are those assessment strategies used for children with SEND in PE?' Towards the end of the interview, we asked teachers two questions that we felt would empower participants to speak freely about their perceptions, unconstrained by the structure of the sections we had designed; these were (1) 'Is there anything you would like to add about the issues we have discussed?' and (2) 'Is there anything else that you feel may be of value to our research?' The research team continued to meet at regular intervals to discuss aspects of the interview schedule throughout the research window as part of an iterative process of reflection to share thoughts and ideas around interview structure and the use of probes, and to capture a general sense of participant responses. While this enabled us to achieve some consistency in relation to the key areas of focus and core questions asked during each interview, we also wanted interviewers to have the freedom to follow lines of inquiry that emerged during conversations, providing they were relevant to the aim and purpose of the research. Moreover, using multiple interviewers improved the trustworthiness of the study by reducing the potential researcher bias created by an individual conducting all of the interviews (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).



## Data analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a third party. The authors then listened to the recordings of the interviews they conducted and scrutinised the transcriptions to verify their accuracy. Data management was facilitated using a standard word-processing package (Microsoft Word) and all transcripts were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. The interview transcriptions were analysed by the first author using a process of selective coding because this enabled us to systematically filter our data and focus on the meaningful essence running through our entire dataset (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). At the start of this process, instances were identified within the text where respondents had talked about issues pertinent to the research aims. In accordance with procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (2014), these individual units of meaning were then initially represented by a short phrase. Once the first author had completed this initial analysis, the second and third authors met to reflexively consider (Smith & McGannon, 2018) the themes and units of meaningful essence that were constructed. Following the discussion, the first author designed thematic descriptors and articulated the essence that he felt was contained within each theme. For example, a theme of 'teachers need to assess learning holistically' was designed with a thematic descriptor of 'responses that refer to beliefs and ideas about how learning should be assessed in PE'. This allowed for a rich, interpretative dialogue so that the themes could be interrogated further. Some themes were re-positioned and even renamed when it was felt that data were misrepresented, and higher-order themes developed to encapsulate the meaning of lower-order themes. For example, an initial theme of 'Standardised approaches disadvantage pupils with SEND' was subsumed within the theme of 'Standardised approaches to assessment in physical education'. This clarification of themes and associated thematic descriptors allowed us to conduct axial coding more accurately to avoid duplication and further substantiate areas of deep interest to the field of study. Concurrently, once higher- and lower-order themes had been assigned, they were designated as branches within the NVivo software system for qualitative data analysis and a further process of cross-analysis was conducted. A comparison of themes facilitated by NVivo was conducted at both the initial and post-analysis stages, allowing units to be merged or split appropriately. Through this process, the following three themes were constructed: (1) standardised approaches to assessment in physical education; (2) teachers need to assess learning 'holistically', rather than prioritising physical performance; and (3) teachers should focus on assessing the progress of pupils with SEND. These have been used to structure the Results presented below. The results are presented through thick textual descriptions that engender honesty and transparency as hallmarks of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Following Elias's (1978) claim that research needs to be theoretically driven and empirically informed, the Discussion draws upon our conceptualisation of ableism to provide a critical discussion of PE teacher views and experiences of assessing the learning of pupils with SEND.

## RESULTS

### Standardised approaches to assessment in physical education

A standardised approach to assessing learning in PE was used in nearly all schools. Some teachers in our study advocated assessing all pupils in the same way because, according to them, it made pupils with SEND feel included. For instance, Fiona said:

Most of our students, if not all of them, want to feel included with the rest of the group. They do not want to feel different. I told you about the girl that said, 'don't enlarge it for me, I want to be part of this group. I can cope, I can manage.' They do not want to be singled out.

Similarly, Rachael argued:

to give them [pupils with SEND] a completely different set of criteria, assessment levels, whatever we are going to call them. Would that be wrong in itself? I think it would because there are some students like the hearing-impaired student for example that physically are not affected. So why cannot they be graded, assessed in the same way as the other students? For me, it allows them to feel included.

However, most teachers expressed concerns that a standardised approach to assessing learning was disadvantaging many pupils with SEND because it did not consider the needs and capabilities of these pupils. In this respect, Paul insisted:

I think it's [assessing pupils with SEND the same as age peers] really poor because they [pupils with SEND] are on a totally different path in how they are going to be in life and the challenges they have are not exactly the same as someone who is a high-flying athlete. A high-flying athlete should be assessed on what skills they are doing, but then the students with learning difficulties have totally different challenges.

One reported consequence of all pupils being judged against the same criteria was that some pupils with SEND were consistently receiving low grades. This point came through a conversation with Phil:

**Phil:** I had someone with executive function disorder years ago, and he did okay, but it really affected his coordination. He could do certain things, but he was never getting to a high level in PE, but he was really bright.

**Interviewer:** And his grades were not differentiated?

**Phil:** They're not differentiated. Basically, that's your grades. I remember feeling really bad. I still do when it happens now. You put their grade into SIMS [online platform] and the big red bang happens. The square turns red because they are way below target.

To avoid potential disadvantage, some teachers suggested that they 'flexibly' applied generic assessment criteria. According to Caleb:

We've gone, as everyone else, to assessment without levels. And we do assess them [pupils with SEND] on the same sort of levels as the other students, but I suppose we are a little bit more flexible. We do try to not be hung up on 'you are at this stage'. It's more about what can the student do to be better or in the next category. So, we have tried to move away from all of them being pigeon-holed.

A few teachers argued that pupils with SEND should have their own assessment criteria. A conversation with Charlotte illustrated with argument:



**Charlotte:** They [pupils with SEND] should be assessed differently because they are never going to access those top grades, and that's not fair. That is unfair.

**Interviewer:** Why is it unfair?

**Charlotte:** Because they [pupils with SEND] have not chosen to have that need have they, so you are automatically cancelling out the fact that they cannot achieve the top levels.

For Susan, the rationale for pupils with SEND having their own assessment pathway was to help motivate them to engage in PE:

What do their [pupils with SEND] results mean when they leave school and go off to college? What's their next steps in education? Are they going to go and do vocational courses? Has it been worthwhile doing it? I think assessment from year seven to 18 is wrong for SEND kids. They should have their own assessment pathway. I do not know how that would work ... you know, it's really hard, because I've been on the other side of it, it is really hard to motivate these students to do well when they are being marked against the rest of the country.

## Teachers need to assess learning 'holistically', rather than prioritising physical performance

Our research found that there was notable emphasis placed on assessing the development of physical skills and sports performance in PE, as illustrated by John:

We base it [assessments] all off sporting ability. We do not tend to assess them as much ... we tend to use professional judgement. Assessing components of fitness does not always assess their sporting performance, so we found that there are certain kids who did not do well in the fitness so they are in middle set but actually when it comes to sports performance, they were outstanding. So, our setting is based on professional judgement of sporting ability. SEND can be sort of mixed in.

While Charlotte also mentioned the focus on assessing physical performance, she acknowledged that a consequence of this would be that some pupils with SEND may not be able to access the higher grades:

They're [pupils with SEND] not really assessed any differently than everybody else. We have the same pathways. We would look at identifying, but it would usually be based on performance, though fitness levels would be taken into account. So, there's nothing to say that they would be physically fit, but in general it would be the same as everybody else. They [pupils with SEND] would not generally access the higher levels within that.

A few teachers did acknowledge that some pupils with SEND demonstrated strong sporting performance in PE, but these examples were in the minority. For instance, Sarah said:

The honest answer is that there's no real difference in the way we assess pupils with SEND. There is not the time. They're in a class of 33, 34. The marks get

given the same as everybody else on what they can do. I mean, some SEND might be good at certain sports. We have some who are good swimmers, so they can get good marks. But, obviously, there are certain things where it is going to affect them. If they have not got any coordination it is going to affect. There is no provision for that. It is a case of this is your marks.

Some teachers had scope to include 'effort' as part of the assessment criteria, and while this enabled them to reward those who they perceived 'worked hard' during PE, some were concerned that it did not encompass enough of the criteria to counterbalance the focus on the development of physical skills and sporting performance:

Unfortunately, they [pupils with SEND] get the same as everybody else on the National Curriculum level. Years ago, before the department changed, people used to get a mark if they could coach or that side of things, so the coaching side and observing. Now, it went back to just physical PE, so everyone is graded the same no matter whether they are SEND or not. You do get an effort grade, so a child with SEND could be putting a massive amount of effort in but would still come out with maybe an 'emerging', which I think is quite upsetting and demoralising.

(Harriet)

Other PE departments had a much more holistic approach to assessing learning, focusing on social and emotional learning, as well as attitude and effort. All of those who used this more holistic approach were extremely positive about it. For instance, Leslie explained:

We assess core skills like communication and working with groups and teamwork. So, it's a grid across different areas within the topic and we'll assess all pupils across that. We've tried to make it a broader spectrum. All the domains; social, emotional, and so on.

It was claimed that a more holistic approach to assessment allowed for pupils with SEND to demonstrate their abilities in a wider range of areas, and for teachers to acknowledge and reward pupils in a wider range of areas of development:

Assessment stands out for me as the most significant change. Old assessment procedures, where you were more focused on physical improvement and more like the old GCSE assessment, looking at skills, looking at 'can you impact on a game?', things like that. Actually, going away from that and looking at the development of the whole individual I think has made a huge difference. And then, SEND students, they can achieve, and we can reward that.

(Chloe)

## Teachers should focus on assessing the progress of pupils with SEND

For most teachers, it was crucial that they focused more on the progress made by pupils with SEND, rather than the specific grades they achieved. Isla, for one, said:

I'd maybe say the assessment, that part does not matter, their attainment, should we say, does not matter, it's their effort and as long as progress is being made is important.

Similarly, Richard explained:

I suppose we are [PE] a little bit different in one sense, the way we come to assessment. English or maths or science is very more formal and rigid and we [PE] have different ways of assessing them. We look at different areas, different strands, overcoming barriers and also progress from where they were. Often students with SEND are coming in on the real low baseline. They may still be down the lower end, but they have still made really good progress.

When discussing the importance of progress in PE, emphasis was placed on the language used and communicated to pupils about their progress. Instead of using grade boundaries, or numbers relating to levels of attainment, terms such as emerging, developing, achieving and succeeding—or bronze, silver and gold—were favoured as these were believed to be more supportive and even helped to motivate learners with SEND:

Key stage 3, so my current year nines, are working on gold, silver, and bronze, which works really well for SEND because there's not much to go at but if they complete specific sports or activities to a certain standard, then they would meet more gold, silver, bronze. The pupils like that. This year, for year 7, it is a brand new one [assessment framework], which is beginning, developing, achieving, securing, extending all with criteria.

(Chris)

In a similar vein, Diane suggested:

The students will be 'working towards' something. That's the language we use. I think perhaps working towards is a better phrasing for something than maybe giving them a level one [grade], when the rest of the students in their year group might be getting a three or a four. We do not want to pigeon-hole them (pupils with SEND). We want to use language that reflects their progress to keep them interested.

Interestingly, some teachers suggested that some pupils with SEND appeared to be over-achieving and making rapid progress in PE because their target was based on Key Stage two data (test results in English, mathematics and science), which was lower than their ability in PE. This point came through a few conversations, including this one with Thomas and Anya, two teachers from the same school, who were interviewed together:

All students who are on our SEN register, if we were going to assess them using a different model, I'm not sure that would work. Based on the Key Stage 2 data, one of those students might come in with a tier 1 target and because they thrive in PE from that physical sense, they have a different way of expressing themselves, they could actually be really excelling because they have got a lower target.

(Thomas)

Conversely, some of the so-called 'more able pupils in PE' were underachieving in PE because their target, again based on Key Stage 2 data, was much higher:

I think more of our lower ability students, whether they are SEND or not, are coming out much better at the moment than our more able pupils in PE because

their targets are from primary school. We know that it's our more able students that aren't getting the recognition when they go home with their data because it looks like they are underachieving and it looks like they are not making progress. We could end up having a room full of low ability pupils just because their target's low.

(Anya)

## DISCUSSION

Some of the teachers in our study advocated for a standardised approach to assessing learning whereby the abilities of all pupils are judged in the same way using the same criteria. Here, teacher-value was attributed to ideas of equality and sameness, which is, according to Maher (2018), unsurprising given the strong association between concepts of inclusion and equal opportunities discourses woven through government education policy and school-based practices. For these teachers, this purview was based on a desire of not wanting pupils with SEND to be considered nor treated differently. We see merit in this given that some pupils with SEND have suggested that instructional and activity modifications, which are established practices in so-called inclusive education (Vickerman & Maher, 2018), are not received favourably by some pupils with SEND because when considered through an ableist lens they do more to highlight differences, which can result in these pupils being marginalised and even ostracised by age peers (Haegele et al., 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that differentiated assessment may not be welcomed by all pupils with SEND, but that is something for future research to explore because the evidence base is limited.

Most teachers expressed concerns that a standardised approach to assessing learning was disadvantaging many pupils with SEND because it did not consider their needs and capabilities, which can be quite different from those of their age peers. Interestingly, such a standardised approach to assessment, which is based on the ableist assumptions that one (normative) size fits all (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2020), is indicative of an individual understanding of disability whereby pupils with SEND are to assimilate into dominant ableist expectations about how normative mind–bodies should look, move and learn in PE. This is tied to neoliberal test-culture ideals (Borghouts et al., 2017; Connell, 2013; Dinan-Thompson & Penney, 2015) and is contrary to research about the most effective ways to support learning and development. Indeed, much of the literature in this respect advocates for tailored approaches to assessing learning, focusing on: (1) establishing where the learners are in their learning; (2) where the pupils are going in their learning; and (3) what needs to be done to get them there (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 2009).

To avoid potential disadvantage to pupils with SEND in PE, some teachers in our study, like those in research conducted by Haycock and Smith (2010), suggested that they 'flexibly' applied this standardised approach to assessment, particularly in relation to the use of assessment criteria, although no concrete examples were offered about how this was done in practice. It was more about teachers using their agency and the micro-political freedom (Thomson & Sparkes, 2020) that some—not all—seemed to have to make intersubjective judgements when assessing learning. While flexible application may reflect an acknowledgement by teachers that assessment criteria in PE is ableist and therefore inappropriate for some pupils with SEND, it is concerning that teachers did not have at their disposal assessment criteria that were suitable for judging, appreciating, rewarding and/or celebrating a wider range of mind–body in PE, especially those that fall outside of ableist expectations about corporeal aesthetics. Nonetheless, it is important to note here that the actions of most teachers, whether they supported a standardised approach to assessing learning

or not, were often constrained by their school leadership team (SLT) to use the universal GCSE performance targets set across all subjects, which were tied to pupil performance in their SATs at the end of Key Stage 2 (pupils aged 11). This point illustrates the role of the SLT, who, it could be argued, possess elevated levels of power in schools, as conduits to the government's neoliberal agenda by actively (re)producing standardised test cultures (Borghouts et al., 2017; Connell, 2013; Dinan-Thompson & Penney, 2015) and embedding and legitimising, whether they realise it or not, ableist systems in school that reward pupils without SEND and disadvantage pupils with SEND (Campbell, 2017, 2019).

Many of the teachers in our study suggested that there was significant emphasis placed on assessing the development of (normative) physical skills and performance in competitive sport, which is unsurprising given the hegemonic position of sports on the curriculum and the high prevalence of standardised, product-oriented assessment practices such as the assessment of isolated technical skills (Lorente-Catalán & Kirk, 2013). Here, we share the concerns of López-Pastor et al. (2013) and Borghouts et al. (2017) about the authenticity of such parochial assessment practices because they have been found to lack meaningfulness as many pupils struggle to connect them to their lives outside of school. Importantly, some teachers in our research suggested that such a focus served to disadvantage some pupils with SEND. Even for those pupils who experienced a significant physical disability, assessment strategies and criteria remained the same, resulting in some pupils (unfairly, according to the teacher we interviewed) receiving low grades. Here, it seemed that pupils were being penalised, even punished, for being disabled and thus unable to meet the ableist expectations that were embedded in school and PE assessment processes. A few teachers did acknowledge that some pupils with SEND demonstrated strong sporting performance in PE, but these voices were in the minority, which is perhaps indicative of hegemonic, ableist ideals of ability. Here, we draw on the work of Evans (2013) and Maher et al. (2020) to argue that the ableist performative culture permeating the field of PE and associated notions of ability are socio-political in nature. Such performative cultures shape ableist perceptions of corporeality and thus the construction of legitimate forms of ability-related (physical) capital. According to Croston and Hills (2017), pupils who are positioned and perceived as possessing such ableist capital are privileged over others. Too often, these hegemonic, ableist beliefs about (physical) capital are based on normative perceptions of how (able) bodies should look and move, thus resulting in many disabled pupils and some with special educational needs having their bodies and movement patterns judged negatively through an able-bodied gaze (Lynch et al., 2020).

Some teachers had scope to include 'effort' as part of the assessment criteria to disrupt, whether they realised it or not, the dominance of ableist perceptions of what is valued in PE. Teachers argued that this enabled them to reward those pupils (with SEND) who worked hard during PE, a point reported in general PE research (e.g., Borghouts et al., 2017). However, some teachers were concerned that 'effort' did not encompass enough of the criteria to counterbalance the focus on the development of normative physical skills and sporting performance. Some PE departments seemed to have much more autonomy over assessment criteria, and many had used such autonomy to assess the learning of pupils holistically, by focusing on social and emotional learning, as well as physical performance, attitude and effort. The ways and extent to which this approach disrupted ableist assessment practices in PE and thus enabled for a more rounded judgement of the learning and development of pupils with SEND is difficult to know based on the data we have available. Interestingly, concerns have been raised about the intersubjective, transient, and potentially ephemeral nature of effort and attitude specifically (Ní Chróinín & Cosgrave, 2013), which can lead to potential difficulties in assessing pupils in PE. Notwithstanding these concerns, we welcome holistic, multi-dimensional (rather than uni-dimensional) notions of ability, advocated by others, including Bailey and Morley (2006) and Whitehead (2010), because they may contribute



towards disrupting hierarchal ableist notions of ability, whilst recognising the importance of pupils (with SEND) learning and developing holistically (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2020). Indeed, all of the teachers in our research using this more holistic approach were extremely positive about it because it allowed for pupils with SEND to demonstrate the diversity of their abilities, and for teachers to acknowledge and reward pupils, in a wider range of areas of development.

Other teachers focused more on the progress made by pupils with SEND, rather than the specific grades they achieved. While a focus on learning as a journey rather than a destination, which values how and to what extent a learner has developed over time, aligns with government expectations (DfE, 2011) and research about best practice in assessment for learning (MacPhail & Halbert, 2010; Ní Chróinín & Cosgrave, 2013; Redelius et al., 2015; Tolgfors, 2018), some research has suggested that pre- and in-service PE teachers find it difficult to judge the progress of some pupils with SEND because their perception of type and rate of progress is embedded in ableist expectations of what typically developing pupils should be able to learn and do (Maher et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it was interesting to learn that teachers were more likely to focus on the progress of pupils with SEND than their age peers. In this respect, emphasis was placed on the language used to communicate with pupils about their progress. Instead of using grades boundaries or numbers relating to levels, terms such as 'emerging', 'developing', 'achieving' and 'succeeding' were favoured as these were believed to be more supportive and even helped to motivate learners with SEND. Again, we query why this approach was used solely for pupils with SEND and not their age peers because the perceived benefits would apply to all pupils. This was something that proved difficult to tease out during the interviews but is, nonetheless, a clear indicator that assessment criteria are ableist and thus need reconsidering. Concerningly, it seemed that less value was placed on the grades achieved by pupils with SEND than their age peers, which is contrary to government claims that teachers should have high expectations for all pupils (DfE, 2011). In fact, in some instances, it appeared that pupils with SEND were exempt from the performative test-culture expectations that were prevalent in all our study schools. Consequently, some teachers openly acknowledged that some pupils with SEND may not have the grades to continue studying the subject beyond GCSE, which is a clear example of how ableism pervades assessment arrangements in schools, impacting negatively on the educational attainment, options for future education and thus life chances of pupils with SEND. As advocates for pupils with SEND and PE, we are concerned that the ableist beliefs of some teachers about pupils with SEND and PE, together with the assessment arrangements that some have implicitly constructed, promote and value, act as barriers to some pupils with SEND continuing to study PE beyond compulsory education.

## CONCLUSION

We end this article with a call for action. From our research it seems obvious that there is a need to disrupt, even dismantle, hegemonic, ableist modes of thinking that cast pupils with SEND as being of inferior ability vis-à-vis their age peers and thus being disadvantaged by standardised, normative assessment practices. While the road towards achieving this cultural change will be a difficult one, there is a need for teachers to recognise the needs and capabilities of pupils with SEND, through more holistic approaches that focus on social, affective and cognitive as well as physical learning and development. This will contribute towards disrupting ableist perceptions of, and practices relating to assessing learning in PE, enabling pupils with SEND to develop and demonstrate a wider repertoire of knowledge and skills than is currently the case. Such an approach becomes much more feasible if supported by SLTs given that they have their hands on the levers of power in schools and thus can play



an important role in dismantling ableist systems in schools generally and ableist assessment expectations specifically. To do so, however, would require those senior leaders to actively resist what Connell (2013) calls the intensified testing regimes that are a central part of the neoliberal agenda in education.

For Connell (2013), high-stakes competitive testing produces significant pressure to teach to the test: narrowing the curriculum to the knowledge and skills being tested and drilling the specific ableist performances that pupils must demonstrate during the test. Based on what we have found, it seems that SLTs are doing much to legitimise ableist test cultures in schools. What can be done, which is perhaps more feasible, is that teacher education needs to focus more on equipping pre-service teachers especially with the knowledge, skills, experience and confidence to disrupt ableist systems and practice in PE generally and assessment specifically. Practically, this will be beneficial because research suggests that newly qualified and early career teachers lack knowledge and skills to assess learning in PE (Moura et al., 2021; van der Mars et al., 2018). Given that teachers find it difficult to change established (ableist) ways of thinking and teaching (Lorente-Catalán & Kirk, 2013), it is crucial that expert teacher educators and researchers in SEND and assessment work together with teachers to help them to critically reflect on their beliefs about ability and assessment in PE to support them to understand and implement more inclusive assessment arrangements. We agree with Haegele and Maher (2021), who insist that it is crucial that the experiences of pupils with SEND are centred and their voices are amplified given that they have expert knowledge about the inclusivity of assessment arrangements in PE because they have lived and embodied them. Concomitantly, networks of PE teachers from different schools could be developed, allowing teachers to meet and share experiences and views on assessing the learning of pupils with SEND in PE. From a research perspective, more needs to be known about the most effective assessment arrangements for pupils (with SEND) in PE.

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