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'Hearing their voice': the experiences of physical education with pupils diagnosed with severe learning disabilities

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ABSTRACT

The number of children educated within maintained Special Educational Needs (SEN) Schools, known as special schools, in England has continued to rise since 2006, yet the 'pupil voice' of children and young people with severe learning difficulties and those attending special schools remains limited in current research. Drawing on Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (see Jones, 2006), this study aimed to provide an under-represented group with the opportunity to express attitudes and opinions towards their physical education (PE) lessons. The research adopted a participant-focused methodology and used a task-based approach, where participants could complete a series of activities suitable to individual needs. The tasks included a drawing activity, a PE likes and dislikes activity and a storyboard with the following sentence starters: 'I like', 'I don't like', 'I feel', 'I want to' and 'I think'. PE took on multiple forms, including therapy sessions and team games, thus suggesting that PE was not narrowly defined as one specific form of education for the pupils. Participants were able to express strong opinions towards the type of activities they liked and disliked and were able to demonstrate a basic understanding of the benefits of PE in relation to health. Results indicate that team-based sports were popular and culturally valued. However, participants were often bored of repetitive PE lessons and well-liked therapy-related exercise often replaced PE classes. Older participants (16 years +) attending sixth form were frustrated that PE or the ability to be physically active during the school day was no longer part of their education, suggesting that perhaps PE lessons were not always culturally valued within the school. Finally, due to the lack of opportunities for adults with special education needs in the wider community, participants no longer had access to the types of physical activity they had enjoyed in school.

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Introduction

This article centralises children's experiences of Physical Education (PE) within special schools, contributing to a limited area of research that explores the nature, purpose and value of PE in special schools. This is significant because special education is often contested - some authors highlight the humanitarian strand of special schools, whilst others acknowledge the segregated nature between mainstream and special education (Robertson et al., 2013). The need for separation was driven by an ideology that children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) required

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'specialist' provision (Maher et al., 2020). However, inclusion within mainstream schools has become more prevalent, particularly in Western countries (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

There remain continuing debates about how best to educate young people with disabilities, with special schools described by Florian (2013) as the 'contested terrain' of education. The Green Paper *Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs* (1997) indicated the UK's first real commitment towards achieving an inclusive education system (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1997). More recently, the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) provides statutory guidelines that local authorities and schools must follow and must consider the educational preferences, views and wishes of the child and the child's parents. Yet, the number of children educated within maintained Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, also known as special schools, has continued to rise since 2006 (DfE, 2019; 2020). After the publication of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), several changes to education policies and practices were made in England, including the SEND Code of Practice which provides statutory guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities (DfE/DoH, 2015, p. 1).

Educational legislation mandates that all school-aged children have the opportunities to participate in PE, and if necessary, receive individually designed instruction (Sato & Haegele, 2017). Unsurprisingly though, PE is an environment in which many disabled children and adolescent's do not feel 'belonging, acceptance or value' (Maher & Haegele, 2022, p. 130). A revised National Curriculum for PE (NCPE) was published in 2013, highlighting the purpose PE as:

> A high-quality physical education curriculum inspires all pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport and other physically demanding activities. It should provide opportunities for pupils to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness. Opportunities to compete in sport and other activities build character and help to embed values such as fairness and respect (DfE, 2014, p. 1)

For children and young people with SEND, and particularly, autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), PE can be a challenging environment. The culture of team games and competitive situations requires a level of cognitive and social skills that many pupils with SEND (and ASD) are not able to deal with (Lamb et al., 2016; Stockley, 2010). As a result, research shows activities that can be undertaken on an individual basis (e.g. fitness-based activities such as running or gym-based activities) are often more appealing (Lamb et al., 2016; Todd & Reid, 2006). To ensure inclusion for all pupils the National Curriculum inclusion statement encourages teachers to adopt modified activities within PE and use alternative assessment methods in order to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with SEND:

> Lessons should be planned to ensure that there are no barriers to every pupil achieving. In many cases, such planning will mean that these pupils will be able to study the full national curriculum. The 0–25 Special Education and Disability Code of Practice includes statutory advice on approaches for identification and assessment which can support this. A minority of pupils will need access to specialist equipment and different approaches. The SEN and Disability Code of Practice is clear about what should be done to meet their needs (Inclusions Statement, DfE, 2014, p. 9)

However, whilst special schools may draw on the National Curriculum's core and foundation subjects, many also provide individualised sensory-based curriculums for those with profound and multiple learning disabilities. In this article, we draw on the concepts of Gramsci's cultural hegemony to understand how children and young people experience PE within the context of a special school.

The cultural hegemony of special schools and the role of physical education

Hegemony refers to a set of interconnected processes related to cultural domination (Jones, 2006). For Gramsci, power is constituted in ideas and knowledge and expressed through consent and legitimacy. We adopt the view of Maher and Fitzgerald (2020a) that culture is the established 'way of life' of a particular social grouping such as those who are part of the cultural formation of special schools. While Gramsci did not specifically define cultural hegemony, it is a concept which refers to the ways

in which domination is maintained through ideological or cultural means. Power is considered multi-dimensional, dynamic and contextual.

Maher and Macbeth (2014) and Maher (2016) draw on cultural hegemony to understand the landscape of inclusive education in mainstream school. Maher and colleagues (2020) expand this to provide an analysis of special school PE. They use the concept of cultural hegemony to explore how historical and contemporary perceptions of PE influence how PE is positioned and delivered in special schools. Our research draws on cultural hegemony to understand how young people in this research experience PE, as the decisions made about PE in the school are influenced by a number of wider cultural issues around education, PE and the needs of SEND pupils. These cultural issues include whether PE teachers are confident in delivering PE lessons that fully include SEND pupils. The current widespread lack of PE, and in particular, inclusive PE-related training during initial teacher training directly impacts teachers' perspectives toward inclusion and the reality of delivering inclusive PE in schools (Coates, 2011, 2012; Vickerman & Coates, 2009). Maher and Fitzgerald (2020b, p. 20) identify how 'in Britain there are no specific graduate or postgraduate PE teacher education programmes aimed at developing specialist teachers of special school PE'. Therefore, many teachers delivering PE in special schools may not be trained or qualified PE teachers. The aim of this research was to explore how children and young people with severe learning disabilities (SLD) perceived PE in their special school. In order to explore children's experiences, pupil voice was fundamental to the study design.

The importance of pupil voice

While studies on cultural hegemony have focused on policy, school leaders, textbooks we are aware that this is in line with most studies focusing on SEND PE that continue to gain adult perspectives such as those from teachers, parents, or pupils without disabilities (Healy et al., 2013; Roberts, 2017). This raises questions about which views are valued, whose voices are listened to and heard, and what the impact is when predominantly adult stakeholder perspectives inform the design of PE programmes (Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012). The voices of children with SEND are often trivialised, reformulated, truncated, or simply not investigated (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Roberts, 2017). Despite more children than ever being educated in special schools, research has previously, and continues to be, predominantly focused on the experiences of teachers and pupils in mainstream education (Maher et al., 2020). This approach is 'perhaps indicative of the omnipresence of an ideology that continues to position mainstream education as the preferred approach of educating young people with disabilities' (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2020a, p. 775). Inclusion has often been researched in the context of mainstream education, where academics seek to understand how children and young people with special education needs are included in PE classes (Barber, 2018; Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012; Haegele, 2019; Maher, 2016). With this in mind, we sought to understand pupils' experiences of PE within their school. We also wanted to explore what children with SLD consider the nature, purpose of PE to them in the context of their school experience by providing them with an opportunity to express their 'voice' through a task-based approach.

Methodology

School background

The case study school was selected as [author name] was already working within the school in a voluntary support role. The school is a mixed gendered, specialist provision for children and young people aged from 2 to 19 years who have severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties in the North of England. The school is one of 540 in England that are approved to provide SLD provision (DoE, 2020). The school also have facilities to deliver TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped CHildren) provision for children with severe

autism and learning difficulties. The school states that they offer an individualised curriculum whilst drawing on the National Curriculum's core and foundation subjects. The school also provide a sensory curriculum for those with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Class sizes are small, typically 8–9 pupils per class, with one teacher and two teaching assistants as a minimum, and additional support staff where needed.

In terms of PE, the school offers a range of activities (e.g. individual fundamental skills linked to dance and athletics and a range of team sports such as football, basketball and dodgeball as well as outdoor pursuits) and is typically delivered by classroom teachers. In addition, the school provides weekly therapy-based activities. Hydrotherapy/aquatic therapy is delivered in the school's onsite hydrotherapy pool, rebound therapy is delivered in a specialist rebound therapy room and both are delivered by trained specialist support staff such as physiotherapists. Assisted aerobics, and hippotherapy are incorporated into the PE curriculum for those pupils with severe learning difficulties and/or profound and multiple learning disabilities and are also delivered by specialist staff. However, once pupils reach sixth form (age 16–18 years old), they do not receive PE within the school but are instead encouraged to access activities in the community.

Learning is usually delivered in either a pre-formal (early developmental stage with high levels of adult support), semi-formal (e.g. structured play, topic-based work) or formal (e.g. adapted National Curriculum) manner depending on the level of pupil needs. The PE curriculum content is delivered to reflect a focus on 'myself and my body'. Typically, the duration of formal PE classes within the school varies depending on the purpose of the lesson. For example, pupils who use trampolining as a form of rebound/physiotherapy lesson will usually last 20 min. For children who are able, and older pupils who use trampolining as a typical PE lesson, the session usually lasts up to one hour. Horse riding (hippotherapy) lessons comprised of approximately 45 min on the horse.

The school curriculum aims for 2 h of PE per week, delivered by classroom teachers, for primary and secondary level pupils (4-16 years old). Although when classroom teachers were asked about how much PE was delivered in a standard week, staff claimed that the 2 h was not always possible due to factors including behaviour and staffing and that it was often the case that time allocated to primary pupils (4–11 years) was often much less than two hours per week. Classroom teachers also acknowledged that they had not received any specific training for teaching adapted PE and often felt as though they lacked the skillset and confidence to deliver a wide range of sports and activities. It is common for exercise-based therapy (delivered by trained staff rather than classroom teachers) to be used as a substitute and/or replacement for PE lessons at the case study school.

Participants

We are aware of the gender imbalance in this study but were also mindful that the imbalance is reflective of the wider gender imbalance across SEN, for example, Recent statistics show that 64.6% of all pupils who receive SEN support are boys (DoE, 2020). This is also true for the number of pupils in the study diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder and speech, communication, and language difficulties plan.

All 10 participants in this study were children and adolescents with a SLD currently being educated in a special school that is approved to cater for SLD pupils. The sample consisted of two females (n × 2 = ASD) and eight male participants (n × 5 = ASD, n × 1 = cerebral palsy and chronic lung disease, n × 1 = SLD, n ×1 = spina bifida) (see Table 1). Participants ranged from age 8–17 years (mean age = 13.6 years) (see Table 1).

One participant was non-verbal, and all participants had varying degrees of communication difficulties. In such cases, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) was used as a communication tool. The PECS system was familiar to all pupils and was particularly important for the pupils with autism and those with speech difficulties. The PECS system has been praised for bringing speech to non-verbal children and was a fundamental part of the research process as it allowed

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant pseudonyms	Gender	Nature of disabilities (in addition to a diagnosis of severe learning disability)
Olivia	F	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Matthew	M	Severe Learning Disability
Sam	M	Cerebral Palsy and Chronic Lung Disease
Leo	M	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Harry	M	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Zachary	M	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Joshua	M	Spina Bifida
Jack	M	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Sophie	F	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
Theo	M	Autistic Spectrum Disorder

research to be conducted in collaboration with young people rather than on young people (Nind, 2017).

Procedures and consent

Prior to commencing data collection, ethical approval was granted by the author's institution and in line with British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018). We recognise the ethical processes and access difficulties when trying to conduct research with disabled children and it is worth noting at this stage that the second author regularly attended the school in a support role and was well known to staff and pupils throughout the school. Having an already established working relationship within the school provided the access and opportunity to undertake this research. The school also provided support before, during and after the research process to ensure pupils did not feel at all coerced into participating. Trust and rapport were paramount for this study and had already been established both with the pupils and staff through prolonged interactions when the researcher was at school in her support role.

Information sheets were sent home to parents in advance of data collection. Parents were asked to discuss the study with their children to see if they would like to participate. It was clearly communicated that children should not feel pressured to be involved in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were also ensured. After a one-week cooling-off period, informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians. On the day of data collection, participant assent was gained from each of the participants. All forms relating to ethics and those providing information on the study were designed with the participants at the centre of the process. The school management team was also fully involved in the ethical process.

To ensure all participants understood the nature of the study and were able to provide assent, the PECS system was used. Pupils were asked questions about the nature of the study and the activities to discern if they understood the process and were able to provide assent in an informed manner. [Second author name] was well known to the pupils and we feel this ensures pupils were comfortable speaking to her and engaging with the activities. However, we were also mindful of the power someone embedded in the school may have over pupils. To minimise this as much as possible, [second author name] reinforced to pupils that they were not required to participate, and they should only complete the activities if they wanted to. All other data (e.g. parental consent forms, parent and pupil information sheets, debrief sheets, confidentiality and right to withdraw) were shared with the school, parents and the participants in the most appropriate form (e.g. written documents or using PECS).

Data collection

Whilst qualitative methodologies have dominated PE and disability research, with researchers often opting to undertake interviews or focus groups (Coates & Vickerman, 2013), more attempts have

been made to draw on inclusive and participant-focused methodologies that make research participation accessible to those with a variety of impairments (Coates & Vickerman, 2013; Jenkin et al., 2015). Inclusive methodological approaches that are participant-focused such as drawing tasks (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2012; Fitzgerald et al., 2003), photo-elicitation (e.g. Lamb et al., 2016) and participatory research (e.g. Sharpe et al., 2022) have highlighted ways in which children with disabilities can be active participants within research.

A task-based approach that allowed inclusion and active engagement was used in this study. This was deemed important as techniques such as interviewing would not have been appropriate for many participants in this study (e.g. those with severe cognitive impairments or participants who are non-verbal). Using Fitzgerald et al.'s (2003) study to inform our methodology and drawing on other examples and explanations of drawing and task-based research (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2012), we designed three different tasks with guidance from the school and pupils. After several conversations with staff and pupils, we designed activities that pupils indicated they would like to engage with such as selecting and sorting PEC symbols and drawing. We also included a writing task for pupils who were able to do so.

The consenting participants were invited to engage with the activities designed and they could select all, some, or none of the activities. Activity tasks complimented one another and enriched the understanding of pupil's PE experiences. Familiar communication methods were utilised throughout, such as Makaton and principles of PECS. This allowed the participants to express their own opinions or attitudes without being subjected to traditional inflexible methods such as interviews or focus groups.

All activities were completed on a 1-to-1 basis with participants; and where necessary school support staff was present to ensure both pupil and researcher safety. The school insisted on this approach due to the challenging behaviour of some pupils included in the study. All sessions were conducted within familiar school environments such as the participant's classroom (where additional support was deemed necessary by the school) and support rooms that were not being used at the time of data collection (where the participants and the researcher could work on a 1-to-1 basis). It was possible that the presence of teachers and other support staff may have led to potential biased responses from the participants and measures were undertaken to prevent this. Whilst research-based activities were completed with other staff present in the classrooms, such staff did not sit with the researcher and the participants or engage in the research process but instead focused on other classroom-based activities with the rest of the pupils. Each participant engaged with the researcher for a period of 15–30 min, depending on the number of activities that each pupil completed, with additional time taken for breaks in between each activity. Participants completed either two or three tasks in one session with the researcher. Four participants did not want to or were not able to complete activity 3.

In addition, the researcher involved at the school also kept a research journal, documenting conversations with staff and details relating to the ways in which PE was viewed by pupils, staff and where PE was positioned within the school. We note that the purpose of the journal was not for ethnographic purposes but to provide an insight into the culture of PE within the school and the wider school context. We draw on these observations and conversations throughout the results section to provide a deeper understanding of the participant's views on PE and its purpose.

Activity 1: 'My PE Activities'

Pupils were shown two activity sheets: PECS symbols of PE activities, and a like and dislike table. To complete the activity, participants were asked if they would like to sort the symbols into two categories to show their preferences within PE. Pupils were encouraged to expand on their choices with the researcher and the reasons why they liked/disliked the chosen activity. Pupils were informed that they did not have to use all the symbols and were able to discard certain sports if they were unsure of their meaning. For an example of a completed task, see Figure 1.

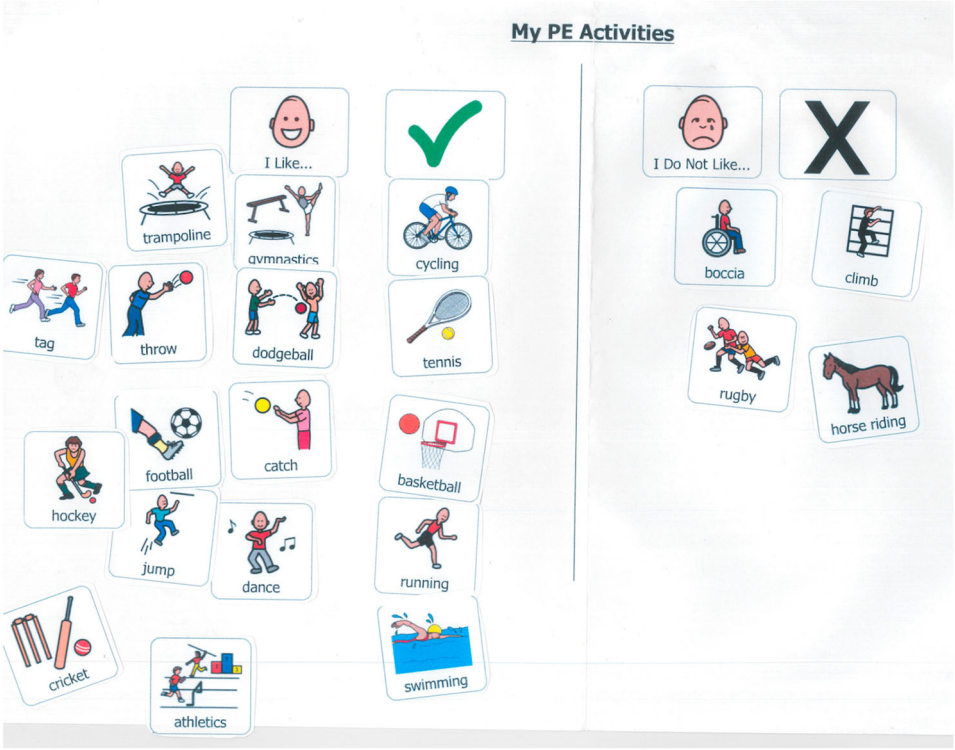

Figure 1. Example of completed Activity 1.

Activity 2: 'Before and After PE'

This activity allowed pupils to draw themselves before they participate in PE, and then a second image after a PE lesson. Analysing children's drawings has proved to be a successful method in allowing the 'child's voice' to be portrayed. Additionally, the use of visual drawings with young children can often provide opportunities for individuals to express feelings or opinions who would otherwise find it difficult to communicate (Bland, 2018). Additionally, individuals with autism have shown that they can express themselves through drawing both contextually and coherently (Happé & Frith, 2006). Pupils were encouraged to write words or explanations alongside their drawings if they thought it would help to explain their thoughts (see Figures 2, 3 and 4 for completed examples of this task).

Activity 3: 'My PE Story'

Participants were encouraged to create a 'PE Story' by completing the sentence starters provided on the worksheet. The starters included 'I like', 'I don't like', 'I feel', 'I want to' and 'I think'. The sentence starters were designed to uncover the pupil's current preferences and experiences within PE and expansion upon their choices made in Activity 1 (see Figures 5 and 6 for completed examples of this task). Commonalities were also identified between drawings created in Activity 2 which were then supported by responses made by participants in Activity 3.

Data analysis and interpretation

A total of 26 worksheets were completed by the participants. Activity 3, my PE story was a more challenging task as it encouraged the pupils to think about PE as a subject and write their responses. As a

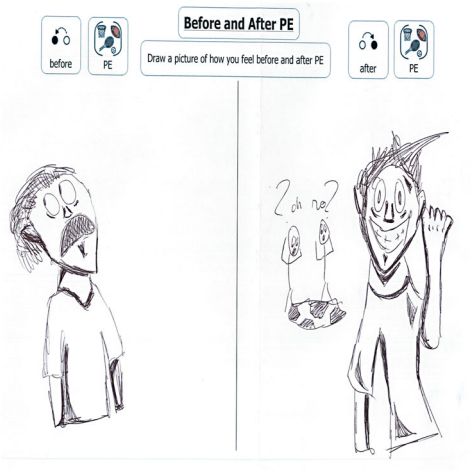

Figure 2. Before and After Activity_participant drawing.

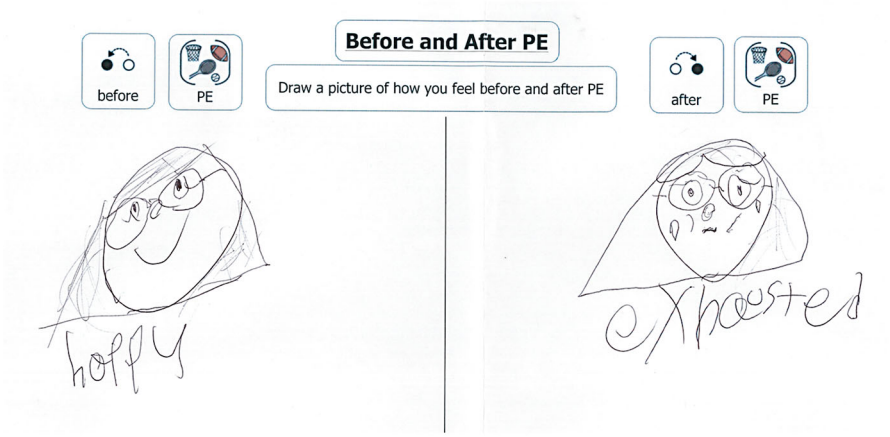

Figure 3. Before and After Activity_participant drawing.

result, four participants did not engage in this task. To analyse the data, several different approaches were undertaken. To identify any clear preferences within activity 1, likes and dislikes were calculated and presented in graph form (see Figure 7).

The analysis of children's drawings has proved to be a successful method in allowing the 'pupil voice' to be portrayed (Bland, 2018) and is how we analysed activity 2. Participants were encouraged to discuss their drawings with the researcher and any comments or written statements included alongside the drawings were collated to inform our interpretations. We used a form of thematic analysis to analyse activity 3 whereby we looked for patterns across the data set 'using a flexible approach to coding and theme development' (Terry et al., 2017, p. 21). We then grouped together the codes identified from the structured tasks where written comments were often single words or a sentence at most to identify themes. Finally, methodological triangulation where data from all three tasks were examined to provide an understanding of the views on PE and its purpose (Heale & Forbes, 2013).

Due to the ongoing relationship [second author name] had with the school, it was vital that researcher bias was acknowledged and minimised throughout the data collection and analysis

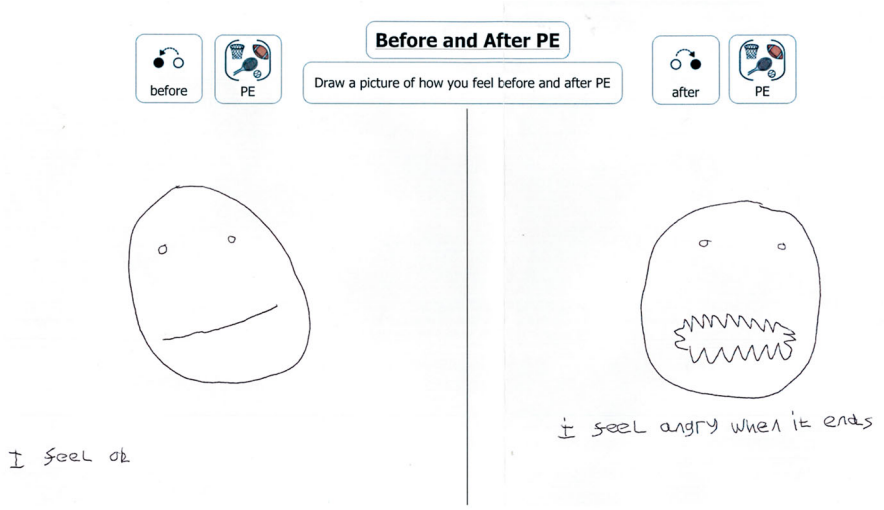

Figure 4. Before and After Activity_participant drawing.

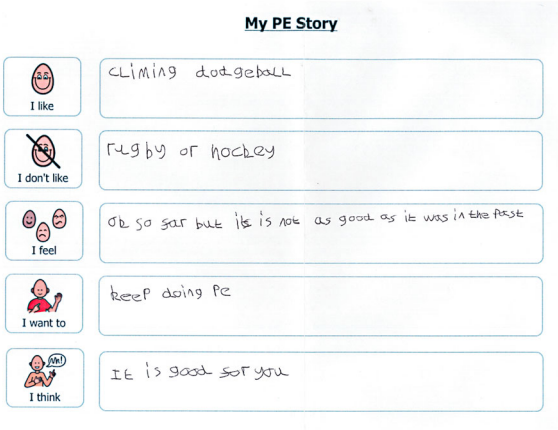

Figure 5. Completed PE story.

phases. To do this, the role of a 'critical friend' was crucial (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) and this role was predominantly undertaken by [first author name] during the data collection phase. This allowed the expansion of ideas and exploration of alternative explanations for data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), it also facilitated the reflective and reflexive processes that were required. [Second author name] was already embedded in the school which allowed us unique access due to the trust and rapport she had with staff and pupils, but her positionality within the research needed to be carefully considered. This critical dialogue allowed us to challenge interpretations made throughout the analysis process to enhance the rigour of our findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results and discussion

The results from the study will be discussed in this section under three main themes: (i) General opinions and the purpose of PE, (ii) Cultural hegemony and therapy-based activities as physical education and (iii) The popularity of team sports and games in special school PE.

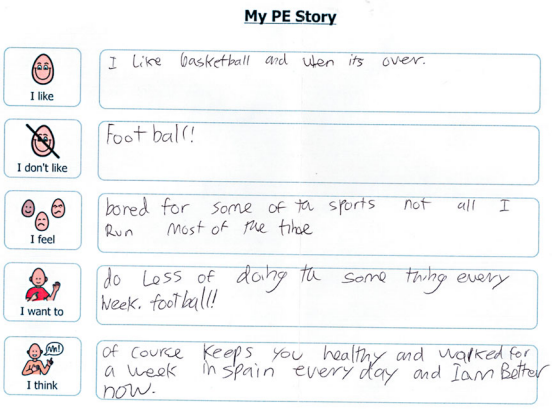

Figure 6. Completed PE story.

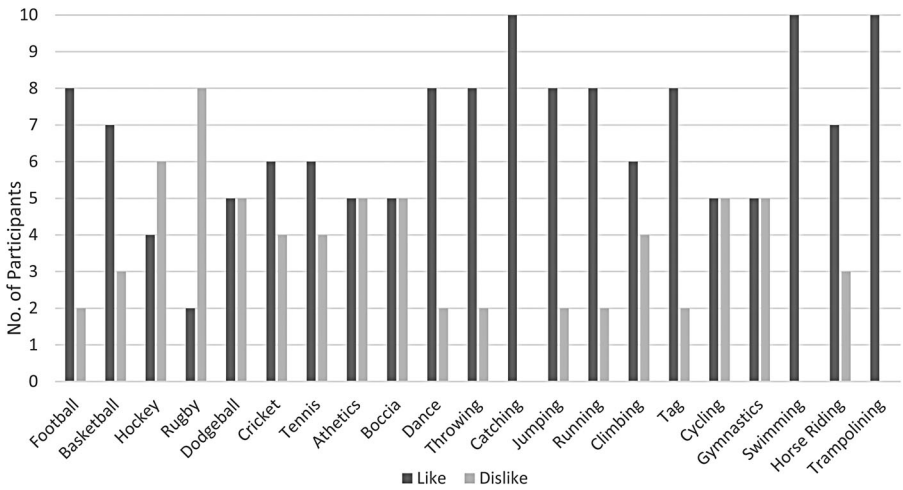

Figure 7. Participants likes and dislikes highlighted in Activity 1.

General opinions and the purpose of PE

Activity 1 was designed to provide an overview of the participant's likes and dislikes in PE (see Figure 7). Our data shows that therapy-based activities (e.g. trampolining, horse riding and swimming) are well liked and popular. Similar to the findings of Lamb and colleagues (2016) we found that our participants, seven of whom have a diagnosis of autism, enjoyed a variety of team sports. We discuss therapy-based activities and team sports in more detail later in the article.

Activities 2 and 3 were designed to understand how the participants feel about PE, explore the purpose of PE and to build on their activity/sport preferences. Many of the responses to the 'I feel … ' prompt indicate positive opinions towards PE. This was evident through feelings and emotions described by participants, in particular, references towards happiness and the promotion of positive emotions after participation in PE. For example, Jack wrote: 'I feel … happy when I do PE'. This sentiment was reinforced by other participants including 'I feel … good [when doing PE]' (Sam) and 'I feel … happy when I am there [in the sports hall]' (Olivia). Olivia communicated that whilst she likes 'playing fun PE games' and PE makes her 'happy', she does not like 'moving around a lot'. During

activity 3, Harry wrote: 'I feel … ok so far but it [PE] is not as good as it was in the past' (see Figure 5). Harry acknowledged in activity 2 that he felt angry when PE ended as it was one of the few lessons in school that he enjoyed (see Figure 4). This was also reinforced when Harry completed his 'PE Story' and wrote: 'I want … to keep doing PE' (see Figure 5).

When asked about PE, pupils often responded in general terms. For example, they often described their attitudes towards PE lessons: 'I like … playing fun PE games' (Olivia). Pupils expressed interest in activities involving fundamental skills such as running, jumping, catching and throwing (see Figure 7). Such skills are important for promoting lifelong engagement and developing physically literate children. This not only pertains to the execution of skills and game play but also the appreciation of being able to understand, assess, evaluate and respond to the environment effectively (Coates, 2011). It may also be linked to the schools positioning of PE around the concept of 'myself and my body'.

The findings of this study echo the findings of Coates (2011) research. It appears that the pupils believe PE lessons are less about skill development and competency and more about physical activity, moving and health. For example, Leo wrote 'I think [PE] keeps you healthy'. Olivia explained: 'I think PE is good for exercise', and similarly, Harry acknowledged: 'I think it [PE] is good for you'. During activity 2, several pupils drew themselves as tired and sweaty after PE (for example see Figure 3). Whilst physical skills and competencies developing physical literacy form the purpose of PE, perceptions appear to relate to physical fitness. For instance, Zachary wrote: 'I think … of course [PE] keeps you healthy and walked for a week in Spain every day and I am better now' (see Figure 6). Here Zachary told the researcher about his holiday to Spain, how he enjoyed walking in the sunshine and how he felt better because he was exercising every day. These perceptions of PE are likely drawn from hegemonic positions where PE is viewed as being good for pupils' health and wellbeing (Gray et al., 2022; Stockley, 2010). The narrative about why PE is important is also reflective of the schools positioning of PE.

Not all pupils enjoyed all their PE lessons, and some negative opinions were expressed. For example, Zachary wrote: 'I like … basketball and when it's over' For Zachary, the end of PE was often a relief although he did acknowledge that he enjoyed some PE lessons. Zachary also wrote: 'I feel … bored for some of ta sports not all I run most of the time' reinforcing the notion that sometimes PE lessons were boring, but he did enjoy certain activities that are viewed as beneficial for health such as walking and running. Zachary's dislike for football became apparent when he wrote: 'I want to … do less of ta same thing every week. football!' Here the sameness of activities is mentioned by Zachary which may reflect the limited activities, or ways that activities were delivered. Despite evolving policies to support the delivery of inclusive and adapted PE, the classroom teachers the researcher spoke to told her that they feel ill-informed, ill-equipped and poorly supported when it comes to teaching adapted PE which is in line with previous research (Morley et al., 2020). Staff reported having received no training or continuing professional development (CPD) on adapted PE and found adapting some sports and games more difficult than others.

During activity 3, Jack wrote: 'I want … more [PE]' and 'I think … more time [doing PE would be] good'. These comments suggest that Jack enjoys PE and wants even more, but in context, PE lessons are often cancelled, and Jack had experienced a cancelled PE lesson prior to completing the task. Through our observations within the school, we found that PE lessons were regularly cancelled or simply forgotten about for several reasons. The most cited reason for cancellation was behavioural issues and safety (linked to staff numbers and availability). This signals that perhaps PE was not culturally valued in the school, compared to other subjects as it was an activity which could be cancelled or forgotten about.

One important note to add is that the activities completed in this study could be, and indeed were, easily influenced by behaviour-related incidents during the school day. Sophie had been involved in an incident during morning lessons on the day when data collection took place. Sophie had picked up a chair and proceeded to throw the chair across the classroom. This behaviour was dealt with by the classroom teacher, but the incident clearly played on Sophie's mind. She

appears to have associated this action with the 'throw' PECS symbol during the data collection as she went on to explain: '*I don't … like it might hurt someone ball' [I don't like activities with a ball because it might hurt someone when I throw it]*. Sophie's reference to injuries caused by a 'ball' may be a reference to the fear of injury many children with SLD experience in relation to team sports such as football or rugby (Healy et al., 2013) or that she had recently been told that throwing objects, such as chairs, could hurt other children in the classroom. The other activities Sophie included in the 'I do not like' section of activity 1 were boccia, dodgeball, tag, athletics (the PEC symbol for athletics includes someone throwing a javelin) and rugby.

Cultural hegemony and therapy-based activities as physical education

Results from activity 1 indicated that all 10 participants enjoyed swimming and trampolining-related therapy. This preference was also supported during activity 3, with Sophie identifying swimming (therapy) as an activity she liked: 'I like … going swimming'. Apparent interest and enthusiasm for the activity suggest enjoyment and suitability for the target group. Through prolonged involvement with the school and pupils, it was clear that swimming and trampolining were used as 'intensive intervention' activities for pupils. Such interventions are referred to as early intensive behavioural interventions (EIBI) within the school and often target cognitive, communication and social skills (Landa, 2018). The use of EIBI is likely to be reflective of the cultural beliefs about PE for children and young people with SEND, as teachers may see therapy sessions as more beneficial than PE lessons.

Swimming and water-based activities are popular EIBI activities due to the ability to provide free and unrestricted movement in the water which can often be limited for some children with physical and/or coordination issues during land-based movement (Pan, 2011) and in more traditional PE environments. Here wider ideologies about hydrotherapy/aquatic therapy and its benefits become part of PE as they seem to be beneficial to the pupils' whole development. Therapy-based activities are also undertaken on an individual basis which may be appealing to pupils with SEND (Todd & Reid, 2006).

Pupils indicated their enjoyment of trampolining, for example, Sophie wrote: 'I want to … go on the trampoline, I feel happy' and Theo also wrote something similar 'I want to … jump on a trampoline'. While the pupils knew the activity as 'trampolining', the school were using rebound therapy as another form of EIBI due to its perceived ability to teach pupils aspects of body awareness and bilateral coordination 'as it is purported to offer physiological, therapeutic and communication benefits' (Smith & Griggs, 2010, p. 91). This reflects the work of Maher and Fitzgerald (2020a, 2020b) where whilst there is recognition that PE can be multifaceted the pupils experienced PE as activities which were designed to support their needs more holistically.

Jack who was a sixth-form pupil (17 years) expressed interest in re-engaging in trampolining due to it being an activity which is not accessible in school by Sixth Form pupils. Jack was able to recall positive memories of previous participation, stating 'I like … trampolining', however also indicated his desire to continue participation; 'I want to … go on the trampoline'. It appears that the older participants wish to continue therapy activities they enjoyed before entering sixth form such as trampolining but find that therapy sessions are no longer available through their school. Wider cultural values and ideologies around access to sport and sports-based therapy may also need to be considered as there appears to be a lack of opportunities and accessibility for adults with special education needs. Here, those in power have decided that pupils no longer have access to the types of physical activity they enjoyed in school once they enter sixth-form education.

The availability of physical activity-based therapy sessions outside of school is difficult to access due to the cultural hegemony of able-bodied sport and physical activity. Challenges include specialist equipment that is required, and the financial cost of such activities. Individuals with learning difficulties are often excluded from opportunities to fully participate in community-based activities and experience significant inequalities when it comes to physical and psychological health

(McKenzie et al., 2018). Despite the significant health benefits that regular engagement in physical activity can provide, children and young people with learning disabilities are less active than their typically developing peers and this trend continues into adulthood (Robertson et al., 2018).

Horse riding is also used as a further form of EIBI. The use of equine-assisted therapy or hippotherapy improves functional outcomes by providing 'physical, occupational and speech therapy' (Scotland-Coogan et al., 2021, p. 1055; Bass et al., 2009). Previous studies examining hippotherapy and SLD have highlighted the therapeutic bond created between the child and animal (Bass et al., 2009). However, three pupils reportedly disliked horse riding but did not provide any reason or indication why they disliked the activity. Here, wider perceptions of child and animal relations as being good for SEND pupils demonstrates the ways in which cultural ideas about disability and needs can be integrated in PE in ways that are perceived to support the pupil's development. Cultural hegemony is about power, ideology and culture (Maher & Haegele, 2022, p. 268), by using this lens the pedagogy demonstrated in this school is based on a needs-based approach and what has previously worked and is therefore viewed as a beneficial and valuable activity for pupils. Yet, for those pupils who do enjoy horse riding (or hippotherapy) access to such activities outside of school is also likely to be limited.

The popularity of team sports and games in special school PE

As mentioned earlier, certain team sports were popular with our participants. Team sports have a specific cultural hegemony in the history and current position of PE in school curricula, as competitive sport and team game ideologies have dominated (Green, 2003). While studies such as Stockley (2010) and Todd and Reid (2006) have found that team sports have been the most divisive for SEND pupils (particularly for children with autism), often reproducing normative hierarchies and situating young disabled people as inferior and different (Fitzgerald, 2005).

However, and in line with previous findings (Lamb et al., 2016), pupils in our study highlighted a liking for certain team sports and games. Olivia told us: 'I like … playing fun PE games'. Olivia was not alone in expressing a love for team sports and/or games. Six participants highlighted a liking for team sports/games during activity 3 and team sports such as football and basketball were selected by eight and seven pupils respectively during activity 1 as an 'I like' sport, game, or skill. For example, Matthew wrote: 'I like … trampolining, football, and basketball' whilst Sam, Theo and Zachary wrote: 'I like … basketball'. It may be that team sports delivered within special school PE can be positive for pupils as pupils are playing these sports with other pupils of a similar physical capital. Pupils may also enjoy team sports because these are the sports they are watching outside of school, and they are engaging with sports that are culturally dominant.

As mentioned above, eight pupils categorised football into the 'I Like' category, Sophie wrote 'I think … doing football, it was good'. However, Zachary wrote in activity 3 'I don't like … football' and that he wanted 'to do less of going the same thing every week – football!'. Conversations that school staff had with the researcher highlighted gaps in knowledge and training when it came to PE. One member of staff told the researcher that they would often rely on sports that were familiar but also popular and enjoyed by most of the class, drawing on ideas of cultural hegemony and reinforcing these. Similar to the findings of Maher and Fitzgerald (2020a) there was a sense that teachers felt as though they 'did their best' when delivering PE lessons.

During activity 1, several participants referred to watching football matches on television or playing online games rather than actively participating. Although team sports can often cause sensory overload, football was popular in this school. The school staff suggest that this could be due to its national popularity, familiarity and cultural dominance of football as a sport. Six participants also highlighted that they liked cricket, whilst we have little data that explains why the pupils like participating in cricket, the classroom teachers believe this could be due to adaptations made by the teachers and the adapted cricket equipment that the school has. It is possible that children with SLD and those diagnosed on the autistic spectrum enjoy watching team sports rather than

actively participating in such sports. This is an area to consider in future studies as the distinction was not always clear in our study. Finally, notwithstanding previous comments, it is important to note that a few team sports such as hockey and rugby were activities most disliked by the participants (six and eight participants respectively). For example, Harry wrote: 'I don't like rugby or hockey' (see Figure 5) and further research is needed to understand the reasons for this.

Concluding thoughts

Using cultural hegemony as a lens, a qualitative task-based approach was adopted to understand pupils' PE experiences. The findings of this article contribute to understanding PE in special schools, something which has largely been overlooked in research on PE, disability and inclusion. In the school where this research was located, PE took on multiple forms, including therapy sessions and team games, thus suggesting that PE was not narrowly defined as one specific form of education for the pupils. From a cultural hemogenic perspective, PE was frequently cancelled in the school, perhaps highlighting the way that dominant hierarchies of subjects and knowledge may frame PE as less valuable than other subjects for pupils (a similar finding was highlighted by Maher et al., 2020). The pupils in this study enjoyed many aspects of the PE they experienced and had varied responses that they were able to articulate using creative methods. However, from a hegemonic perspective, aspects of culture and power were evident in the delivering of PE.

Whilst existing literature suggests team games are difficult to teach and deliver and children with SEND often dislike team sports, yet team games such as football, basketball and cricket were popular with the pupils in this study. With this in mind, teachers should not shy away from offering adapted versions of these sports, as these sports have cultural value, and some pupils will enjoy these. Although relying on these culturally popular sports can lead to repetitive lessons which some participants in this study found boring. Fundamental skills that also lend themselves to team sports such as throwing, catching, jumping were also well liked and are important for lifelong participation although from a cultural perspective, access to sport for disabled adults within the community can be challenging.

Future research should seek to understand the unique experiences of children and young people from a range of different disabilities and impairments. Gender choices, sport preferences and the level of support needed to fully engage pupils in these should also be explored. These questions could form part of the research communities' approach to understanding PE in special educational schools from the lens of policy, teachers and critically the voices and experiences of young people.

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