Quest

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uqst20

The Influence of a Special School Placement on Prospective Teachers' Views About the Nature, Purpose, and Value of Physical Education in England: A Gramscian Critique

Anthony Maher, Samantha Parkinson & Alan Thomson

To cite this article: Anthony Maher, Samantha Parkinson & Alan Thomson (2022) The Influence of a Special School Placement on Prospective Teachers' Views About the Nature, Purpose, and Value of Physical Education in England: A Gramscian Critique, Quest, 74:3, 266-284, DOI: 10.1080/00336297.2022.2091462

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2022.2091462

© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

Published online: 20 Jul 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 881

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=uqst20

QUEST
2022, VOL. 74, NO. 3, 266–284
https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2022.2091462

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

The Influence of a Special School Placement on Prospective Teachers' Views About the Nature, Purpose, and Value of Physical Education in England: A Gramscian Critique

Anthony Maher, Samantha Parkinson, and Alan Thomson

Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

School–based placements have been identified as important for personal and professional development, supporting prospective teachers to critically (re)consider and disrupt normative and ableist practices. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony was used in this research to explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective teachers' beliefs about the nature, purpose, and value of physical education (PE) for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Twenty-six prospective teachers from England participated in focus groups prior to and after placement in a special school. Focus group audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically. Our findings suggest that special school field experiences can contribute toward disrupting hegemonic beliefs about the nature, purpose, and value of PE, and allow prospective teachers to develop more critical, diverse, and nuanced understandings of PE, which may be crucial for providing more inclusive PE experiences for pupils with SEND in both special and mainstream settings. Saying that, we end by offering a note of caution about the transferability and permanence of ideological change, calling for future research that explores the long-term influence of special school placements and transfer to mainstream schools.

KEYWORDS

Physical education; pupils with special educational needs and disabilities; special schools; Gramsci; cultural hegemony

Introduction

Dominant discourses about the nature, purpose, and value of physical education (PE) in England have changed over time. In post–war Britain, drills and physical training were embedded in the cultural terrain of mainstream schools – known as regular schools in the US – and used as mechanisms to maintain social control and to discipline the unruly and unhealthy bodies of the working classes (Kirk, 1992). With the advent of calisthenics and Swedish gymnastics, a more aesthetic corporeal approach to PE emerged (McIntosh, 1968). For girls in particular, movement approaches evolved further through various types of modern educational dance and gymnastics (Morrison, 1969). Raising the school leaving age in the 1950s, together with a greater male teaching presence in the field, stimulated a shift away from movement orientated discourses. Emerging from new understandings of sport related physiology and biomechanics, physical educators began to focus upon the improvement of performance in team games (Kirk, 2010) meaning that the development of "skills"

CONTACT Anthony Maher Anthony.Maher@leedsbeckett.ac.uk Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

taught by 'experts' was privileged over the 'playing' of games. Since then, 'PE-as-sport-techniques' and (physical) health discourses have become deeply embedded in mainstream schools in England. The most recent National Curriculum for PE (NCPE), which is, according to Maher (2016), a mechanism of cultural (re)production because it contributes to shaping ideologies, traditions, rituals, and behaviors in schools, supports this endeavor. The neoliberalisation of the education system in England, as well as many other countries, continues to structurally reinforce a conception of PE that typically values performance and body-based outcomes (Evans, 2014).

Research suggests that the established beliefs and practices relating to the nature, purpose, and value of PE in mainstream schools are normative and ableist (Barton, 2009). That is, dominant ways of thinking about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are shaped by and for able-bodied people (see Coates, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2005, 2012). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that many pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) participate less frequently and in fewer activities than their same age peers in PE (Vickerman & Maher, 2018) and are more likely to experience marginalization and bullying in the subject (Haegele, 2019). This makes us wonder about the nature, purpose, and value of PE in special schools – known as specialist or self-contained schools in the US – given the largely negative experiences of pupils with SEND in mainstream PE, and the distinct lack of research situated in a special school setting.

While there is a notable lack of research about the nature, purpose, and value of PE in special schools, several studies have sought the views of disabled young people about their experiences of PE in that setting (e.g., Aspley Wood School, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2005, 2007). Above all, young people in this research valued the opportunity PE offers for them to move their bodies, but many wanted more opportunities to take part in sport after-school. In terms of extra-curricular activities, Stride and Fitzgerald (2011) explored the footballing [soccer] experiences of girls with learning disabilities through an after-school programme. The girls emphasized the social benefits of this opportunity, considering it especially beneficial for meeting and developing relationships with girls from other schools. It is noteworthy that teachers in research by Crawford (2011) suggested that PE can promote the personal, social, and physical development of young people in that setting. However, concerns were raised about the lack of appropriate training for staff to deliver PE. Maher and Fitzgerald (2020) found that common cultural norms in special school PE are underpinned by the aspiration to develop the "whole child". This holistic perspective can be situated within broader ideas around what Bailey et al. (2009) describe as the physical, social, affective, and cognitive benefits of PE. Maher and Fitzgerald (2020) advocate for challenging the taken-for-granted dominance of the physical domain in PE, which is often based on ableist beliefs about how bodies should look and move, and they offer a broader and stronger educational rationale for learning. Thus, our research utilizes a special school placement because we want to explore how, if at all, it can support our prospective teachers to develop more complex and nuanced beliefs about the nature, purpose, and value of PE. This, we hope, will better prepare them for teaching pupils with SEND in the future.

School–based placements are important for personal and professional development because they can impact prospective teachers' ability to critically reflect on already developed beliefs (Richards et al., 2014). Putting the focus on personal and professional development is crucial, and intentional, given that teachers still experience difficulty teaching pupils with SEND in mainstream PE (Morley et al., 2021). This is a long-lasting precedent,

but, beyond that: "pre–service teachers typically do not change their beliefs about teaching and learning during teacher education unless they are confronted with and challenged about their held beliefs through powerful and meaningful experiences" (Tannehill & MacPhail, 2014, p. 151). As pre-service teachers are often unprepared for the actualities of teaching PE (Richards, 2015), there is an obvious need to, first, better prepare pre–service PE teachers for the demanding reality of working in an educational setting, and second, to facilitate critical thinking around often unchallenged beliefs that (unwittingly or not) continue to reinforce normative values. We aim to add to this body of work by exploring the influence of a special school placement on prospective PE teachers' beliefs about their subject. Given that most of our prospective teachers will work in mainstream settings in the future, we hope this will help widen knowledge of what PE is and can be for pupils with SEND. For this, we draw on Antonio Gramsci's ideas about cultural hegemony as a theoretical lens for our research.

Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony

We used Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony to help us make sense of and explore the ways and extent to which a special school placement did, or did not, disrupt prospective teachers' PE and SEND ideologies. Ideological disruption, for us, ranges from minor shifts to radical changes and transformation in the ways our participants think about PE and SEND, although the latter is less likely given the short duration of the school placement and Elias' (1978) claim that ideological beliefs become so firmly embedded in the personality structure of adults that they are difficult to dislodge. Cultural hegemony is about power, ideology and culture. In our article, cultural hegemony refers to processes in which those in positions of authority use their power to shape the culture of a social grouping (Sissel & Sheard, 2001); that is, the dominant ideologies, values, customs, rituals, and behaviors of, for instance, schools generally or PE specifically. While Gramsci's work has been largely ignored in PE research, it is worth noting that Maher and Macbeth (2013) and Maher (2016) used it as a theoretical tool to examine the contested cultural landscape of mainstream PE. In special school settings, a Gramscian perspective was applied by Maher et al. (2020) who identified PE as less favorable when compared to other areas of the curriculum, or indeed mainstream PE. This was crucial in influencing teachers' desires and creativity when delivering special school PE – something that is particularly pertinent for prospective teachers on placement in our research. Maher and Fitzgerald (2020) used cultural hegemony to explore the cultural landscape of special school PE, with consideration given not only to teachers but also teaching assistants and senior leaders as agents involved in shaping cultural beliefs and expectations in that setting. The status of dominant and subordinate groups within education is anchored to cultural hegemony. People with higher degrees of legitimate power (Webb & Macdonald, 2007) like policy makers in government and senior leaders in schools will use the influence they have to disseminate ideology and shape culture (Nowell–Smith & Hoare, 1971), such as that of special school PE.

From a Gramscian perspective, power relates to an individual or group's ability to shape the values and behaviors of others, typically through ideological leadership, to achieve one's own objectives (Nowell–Smith & Hoare, 1971). Accordingly, power is multi–dimensional, dynamic, contextual, situational, and constantly in flux. Consequently, the meaning and values that influence the culture of special school PE are tied to Ball's (1987) notion of

schools (and the departments within them) as arenas of struggle where power relations are played out between key stakeholders, such as policy makers, senior leaders, teachers, and pupils, as they conflict, contest, negotiate and compromise. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony therefore offers a framework that allows for meaning to be made through the identification of the specific school and PE ideologies, experiences, traditions, and rituals that have become so established and privileged that they manifest as common–sense collective arrangements (Engelstad, 2009). Thus, our attempts to encourage prospective PE teachers' to critically reflect on and disrupt normative beliefs about PE whilst on placement will be influenced by the established "way of life" of those who are part of special schools and, according to Jones (2006), the degrees of power that each individual and group can exercise.

Methodology

Philosophical position

To make sense of and pass judgment on this study, our assumptions should be made clear (Tracy, 2010). By claiming allegiance to an internal, relativist ontology, we accept that special schools are humanly constructed social realities. This suggests that our understanding of prospective teachers' experiences in the school are multifaceted, often with a subjective viewpoint depending on how they are positioned in relation to phenomena. Based on this, a nuanced subjectivist and constructivist epistemology was held, highlighting that we cannot be removed from ourselves and thus produce theory–free knowledge (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Hence, we explored participant realities by listening to their voices and presenting them in the form of extended quotes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Given our philosophical position, it is important to underscore the situatedness of the self (Coffey, 1999) by outlining our own roles within the inquiry. All researchers identified as white, working–class and able–bodied. Two taught on the BA (Hons) Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) undergraduate programme from where participants were recruited, and the second author is a former graduate of that programme who is now undertaking a PhD at a different university. Each member of the research team has historically contributed to and/or led "health weeks" in the school forming the context of this inquiry. Learning about healthy behaviors through physical education comprised an important part of the health week.

Participants, recruitment and setting

We recruited participants from the Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) programme that two of us taught at a university in the North of England. This undergraduate programme does not give graduates qualified teacher status (QTS) but, instead, seeks to develop students' understanding of the PE landscape given that most will likely progress onto a PE teacher education pathway. Information about an opportunity to gain experience delivering a health programme to all-through special school pupils (combined primary and secondary school phases, pupils aged 5–16) was given to university students during scheduled lecture time. While 72 university students from across the three years of the PESS programme signed up for the special school placement, 26 first year students were

purposively sampled for this study (Cohen et al., 2017) on the basis that they had no prior experience working within a special school and that they aspired to become PE teachers. Importantly, the students had not yet been exposed to the depth and complexity of concepts of hegemony and ableism, or even wider issues relating to social justice and inclusion, through their university study at the time of the placement and data collection. We intentionally selected participants who had limited exposure to pupils with SEND and this notion of cultural hegemony to explore the influence of the special school placement more precisely. Of course, it is possible that participants had developed some knowledge and understanding of these concepts before entering, and outside of, university study, but based on our extensive experience of working with students on the PESS programme, this was very unlikely.

Westfield Park (pseudonym) is a local school that provides specialist provision for children aged five to sixteen who have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), which is a legally binding document outlining a child or young person's educational, health, and social care needs. Thus, pupils at Westfield Park have a range of complex learning and/or medical needs. Traditionally Westfield Park has offered students from the PESS programme an opportunity to gain "hands on" experiences working with pupils, teachers, and teaching assistants. In self–selected peer groups students met with an allocated teacher to learn more about and establish initial contact with the pupils they would be supporting. Next, participants spent one week with an assigned class, observing, supporting, and teaching health–related activities. The teachers and teaching assistants remained responsible for their pupils and merely guided university student learning alongside university staff.

Method

To explore the construction of meaning and move beyond description (Merril & West, 2009), focus groups were used. Participants were interviewed in the groups they self-selected for the placement to ensure that individual and collective views and experiences could be discussed and situated within a special school context. Each group were interviewed once, one week before the placement to explore beliefs about PE and special schools, and once again three weeks after the placement to consider how, if at all, the placement may have disrupted established beliefs. Every attempt was made to ensure that pre and post placement focus groups comprised of the same participants. However, two participants were unable to attend the post placement focus group due to personal issues but were happy for their data to be included in the research. Therefore, one post placement focus group was disbanded and the remaining two participants joined a different focus group. Hence, there were six focus groups (FG 1–6) of three to four participants pre placement and five focus groups (FG 7–11) of three to four participants post placement. Focus groups lasted between 86–122 minutes; the duration of each was determined by the extent to which participants were able and willing to answer and discuss the questions asked by the facilitator. Focus groups enabled us to capture in rich detail singular and collective expectations, fears, concerns, assumptions, and experiences about the culture of PE in special schools, and the influence of the placement on their beliefs about PE.

The research team co–constructed focus group questions through meetings to discuss potential content, discount irrelevant material, and clarify ambiguities to ensure consistency (Bryman, 2015). The following are examples of questions used to support participants to reflect on their ideologies and values relating to PE prior to the special school placement: "What activities do you associate with PE?" "What activity areas should be covered in PE? What should be learned in or through PE?" "What is the purpose of PE?" "What are the benefits of engaging in PE?" Post special school placement focus group questions had a similar focus but were preceded by "how, if at all, did the placement influence your views about . . . " Before the focus groups, prospective teachers were assured that non–participation in the research would not impact staff–student relationships or their future studies. Efforts were made to neutralize power relationships (Ennis & Chen, 2013) by focusing upon the learning experiences students would collectively gain from this process. For instance, new experiences of special school PE, transferable skills, and an additional placement to add to future teacher training applications were discussed. As might be expected, some voices were louder than others. Therefore, researchers endeavored to prompt and promote thinking and reflection to ensure that no voices were silenced (Cohen et al., 2017).

Ethics

Before the research commenced, ethical approval was sought and gained from a university research ethics committee. Due to the breadth and depth of the pupils' vulnerability within Westfield Park School, the researchers were mindful to familiarize participants with the ethos, operations, and procedures of the school in advance of their placement. An induction was also provided by one of the school's senior leadership team before any contact with pupils occurred. Written consent was obtained from each participant and they were reminded of their right to withdraw from the placement and/or the research project at any time. Each focus group was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and stored securely by the principal researcher on a password protected USB memory stick. Pseudonyms are used throughout the Findings and Discussion to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis

When making sense of participants' individual and collective ideologies and placement experiences, reflexive thematic analysis linked ontologically and epistemologically to our philosophical position (Braun et al., 2018). While the aim of the research was to explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective PE teachers' beliefs about their subject, we did not want to directly compare individual or group units of pre and post data because that is more compatible with (post)positivist research that strives to identify correlative or casual relationships between variables (e.g., placement in a special school and beliefs about PE), which would have also been incompatible with our relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Instead, we were interested in exploring both the continuity and disruption of ideological threads that ran through pre and post placement data. As such, we analyzed all pre placement data once it was all gathered, and post placement data separately, once that had all been gathered. Hence, the process explained below was undertaken separately using pre and post placement datasets.

All focus group transcripts were read numerous times by each researcher to increase familiarity with the dataset. Anthony performed the thematic analysis. Codes were constructed by giving labels to sections of the participants' narratives that would be used to explore the essence of meaning (Lopez & Willis, 2004) based on their beliefs about the nature, purpose, and value of PE both before and after experiences in the special school. Labels were descriptive, analytical, and theoretical, meaning what was said, and the significance of this, was tied to Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. For example, some chunks of the text were labeled:

- Descriptive – mainstream and special school PE should be the same.
- Analytical – this assumes that one size fits all, is tied to beliefs about inclusion as equal access and opportunities, and links to the work of Maher and Fitzgerald (2020).
- Theoretical – this is a hegemonic ideology that pervades mechanisms of cultural (re) production such as the National Curriculum in England.

The intention here was to move beyond superficial meaning, toward the construction of more latent codes (Braun et al., 2018). As patterns and relationships were reflexively considered within and between codes, themes were constructed (Mills & Morton, 2013). This allowed codes to be clustered together or selectively removed during the development of the established themes. These themes were continually reviewed until Anthony felt confident that they accurately and authentically reflected the ideologies and experiences that were reported by participants. Next, this thematic analysis along with the interview transcripts were sent to Samantha and Alan as part of a process of peer debriefing that involved them reviewing the transcripts in relation to the key themes developed by Anthony and the data used to support these. Samantha and Alan also added their own reflective notes to the themes. Following this, Anthony, Samantha and Alan had two Microsoft Teams discussions to reflect upon the process. This supported Anthony to reflexively consider the analytical decisions made, which enhanced the quality of the study in relation to the goodness criteria advocated by Richardson and Adams St Pierre (2017). Once themes were established, Anthony noted both the continuity and disruption of ideological threads that ran through pre and post placement themes to aid sense-making and to support the writings of the Findings and Discussion.

Findings

The six themes constructed, which encapsulated participants' ideologies about and experiences of the nature, purpose, and value of PE for pupils with SEND, were: (1) special school PE should be the same as mainstream school; (2) sport and team games; (3) physical activity and health; (4) a tailored PE curriculum; (5) developing physical skills; and (6) developing life skills. In presenting these themes below we provide multiple and detailed quotations from the participants in our study. This strategy was chosen as it meets the authenticity criteria of "fairness" articulated by Lincoln et al. (2011) that requires participant views, perspectives, and voices to be apparent in the text. Likewise, this strategy also provides the 'polyvocality' and 'thick description' required by Tracy (2010) to enhance the credibility of our findings. The descriptive Findings are presented first as the 'show' to encourage readers

to construct their own meanings and explore how and why these data may, if at all, resonate with them, before a Gramscian lens is use in the Discussion for what Sparkes and Smith (2014) call the analytical 'tell'.

Prior to placement

Special school PE curriculum should be the same as mainstream school

Prior to the placement, most participants suggested that pupils in special schools should experience the same curriculum activities as their same age peers in mainstream school PE:

Catherine: The children [in special schools] should do the same curriculum as mainstream school children. They should be treated the same. They should not be considered different.

Megan: We're always going to say that because we all believe that people should be treated normally, if you get what I mean? I don't want those kids to feel different (FG3).

Similarly, participants in FG4 discussed a curriculum based on sameness, hinting at the type of learning activities that pupils in special schools should experience:

Matt: A special school PE curriculum should be the same as anyone else. I don't see why it would be different from what I did in [mainstream] school.

Holly: I don't think it should be any different to what kids in mainstream school experience, so like the usual team games, fitness, athletics. I think they should experience it all.

Facilitator: How should they experience it?

Holly: Just like in normal PE lessons or like maybe after–school clubs if they want to join that, or maybe a before–school club or something at dinner and break time.

While calls for a modified and adapted curriculum did not come through strongly during pre–placement focus groups, it was mentioned briefly by Megan when she expanded her discussion about curriculum experiences:

> I'm always going to say that kids [in special schools] should do the same curriculum as all kids because I always think that even if they're mentally or physically challenged or they've got different abilities, they should do exactly the same as me. It is just adapted (FG3).

This highlights that Megan's understanding of SEND pupils getting equity in their experiences is still informed by the traditional games-based curriculum.

Physical education as sport and team games

As part of broader discussions about following the same curriculum as mainstream settings, our participants suggested that pupils in special schools should experience sports and team games:

Facilitator: Let's imagine you've got free reign over the PE curriculum in this special school. What should it involve?

Sophie: Games.

Facilitator: OK, why games?

Sophie: To keep them [the children] involved in stuff and it's a PE lesson, isn't it, really? So, they should do games.

Charlotte: Games is part of the national curriculum so they should do that. They should follow the national curriculum like everyone else.

Sophie: It's [games] like the main part of the national curriculum (FG1).

Interestingly, rugby was identified by some participants as being inappropriate because of the risk of injury to pupils:

Megan: I think they should play sport but not rugby. I don't think we'd see rugby or anything like contact sport in the [special] school.

Facilitator: Why shouldn't they do contact sports, Megan?

Megan: It'd be a bit unfair and some might get hurt or injured (FG2).

While a focus on team games and sports continued to dominate discussions about what PE in special schools does and should involve, some participants expanded this purview by talking about disability and Paralympic sports:

Joe: You might see more Paralympic sports. Whereas in our school we wouldn't have done things like that because you did need the different aspect to that sport.

Facilitator: What do you mean by that then?

Joe: Like all the sports get, what's the word?

Megan: Like adapted. The stuff we watched on TV during the Paralympics (FG2).

Physical education as physical activity and health

A final theme that was prominent across all focus groups prior to the special school placement related to PE being about physical activity and health. It was implicitly linked to students' thinking about the nature, purpose, and values of PE:

Harriet: I think the focus should be on a healthy lifestyle 'cause that's what PE is; that's what they try and say in PE: you've got to do this to lead a healthy life. It should be the same in a special school.

George: And how to look after themselves, like you'd teach anyone else. The best way is to keep themselves healthy and look after their body as best they can (FG 5).

According to our participants, increasing knowledge and understanding about health and healthy behaviors was crucial for continued participation in physical activity once pupils in special schools finished compulsory education. Matt, for instance, said:

> PE is really important for setting people on a pathway for, say, a healthier lifestyle in the future. You know, so people carry on being physically active. You have to learn how to do that though. It needs to be drilled in (FG 4).

For some, increased levels of physical activity were crucial for reducing health style-related illnesses:

Emma: Get the kids active in PE. Make them sweat. It can also prevent illnesses in the future, if you get them [pupils] active early.

Harriet: If they don't do that [be physically active] the kids will get fat. PE teachers need to help stop the obesity (FG 1).

While Lois did not mention health style–related illness, nor being physically active in future, she did consider PE essential for engaging in forms of physical activity that may be lacking in the wider lives of children and young people:

> Getting the kids physically active in PE is important 'cause some of them might go home and sit and watch TV all night, so they might not be involved in sports. When I was younger, I was doing different things every night, but other children used to go home and watch the TV, so it was only through school that they had that physical exercise and that little bit of fitness (FG5).

Post placement

PE curriculum should be tailored to needs and capabilities of the pupils

Interestingly, there was little mention of PE as being synonymous with specific activity areas during the post–placement focus groups. Instead, most of our participants suggested that curriculum activities should be based on the needs and capabilities of the pupils:

Facilitator: What did you do in PE?

Gemma: We did different things. It depended on the class.

Harriet: Yeah, it depends because our group were very able so we did more difficult stuff.

Jenny: I think they were very able, yeah.

Harriet: So our group was more able so they'd be able to do harder things, so it's not so much like, for example, the curriculum they do in mainstream. It's more about focusing on what the individual can actually learn and their abilities rather than what they need to learn (FG10).

The use of adapted bikes was just one of many examples of equipment and activities used that were deemed suitable to the needs and capabilities of the pupils in PE:

Natalie: We went outside and went on the bikes with them. We chose to go on the bikes because we weren't really sure how to adapt the sessions for the wheelchair users. But they [wheelchair users] had fun on the bikes. It was good.

Tracey: Yeah. We found that class quite challenging because we'd never worked with wheelchair users so we thought the bikes would be a bit easier to do because they are built for people like that. The kids loved them so that worked well (FG8).

In FG7, a discussion about the adapted bikes developed into a conversation related to the potential difficulties of teaching to the needs and capabilities of all pupils:

Harry: The challenge is there'd be nine different kids and all completely different in their own way, so one person is responsible for doing one thing that helps all; that's the challenge. We can only do one certain activity and trying to get them all to enjoy it and learn something, it's pretty difficult.

Kate: See, the bikes were okay, though, because every child had a different bike, and they all love bikes. They only do bikes in summer so with us it was easy, especially with bikes, just to get them all out and on the bikes (FG7).

Some of our participants were critical of the PE teacher they worked with because they felt that some of the activities delivered were not tailored to the needs and capabilities of the pupils:

Chris: I don't think their [pupil's] coordination was quite there for proper games. They were struggling to catch the rugby ball when we were playing ball tig [t*ag]*.

Matt: Which is why I questioned why they're doing basketball. They were doing basketball, but it was too hard for them. I don't think they've been taught basic skills. John [PE teacher] got that wrong I think.

Harry: There was only Ben [pupil] that could throw a ball.

Matt: I don't think half of them actually know how to pass and shoot but they've been trying to get taught that. I don't think half of them still know how to do that so why are they trying to play basketball? (FG7).

PE as developing physical skills

It was partly because of claims that pupils lacked the fundamental skills to play sports and team games that our participants considered it necessary to focus on the development of physical skills during PE lessons:

George: We just taught movement skills.

Facilitator: So why those movement skills?

George: The kids really struggled with even basic skills and they [movement skills] seem important to every day.

Amber: It's the basics of like moving, throwing, catching, running, walking.

Summer: Simple steps.

Amber: Yeah. Skills that in mainstream schools you learn from a young age but they're learning at an older age in special schools (FG8).

Similarly, Mark from FG11 suggested:

> The kids need to learn how to throw, catch. If they can't do that at a younger age then it becomes difficult when you're older to learn and to perfect. If you teach it at a younger age, teach them to kick a ball, throw a ball, catch, then their coordination will get better as they get older. You need to be able to do that to play games and do sport.

Louise was another who focused on the importance of developing physical skills for participation in sport and games. Interestingly, her discussion with Rachel also considered time restrictions as a constraint to the development of physical skills:

Louise: For one [of the PE lessons] we did a dribbling drill with the basketball and some of them [pupils] were struggling the first time but then like the third and fourth they were managing to do it on their own. That was great to see. They could definitely play a game of basketball in future.

Rachel: We only got half an hour PE so there's not really a lot of development that can happen in half an hour. That was frustrating. We felt like the kids weren't getting any better. You start to think that it's something you are doing wrong (FG9).

PE as life skills development

Much to the surprise of our participants, the development of life skills was part of the PE curriculum delivered in the special school. The discussion below illustrated the perceived benefits of developing verbal communication and teamwork through PE:

Niamh: PE was really good because it helped them [the kids] to make friends.

Jenny: Yeah. They were working really well in a team together. That was important for us.

Niamh: Yeah, teamwork. It wasn't about competition but developing teamwork.

Jenny: The kids worked with different ages too. That was good. I haven't seen that in PE before. They helped each other.

Niamh: They had to communicate with each other and develop that skill. Communication is very important.

Facilitator: So socially it really helped?

Jenny: Yeah, social skills was a massive benefit of it (FG10).

Finley was one of several participants who suggested that life skills developed through PE were transferable across curriculum subjects. In the extract that follows he explained how he had observed this during placement:

> These isolated kids were involved and then when we went back to the classroom they were actually communicating more with everyone else in the classroom because they had that [background] coming in from PE, so it obviously helps communication between everyone, gets people along, gets you to know each other *(FG9).*

Interestingly, Mel discussed why she considered life skills to be important for all young people, not just those in special schools or those with SEND by connecting it to employability:

Mel: I think social skills and life skills aren't just important in special schools but like all schools in general. Social and life skills help you to progress in the future. When you grow up and you're in your working situation at a job, you need those teamwork skills and communication skills to help you get on with your colleagues (FG11).

Discussion

Prior to placement our participants believed that PE in special schools should be the same as that offered in mainstream settings. Such a belief, which at first seemed deeply rooted in the ideological and emotional frameworks stirring the behaviors of our participants (Jones, 2006), center established cultural values and practices of education "integration" and providing 'equal opportunities'. Perhaps more interestingly were the discussions among our participants about the dominance of sport and team–game ideologies in PE within mainstream schools. While the National Curriculum (NC), as a key mechanism of cultural (re)production and disseminator of Government ideology (Maher, 2016), favors physical skills and sports performance (Department for Education [DfE], 2013), games are not a statutory activity area that must be taught in schools. Yet, prior to their placement, our participants emphasized their role and significance in PE, perhaps because these activities were lived and embodied by them when they were at school. Indeed, it is now well established that the beliefs, values, preferences, and inclinations of PE teachers are shaped by their own experiences of the subject as pupils (Green, 2003). However, by assimilating into the culture and way of life of Westfield Park, our participants held a much stronger view that curriculum delivery should be learner- centerd; that is, appropriate to the needs and capabilities of the pupils. This was a key point of departure from the one size fits all ideology that often influences the curriculums developed and pedagogical approaches used when teaching pupils with SEND (Maher & Fitzgerald, 2020).

In their discussions around the nature and purpose of PE, this marked what may at first be considered a shift in the beliefs held amongst our participants. Yet, while the findings suggest that PE needs to meet the learning needs of the pupils and operate at a level they can access, developing skills to play games was still seen as an important facet of learning. It suggests that participants may still hold a distinction between the purpose, aims and value of PE and the type of curriculum (i.e., games) that may facilitate this. While participants advocated for a more equitable PE experience for the pupils, their thinking was still influenced by a curriculum informed by games-based discourses. Indeed, in moving the participants back into a mainstream PE space, it would be interesting to capture both their beliefs and subsequent teaching behaviors to analyze the longevity of this claimed ideological change.

For some time now the SEND in PE research community has championed "an inclusive approach to PE" and encouraged educators to advocate for social understandings of disability (e.g., Vickerman & Maher, 2018). These involve actively challenging the hegemony of individual and deficit ideologies of disability which cast pupils with SEND as the

problem (Oliver, 2013), rather than the mechanisms of cultural production in schools, such as established policies and practices which serve to, often unintentionally, subordinate pupils with SEND (Maher, 2016). In this respect, it is noteworthy that one outcome of participant experiences in a special school and a key area of growth for them as prospective teachers was that they began to think critically about the normative PE curriculum and elevate the needs and capabilities of pupils with SEND above the activities being taught. Rather than taking their understanding of mainstream and traditional PE into the special school, there may be the opportunity to bring their experiences back into mainstream PE. In the future, this way of thinking may be advantageous to our participants because many of the Teachers Standards (Department for Education [DfE], 2011), also considered as a mechanism of cultural production as they are the criteria used in England to judge whether pre–service teachers become qualified teachers, highlight the importance of knowing the capabilities of learners so they can be appropriately stretched and challenged.

While emphasizing the significance of a tailored curriculum, participants appeared, at first at least, to shift their ideological commitment away from outcome-based performance in sport and team games after their placement toward improving physical competence and fundamental movement skills at a level beyond which they had previous been capable of. For some, traditional – or, for us, ableist – sports were just too complex for the pupils they were working with, so there was a desire to "get back to basics" and developing movement focused skills that were transferable across different spaces. This finding is supported by research conducted by Vickerman and Maher (2018) who identified several principles for inclusive practice when working with pupils with SEND in PE, particularly those who experience motor difficulties or those who struggle to process information, which include learning how to 'simplify', 'break down', and 'slow down' PE activities. Interestingly though, the initial rationale for developing fundamental movements skills among pupils was to improve performance in sport and team–games. Thus, we question the ways and extent to which the special school placement, which we intended to use to disrupt normative, ableist beliefs about PE, dislodged our participants' ideological commitment to competitive sport and team games given that the justification for focusing on movement skills was so that pupils can become more competent sport and games performers. Perhaps more importantly, it was common for our participants to judge the abilities of pupils with SEND against normative, ableist expectations relating to what bodies should be able to do in PE. From our research it was unclear how such normative hierarchies of ability were constructed by our participants. Like Penney and Evans (2014), we suspect that participants have and continue to unwittingly and unconsciously accept and transmit those performative ideologies circling mainstream PE without question. What does seem clear is that the special school placement has done little to disrupt those hierarchical notions of ability, which contribute toward the subordination of pupils with SEND in PE by casting them as inferior 'Others' (Lynch et al., 2020).

Prior to their placement, our participants also placed a strong emphasis on PE as physical activity and health, with the intention that pupils would participate in health–related behaviors both outside of school and once they left compulsory education. However, this was rarely present in the post–placement data, which is ironic given that the placement experience was tied to a "health week". There was a strong ideological commitment within Westfield Park to PE as a vehicle for developing life skills among pupils, which influenced the curriculum decisions and pedagogical practices of our participants whilst on placement.

Accordingly, our participants learned to appreciate the value and significance of communication and teamwork so pupils could build friendship groups, transfer those skills to other curriculum subjects, and gain employment in later life. According to Goudas (2010), PE is an ideal socio–cultural context for the development of life skills. Indeed, communication, teamwork, problem solving, decision making, and leadership have all been said to develop through the established traditions, rituals, and practices in PE (Smither & Zhu, 2011). This ideology pervaded the policy and practices shaping the culture of Westfield Park. We would suggest that there is a more explicit ideological commitment to developing the 'whole child' in special school PE, when compared to a mainstream setting, a point supported by Maher and Fitzgerald (2020). In the case of our research, Westfield Park acted as what Althusser (1971) termed an ideological state apparatus and the teachers ultimately became agents in the cultural dissemination of ideologies (Sissel & Sheard, 2001) that cast PE as more diverse, complex, and nuanced than it is often considered in mainstream school settings. For teacher educators and their students, it offers a realistic shift in experiences away from focusing upon performances in games and the physical domain entirely to generate an understanding of and appreciation for a range of practices and behaviors that align with the social, affective, and cognitive domains of learning (Bailey et al., 2009).

Conclusion

The placement offered our participants with a unique opportunity to reflectively (re) consider and disrupt the normative, ableist perceptions that form part of PE landscapes. We believe that the learning experiences that our participants had may contribute to better preparing them for their initial teacher education and a career in teaching given that they align with the Teachers' Standards in England (DfE, 2011). More crucially, we are hopeful that we have contributed to better preparing them for teaching pupils with SEND by disrupting, even in a very minor way, their previously held assumptions about what PE is and who it is for.

Our research suggests that the established ideologies within the school, and participants' experiences of interacting, communicating, and observing lessons, helped them to develop more considered and sophisticated understandings of the special school environment and pupils within that context. The notion of "ideological leadership" is something that is mostly absent from existing PE literature. Thus, there is a need for future research to gather data with senior leaders and teachers within special schools to explore notions of leadership, mentorship, coaching and guidance to gain a stronger and more holistic sense of the routines, characteristics, and idiosyncrasies our participants learned. It is hoped that this research contributes to broader agendas by using Gramsci's theory of hegemony to explore prospective PE teachers' beliefs about the nature, purpose, and value of their subject before and after a special school placement.

In highlighting the potential for facilitating changes in prospective teachers' thinking and providing them with opportunities to disrupt ableist notions of PE, we offer a word of caution. Facilitating placements in special schools for a process-product mechanistic vision of change is both (too) simplistic and idealistic. For prospective teachers who have been socialized into dominant ways of thinking about the nature and purpose of PE (Curtner-Smith, 2001; Richards, 2015), changing deeply held beliefs is not a simple process. In differentiating between "real" and 'superficial' change, Sparkes (1991) notes

that this takes an extended period – something that prospective teachers undertaking a week-long placement will not experience. For them, their change rhetoric may be better understood in Macdonald (2004, p. 70) analogy of a stone hitting the iron roof of a 'chookhouse' (chicken-house) followed by a brief flurry of activity before the chickens then settle down again. The prospective teachers initially are influenced by their special school experience, but when they return to teaching and learning focused on the domains of mainstream PE and experiences of traditional activities, they may experience 'reality-shock' (Richards, 2015) and their 'new' ideals may become 'washed-out' (Curtner-Smith, 2001), particularly if there are no pupils with SEND present in their sessions.

Indeed, what our research has not done is analyze the extent and ways in which learning about PE for pupils with SEND whilst on placement influences the future beliefs and practices of prospective PE teachers during their initial teacher education and teaching careers. Nor have we captured how experiences post placement – symbolized as "the powers that be" perhaps – may override beliefs and practices of our participants whilst working in educational settings. This is something for future research to consider. In addition, the learning explored in this study was restricted to one special school. It would be wise to try to understand how learning transfers from this context to a mainstream context and how it may be relevant to all children, not just those with SEND (Vickerman & Maher, 2018). Although there is much more to learn about the long–term influence of special school placements and their transferability to the mainstream setting, we position them as an important educational tool for those who aspire to teach because they can go some way to disrupting normative beliefs about the nature, purpose and value of PE, but also support prospective PE teachers to develop their confidence and competence (Maher et al., 2021) and empathy (Maher & Morley, 2020) for teaching pupils with SEND. We accept that many prospective teachers who experience a special school placement will pursue a career in mainstream education. Regardless of the career context, we conclude by arguing that all teachers should gain special school field experiences because they have been found (at least initially), to contribute toward disrupting hegemonic beliefs about the nature, purpose, and value of PE, and allow prospective and pre-service teachers to develop more critical, diverse and nuanced understandings, which may be crucial for providing more inclusive PE experiences for pupils with SEND in both special and mainstream settings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Anthony Maher http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1628-0962

References

Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. Monthly Review Press.

Aspley Wood. (2009). Picture this! Students as co-researchers. In H. Fitzgerald (Ed.), *Disability and youth sport* (pp. 106–116). Routledge.
Bailey, R., Armour, K., Kirk, D., Jess, M., Pickup, I., & Sandford, R. (2009). The educational benefits claimed for physical education and school sport: An academic review. *Research Papers in Education*, *24*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701809817
Ball, S. (1987). *The micro-politics of the school: Towards a theory of school organisation*. Routledge.
Barton, L. (2009). Disability, physical education and sport: Some critical observations and questions. In H. Fitzgerald (Ed.), *Disability and youth sport* (pp. 39–50). Routledge.
Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2018). Thematic analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1–18). Singer.
Bryman, A. (2015). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.
Coates, J. (2011). Physically fit or physically literate? How children with special educational needs understand physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, *17*(2), 167–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X11413183
Coffey, A. (1999). *The ethnographic self: Fieldwork and the representation of identity*. Sage.
Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
Crawford, S. (2011). An examination of current adapted physical activity provision in primary and special schools in Ireland. *European Physical Education Review*, *17*(1), 91–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X11402260
Curtner-Smith, M. (2001). The occupational socialisation of a first-year physical education teacher with a teaching orientation. *Sport, Education and Society*, *6*(1), 81–105. https://doi.org/10.1080/713696040
Department for Education. (2011). *Teachers' standards*. DfE [online]. Retrieved January 5, 2022, [online] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665520/Teachers__Standards.pdf
Department for Education. (2013). *National curriculum in England: PE programmes of study*. DfE.
Elias, N. (1978). *What is sociology?* Columbia University Press.
Engelstad, F. (2009). Culture and power. In S. Clegg & M. Haugaard (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of power* (pp. 210–238). Sage.
Ennis, C., & Chen, S. (2013). Interviews and focus groups. In K. Armour & D. Macdonald (Eds.), *Research methods in physical education and youth sport* (pp. 217–236). Routledge.
Evans, J. (2014). Neoliberalism and the future for a socio-educative physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *19*(5), 319–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2013.817010
Fitzgerald, H. (2005). Still feeling like a spare piece of luggage? Embodied experiences of (dis)ability in physical education and school sport. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *10*(1), 41–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/1740898042000334908 .
Fitzgerald, H. (2007). Dramatising physical education: Using drama in research. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *35*(4), 253–260. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3156.2007.00471.x
Fitzgerald, H. (2012). 'Drawing' on disabled students' experiences of physical education and stakeholder responses. *Sport, Education and Society*, *17*(4), 443–462. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.609290
Goudas, M. (2010). Prologue: A review of life skills teaching in sport and physical education. *Hellenic Journal of Psychology*, *7*, 241–258.
Green, K. (2003). *Physical education teachers on physical education: A sociological study of philosophies and ideologies*. Chester Academic Press.
Haegele, J. (2019). Inclusion illusion: Questioning the inclusiveness of integrated physical education. *Quest*, *71*(4), 387–397. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2019.1602547
Jones, S. (2006). *Routledge critical thinkers: Antonio Gramsci*. Routledge.
Kirk, D. (1992). *Defining physical education: The social construct of a school subject in post–war Britain*. The Falmer House Press.
Kirk, D. (2010). *Physical education futures*. Routledge.
Lincoln, Y., Lynham, S., & Guba, E. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 97–129). Sage.

Lopez, K., & Willis, D. (2004). Descriptive versus interpretive phenomenology: Their contributions to nursing knowledge. *Qualitative Health Research*, *14*(5), 726–735. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732304263638

Lynch, S., Simon, M., & Maher, A. (2020). Critical pedagogies for community building: challenging ableism in higher education physical education in the United States. *Teaching in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1789858

Macdonald, D. (2004). Curriculum change in health and physical education: The devil's perspective. *The Journal of Physical Education New Zealand*, *37*(1), 70–83.

Maher, A. (2016). Special educational needs in mainstream secondary school physical education: Learning support assistants have their say. *Sport, Education and Society*, *21*(2), 262–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2014.905464

Maher, A., & Fitzgerald, H. (2020). The initial teacher education and continued professional development of special school physical education teachers. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*, *11*(1), 18–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/25742981.2019.1696687

Maher, A., Fitzgerald, H., & McVeigh, J. (2020). Factors influencing the culture of special school physical education: A Gramscian critique. *European Physical Education Review*, *26*(4), 954–969. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X20901337

Maher, A., & Macbeth, J. (2013). Physical education, resources and training: The perspective of special educational needs coordinators working in secondary schools in North–West England. *European Physical Education Review*, *20*(1), 90–103. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X13496003

Maher, A., & Morley, D. (2020). The self stepping into the shoes of the other: Understanding and developing empathy among prospective physical education teachers through a special school placement. *European Physical Education Review*, *26*(4), 848–868. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X19890365

Maher, A., Parkinson, S., & Thomson, A. (2021). Learning about inclusive pedagogies through a special school placement. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2021.1873933

McIntosh, P. (1968). *Physical education in England since 1800*. Camelot Press Ltd.

Merril, B., & West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. Sage.

Mills, D., & Morton, M. (2013). *Ethnography in education*. Sage.

Morley, D., Banks, T., Haslingden, C., Kirk, B., Parkinson, S., van Rossum, T., Morley, I., & Maher, A. (2021). Physical education teachers' views of including pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities: A revisit study. *European Physical Education Review*, *27*(2), 401–418. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X20953872

Morrison, R. (1969). *A movement approach to educational gymnastics*. J.M. Dent and Sons.

Nowell–Smith, G., & Hoare, Q. (1971). *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the prison notebooks*. Lawrence and Wishart.

Oliver, M. (2013). The social model of disability: Thirty years on. *Disability & Society*, *28*(7), 1024–1026. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.818773

Richards, K. (2015). Role socialisation theory: The sociopolitical realities of teaching physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, *21*(3), 379–393. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X15574367

Richards, K., Templin, T., & Graber, K. (2014). The socialization of teachers in physical education: Review and recommendations for future works. *Kinesiology Review*, *3*(2), 113–134. https://doi.org/10.1123/kr.2013-0006

Richardson, L., & Adams St Pierre, E. (2017). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 818–838). Sage.

Sissel, P., & Sheard, V. (2001). Opening the gates: Reflections on power, hegemony, language and the status quo. In V. Sheard & P. Sissel (Eds.), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education* (pp. 3–15). Bergin and Garvey.

Smither, K., & Zhu, X. (2011). High school students' experiences in a sport education unit: The importance of team autonomy and problem–solving opportunities. *European Physical Education Review*, *17*(2), 203–217. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X11413185

Sparkes, A. (1991). Curriculum change: On gaining a sense of perspective. In N. Armstrong & A. Sparkes (Eds.), *Issues in physical education* (pp. 1–19). Cassell.

Sparkes, A., & Smith, B. (2014). *Qualitative research methods in sport, exercise and health: From process to product*. Routledge.

Stride, A., & Fitzgerald, H. (2011). Girls with learning disabilities and 'football on the brain'. *Soccer & Society*, *12*(3), 457–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2011.568111

Tannehill, D., & MacPhail, A. (2014). What examining teaching metaphors tells us about pre–service teachers' developing beliefs about teaching and learning. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *19*(2), 149–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2012.732056

Tracy, S. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight 'big–tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(10), 837–851. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121

Vickerman, P., & Maher, A. (2018). *Teaching physical education to children with special educational needs and disabilities*. Routledge.

Webb, L., & Macdonald, D. (2007). Techniques of power in physical education and the under-representation of women in leadership. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, *26*(3), 279–297. https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.26.3.279