

ADAPTED PHYSICAL EDUCATION

“You Don’t Get to Have the Same Experiences:” Youth with Disabilities’ Perspectives of Integrated Physical Education

*Katherine Holland, Justin A. Haegele, Xihe Zhu, and
Jonna Bobzien*

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore youth with disabilities’ perspectives of their experiences in integrated physical education classes in the United States. Participants were three youth with visual impairments and three youth with orthopedic impairments (ages 10–17 years). Data sources were written prompts, audio-recorded, semi-structured virtual interviews, and reflective notes. Based on a six-step thematic analysis method, four themes were developed: (a) “I couldn’t do most things:” lack of accommodations; (b) “They had absolutely no clue:” the teacher’s role; (c) “I’m a scared boy:” concerns about injuries and unsafe activities; and (d) “I get to hang out with my friends:” interpersonal relationships and feelings of inclusion. Participants recalled feeling a sense of belonging, acceptance, and value when experiencing

Katherine Holland, Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Justin A. Haegele, Department of Human Movement Sciences, Old Dominion University. Xihe Zhu, Department of Human Movement Sciences, Old Dominion University. Jonna Bobzien, Department of Human Movement Sciences, Old Dominion University. Please send author correspondence to katherine.e.holland@ntnu.no

positive interpersonal relationships. In contrast, a lack of accommodations, safety measures, and a perceived lack of teacher preparation made these feelings uncommon.

Introduction

In the United States, physical education (PE) classes in kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) schools are dedicated to the “development of physical and motor fitness, fundamental movement skills and patterns, skills in aquatics, dance, and individual and group games and sports (including intramural and lifetime sports)” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). The goal of PE is to prepare students to become physically literate individuals, or individuals with the ability, confidence, and desire to be active throughout their lifespans (Society of Health and Physical Educators America, 2013). In addition to providing the only legal definition of PE, IDEA (2004) also mandates that all students, regardless of disability status, receive instruction in PE as a part of a free and appropriate public education.

In 2005, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated that students cannot be disqualified from receiving instruction in integrated educational settings based on their disability status. Likewise, many educational scholars have promoted the belief that segregated educational placements, such as self-contained classrooms, should be phased out in favor of educating all students in integrated settings (Stainback et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2019), leading to increasingly higher numbers of students with disabilities being educated in general education settings in recent years (Obrusnikova & Block, 2020). PE is often one of the first settings where this integration of students with and without disabilities takes place (Alquraini & Gut, 2012), and the literature indicates that the majority of students with disabilities are now receiving PE instruction in general education settings (Coates, 2012; Obrusnikova & Block, 2020, Wilson et al., 2020).

There are several ways that scholars have conceptualized this combining of students with and without disabilities into one PE class, with some referring to this arrangement as *inclusive* while others preferring the term *integrated* (Haegele, 2019). Many researchers have defined inclusion as a placement in which students with dis-

abilities are physically educated in the same setting as students without disabilities (An & Meaney, 2015; Hilderley & Rhind, 2012; Qi et al., 2016). In contrast, other scholars label the actual co-placement of students with and without disabilities as integration (Haegele, 2019; Haegele et al., 2020) and refer to the term inclusion as a philosophy related to the socially constructed environment within a PE class and how it relates to the subjective experiences that students with disabilities have within this environment (Hutzler et al., 2005; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Svendby & Dowling, 2013; Wang, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

It is important for scholars to “explicate the discourses of inclusion” (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 3) by revealing the conceptualization of inclusion used to guide their work. This study was conceptually guided by Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson’s (2010) interpretation of inclusion, as a “subjective experience [requiring] investigation from the perspective of the child who is ‘to be included’” (p. 275), meaning that one must understand this phenomenon from the perspectives of the child rather than using objective checklists, for example. This interpretation of inclusion was based on Stainback and Stainback’s (1996) definition of the term, which identified three hallmarks of inclusion: feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value. Thus, the term *integration* is used intentionally in this study to describe the educational placement in which students with and without disabilities receive instruction in the same physical space (Haegele, 2019), and *inclusion* is used to describe the subjective experiences participants described (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010) that led to their feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value (Stainback & Stainback, 1996), allowing the authors to keep the unique perspectives of the participants central when presenting the data.

Inclusion/Integration in Physical Education

Although the literature base in this area has grown in recent years, there are still gaps to be filled. To date, research examining perspectives of individuals with disabilities toward integrated PE in the United States has largely utilized adult participants reflecting retrospectively on their experiences (Haegele et al., 2019, 2020; Haegele & Zhu, 2017), rather than youth currently enrolled in K-12 schools.

In these studies, participants tend to recall experiencing forced physical exclusion (Haegele et al., 2019, 2020; Haegele & Zhu, 2017), inappropriate or non-existent accommodations (Haegele & Zhu, 2017; Haegele et al., 2019), and social exclusion by teachers and peers (Haegele et al., 2020; Haegele & Zhu, 2017). Retrospective studies are valuable in representing the meaning that individual participants placed on their personal PE experiences but may not be representative of the current state of integrated PE in schools (Haegele & Zhu, 2017). Research including youth participants' perspectives toward integrated PE has been limited in the United States, and more common in other places, such as Canada (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Seymour et al., 2009; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010), China (Wang, 2019), the United Kingdom (Hilderley & Rhind, 2012), and Norway (Svendby & Dowling, 2012). Like the retrospective studies mentioned above, these international studies also portray negative experiences for individuals with disabilities in integrated PE classes. Participants experienced restricted participation due to lowered expectations or inappropriate modifications (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Hilderley & Rhind, 2012; Wang, 2019), and discriminatory attitudes from peers and teachers (Hilderley & Rhind, 2012; Svendby & Dowling, 2012; Wang, 2019). In contrast, youth felt most included when experiencing positive peer interactions (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Seymour et al., 2009; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Wang, 2019). The authors in this study aimed to extend this body of research by exploring the perspectives of youth with disabilities toward their experiences in integrated, general PE classes in the United States.

Method

The authors chose to conceptualize this study through Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson's (2010) interpretation of inclusion, as they ascribe to a social constructivist worldview, believing that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences while attempting to gain an understanding of the world in which they live (Creswell, 2014). To investigate the subjective experiences of participants, this study utilized a qualitative descriptive methodology with data collected through interviews, focus groups, and written prompts (Sandelowski, 2010). Although all qualitative research is subject to some degree of interpretation, utilizing qualitative description, as

described by Sandelowski (2010), allowed participants' perspectives to be presented in a data-near manner in this study.

Qualitative descriptive studies intend to provide a straight descriptive summary of the data rather than the data as interpreted by the author (Sandelowski, 2000). Thus, the authors must acknowledge their positionality and work to minimize the impact of any potential biases through the addition of their interpretation throughout the data analysis process. The first (female) and second (male) authors both identify as white, able-bodied individuals with experience teaching adapted PE in K-12 schools before joining academia. Both the first and second authors acted as instructors during the adapted sports program from which participants were recruited and had previously established relationships with each of the participants. Additionally, they have each previously conducted research on the experiences of persons with disabilities in PE and physical activity contexts and are invested in furthering this line of research. Given the role of the researchers as instructors for the participants, the researchers ensured that no questions were asked that might be perceived to pertain to the adapted sports program, and that all conversation was directed toward their educational experiences to avoid responses influenced by social desirability.

Participants

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval from the authors' university, participants were selected from a convenience sample of adapted sports athletes participating in a university-based recreation program at the authors' institution in the United States' mid-Atlantic region. The program provided cost-free, adapted sports opportunities, open to any school-aged youth in the surrounding community with a visual impairment (VI) or orthopedic impairment (OI). Total enrollment in the program was 35 at the time of recruitment. Of the 35 participants, only nine met the inclusion criteria of those who (a) were between 10 and 17 years of age and (b) had received PE in an integrated context with their peers without disabilities. The age thresholds were selected to ensure that potential participants were old enough to understand and respond to assent documentation, yet young enough to still be enrolled in K-12 schools.

To recruit participants for this study, a welcome letter, which included a description of the research purpose, protocol, inclusion criteria, incentive information, and contact information for the primary researcher, was e-mailed to eligible families before the first adapted sports program meeting of the Spring 2020 semester. Families who were interested in participating in the study were instructed to complete a demographic questionnaire that included open-ended questions about the age, gender, disability, race/ethnicity, and PE placement of the child(ren) with disabilities. See Table 1 for a summary of demographic data.

Table 1
Demographic Descriptors of Participants

Name	Age	Disability	Disability Note*	Acquired/ Congenital	Race/ Ethnicity*	Gender*	Physical Education Placement at Time of Study
Jesse	10	OI	Spina bifida	Congenital	White	Male	Integrated
Jordan	14	VI	B1; septo-optic hypoplasia	Congenital	White	Female	Self-contained
Kolby	17	VI	B1; visual optic-nerve hypoplasia	Congenital	Black	Female	Self-contained
Mark	13	OI	Osteogenesis imperfecta; scoliosis and kyphosis	Congenital	White	Male	Integrated
Norman	13	VI	B3; aniridia	Congenital	White	Male	Integrated
Usman	10	OI	Paraplegia; chronic lung disease	Congenital	Black	Male	Self-contained

Note: OI = Orthopedic Impairment, VI = Visual Impairment, B1 = blind, B2 = Visual acuity up to 20/600, B3 = visual acuity up to 20/200

*Participants self-identified their disability, race and/or ethnicity, and gender in an open-ended question.

Six of the nine eligible individuals, three with a VI and three with an OI (aged 10-17 years), volunteered to participate in this study. All six participants were United States residents, enrolled in K-12 public schools, and had congenital disabilities. Two participants identified as female and the other four as male. Of the six, two identified as Black, and the other four identified as white. All participants with OIs used mobility aids of some sort (i.e., wheelchair or arm crutches) and self-propelled, manual wheelchairs during adapted sport and PE participation. All participants with VIs identified as meeting the criteria for legal blindness (visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better-seeing eye with correction; International Blind Sports Federation, 2018). While all participants had experience attending integrated PE at some point in their K-12 education, three were enrolled in self-contained PE (PE class for students with disabilities only) at the time of data collection, and one did not attend PE at all at the discretion of his school administration (although he was a full participant in

the adapted sports program). Each participant was offered a \$20 e-gift card as an appreciation for their participation in the study. The incentives were intentionally kept small, as small monetary incentives have been found to increase participation in research studies without differentially influencing specific subgroups, which could potentially result in a biased sample (Kelly et al., 2017).

Data Collection

Upon volunteering for the study, parental consent and participant assent were obtained for all participants. The first and second authors then met with the families at the beginning of the first adapted sports program session to discuss the study and answer any questions that had arisen. Three data sources were used in this study: (a) written prompts, (b) interviews, and (c) reflective notes. Over the semester, the participants were provided five written prompts (one per month) that included one or two broadly worded questions focused on their experiences in school-based PE. Participants were asked to write as much or as little as they would like on the given topic and return the response to either the first or second author. These prompts were provided in either hard copy or electronic copy at the preference of the participant.

Upon completion of the written prompts, interviews were scheduled with each participant that lasted approximately one hour. Both individual and group interviews were used, based on the preferences of the participants. Two participants were interviewed individually and the remaining four were interviewed in dyads. One dyad consisted of participants with VIs and the second was comprised of participants with OI. These dyads were adopted because of the expressed preference of the participants. All interviews were conducted virtually using an online video conferencing program and were audio recorded. Each followed a semi-structured interview guide that included open-ended questions developed from prior research in the field and aligned with inclusion as conceptualized by Spencer-Cavaliere and Watkinson (2010) and Stainback and Stainback (1996). Sample questions from the interview guide included: How do you feel about PE, how do you feel about your PE teacher, and do you think that having a disability influences how you experience PE? The first author, an instructor in the wheelchair sports portion of the recreation program, conducted the interviews with participants

with OI, whereas the second author conducted the interviews with participants with VI, as he was their primary instructor in the recreation program and the participants were familiar with him. Both authors took reflective notes throughout the interviews on the tone of the interviews, topics that stood out as particularly meaningful, and initial thoughts on emerging themes. These notes allowed the authors to return conceptually to the context of the interview during data analysis (Walker et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

After the completion of the interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The objective of the transcription process was to provide a semantic record of the interview with a focus on the content of participant experiences; therefore, pauses and non-verbal utterances were not transcribed (O'Connell & Kowal, 1995). Written prompts, transcribed focus group interviews, and reflective notes were treated by the first author using a six-step thematic analysis as described by Nowell and colleagues (2017).

Nowell and colleagues (2017) described six steps for thematic analysis, which were initially presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six steps are as follows: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define and name themes, and (6) produce the report. In step one, the first author immersed herself in the data by reading and rereading the written prompts, interview transcripts, and reflective notes to search for meanings and patterns. Then, she identified important sections within the data, attaching labels to begin indexing the content (Nowell et al., 2017). Once all the data had been coded, she completed step three, which involved sorting the relevant codes into themes. Codes that did not seem to fit into a main theme were set aside to revisit during step four of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). In step four, the first author refined the themes by rereading each piece of data and its accompanying code to ensure that it was categorized under the correct theme (Nowell et al., 2017). At this time, any leftover codes that did not support the constructed themes were discarded. Next, she scrutinized each theme to develop a title that best captured its overall scope and content, and lastly, she created a written description of each theme, using direct quotes from the data and relevant literature to provide depth (Nowell et al., 2017).

Constructed themes and associated data were reviewed by the second author, who agreed with the lead author's analysis, the presentation of the themes, and the alignment between the data presentation and the purpose and approach used in this study.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, confirmability, and transferability were addressed to enhance the trustworthiness of this study (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Credibility was supported through peer debriefing, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined as the "process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). In this study, an impartial peer who was familiar with this line of research was sent the transcripts and finalized themes and asked to provide feedback. The peer debriefer agreed with the themes as they had been developed and offered suggestions on possible discussion points, which were then incorporated into the results and discussion section of this manuscript. Credibility was further supported by the authors establishing rapport and a trusting relationship with the participants before the interviews (Bradshaw et al., 2017). That is, each of the interviewers had established relationships with participants through participation in an adapted sports program. The authors addressed confirmability by recording reflective notes throughout the data collection process, providing a description of participant demographics, and maintaining transparency regarding their positionality with each other, as well as with the participants (Bradshaw et al., 2017). The first and second authors began each interview by resharing their positionality with the participants and revisited it as needed throughout the discussions. The presentation of sufficient methodological details to allow for the re-creation of the study by other researchers lent support to transferability (Bradshaw et al., 2017).

Results and Discussion

Four themes were constructed based on the data: (a) "I couldn't do most things:" lack of accommodations, (b) "They had absolutely no clue:" the teacher's role, (c) "I'm a scared boy:" concerns about injuries and unsafe activities, and (d) "I get to hang out with my

friends:” interpersonal relationships and feelings of inclusion. These themes are portrayed with narrative examples within the context of the literature below.

“I Couldn’t Do Most Things:” Lack of Accommodations

The participants in this study recalled many more experiences with feelings of *exclusion* than they did *inclusion* (reflective notes). Primary barriers to feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value that were shared by participants were a lack of accommodations and physical exclusion from large group activities. Historically, literature has shown that these barriers to feelings of inclusion can lead to decreased interest and participation in PE overall (Haegele & Buckley, 2019), as well as decreased physical activity later in life (Haegele et al., 2019). The results of this study suggest that these experiences persist and continue to be portrayed as new research emerges. An example from this study was Mark’s (OI) explanation that PE “wasn’t very accessible; I couldn’t do most things. My teachers never really made any accommodations,” (written prompt) which led him to feel like he was not a full participant in his class, diminishing any sense of belonging that he may have felt. He described how he did not feel valued when his teachers implemented activities that he was unable to participate in successfully, and “didn’t really seem to care what I was doing at all. They basically didn’t care if I was just sitting there” (interview transcript).

The lack of accommodations that Mark needed to safely and successfully participate in PE made him feel like an outsider. He said when you have a disability, “you don’t really get to have the same experiences as your friends in the class” (interview transcript). Experiences like Mark’s are not quickly forgotten, as feelings of not being a full participant (Haegele et al., 2020) and of teachers appearing not to care (Haegele & Zhu, 2017) have been described by adults with disabilities reflecting on their time in school-based PE as well. When viewed within the context of PE literature, the current results also hint at a larger issue—that these negative experiences have been happening perpetually for years without improvement.

Often, differences in experiences, such as those that Mark described, were exacerbated by the students with disabilities having to engage in activities in an entirely separate space from their integrated PE class, even though he was enrolled in that class. Jesse (OI),

for example, mentioned that he was asked to select a few peers to participate in alternate activities with him in a different room each time he attended PE (written prompt), making him associate any feelings of belonging with the smaller, segregated group rather than in his large group, integrated PE class. Likewise, Kolby (VI) stated that she would choose a small number of her friends to join her in the smaller gymnasium during her integrated PE time. She said that they “would do exercises, play catch with a big pink ball, sometimes play goalball, and race on scooters” (written prompt). When activities in an alternate location were not offered, some participants simply did nothing during PE. Mark’s (OI) first memories of this happening were during a month-long jump rope unit in elementary school, as he recalled that “one time I was actually handed a jump rope, I didn’t even know what to say to that” (interview transcript). Mark, who had limited mobility and always required a wheelchair, stated he sat with the jump rope and watched his peers for the entire duration of the unit, a devaluing experience that he relived later in his middle school years. Mark recalled: “When I went to middle school, PE wasn’t really accessible to me, and I usually just sat on the sidelines and did my homework. Or I didn’t even go to class. I just used PE as a study hall” (interview transcript).

Self-selecting to sit out rather than waiting to be forced to do so by teachers or peers has also been described in the literature in previous years, as some individuals with disabilities have expressed that sometimes it doesn’t feel as bad to be excluded when the choice is your own (Haegele & Zhu, 2017).

Like Mark, Kolby (VI) recalled experiences of sitting out and wishing that her PE teachers had higher expectations for her; however, rather than self-selecting to sit out, she described taking matters into her own hands. Kolby explained that she felt the low expectations her teachers had were unfair and “hindered my inclusion,” specifically sharing that “my teacher thought I could not play, so I had to sit in the bleachers while everyone else played” (interview transcript). Kolby described how she advocated for herself and offered her teachers ideas on how she might be successful, facilitating her inclusion. After requesting specific modifications to the activity, Kolby was allowed to participate with her peers (written prompt), fostering her sense of belonging within the class. Jordan (VI) had

similar experiences, expressing that “most of the time they’d [teachers] just not have me participate at all, which I don’t think is fair, because I’m not getting the same or any similar exercise and physical activity as everybody else” (written prompt). When Jordan’s adapted PE teacher came to see her, which she described as happening “rarely,” she was “pulled out of the class so that kind of made me feel like I wasn’t really participating in what everybody else was doing” (interview transcript). Overall, she felt that PE “wasn’t very adaptable, or accessible in any way” (written prompt). These experiences echo those of the participants in Fitzgerald’s (2012) study, whose teachers removed them to another setting when they had difficulty with an activity, rather than questioning the content or delivery of the PE curriculum. This study adds to the growing evidence of PE’s inaccessibility, which suggests that physical exclusion and segregation in PE classes decrease feelings of belonging and value for students with disabilities.

Interestingly, Norman’s (VI) experience was unique when compared to the experiences shared by the other participants, as he commented that his PE teachers mostly failed to address him or his disability. Norman shared that: “It’s not like my gym teacher ever talks to me. She just tells the whole class what to do and then sits at her table or talks to other gym teachers or whatever. She has said to me before that I don’t have to play because of my eyesight though. But I don’t want to be that one kid that’s like sitting out, you know?” (interview transcript). According to Norman, this lack of attention or accommodations made him feel excluded, undervalued, and like he “couldn’t do as good as everybody else” (interview transcript).

Unfortunately, Norman is not unique in this manner, as other students with disabilities have reported feeling ignored by their PE teachers. In a study by Bredahl (2013), for example, participants also described feeling as though their teachers did not listen to them, which often resulted in their withdrawal from class activities. PE teachers are central to the quality of experience for youth with disabilities and have the power to provide meaningful learning experiences through relevant and appropriate modifications and accommodations (Haegle & Sutherland, 2015). Thus, improving the perception of PE for youth with disabilities must begin with changing PE teachers’ behaviors.

“They Had Absolutely No Clue:” The Teacher’s Role

The participants in this study perceived that their teachers were unprepared to teach students with disabilities in integrated PE settings. This idea aligns with the findings of Coates and Vickerman’s (2008) literature review, in which they concluded that the experiences of youth with disabilities in PE were restricted by a lack of training for PE teachers and their support staff. Wang (2019) supported this notion and recommended that schools should provide financial support and training to improve the quality of PE instruction provided to these students. While they expressed unhappiness with the quality of instruction they received, the participants in this study were eager to explain that they did not think their teachers were unkind, or bad people.

For example, Mark (OI) said: “I’ve always had nice teachers. I just don’t think they were ever trained to handle someone with a physical disability. They had absolutely no clue what to do or how to make accommodations. It’s really annoying because, like, I’m able to do pretty much just as much as the other kids but with just a couple of accommodations. I could do most activities, but [the teachers] don’t know how to make those accommodations. Teachers need to be more informed” (interview transcript).

Jordan (VI) and Kolby (VI) both stated they felt as though their teachers’ inexperience negatively influenced their ability to be or feel included. When it was obvious to them that their teachers were unprepared to accommodate them, it made them feel as though they were not important, or of value, compared to their peers. Jordan said: “All of my PE teachers were kind people. I feel like they just didn’t have any previous experience with a blind or visually impaired student, so they didn’t know what they could do instead. I didn’t really enjoy having so little expected of me, especially knowing how much I can do” (interview transcript).

During their focus group interview, Kolby shared that she “felt like [her PE teacher] probably hasn’t worked with a lot of visually impaired people” (interview transcript), and then Jordan discussed the importance of students self-advocating for their participation. Jordan said that she felt comfortable giving her teachers ideas about what to do for her, but Kolby felt it was important to emphasize that “it’s the teachers’ responsibility to make sure they incorporate some

of those activities” (interview transcript). By putting effort into fulfilling this responsibility, PE teachers could increase the feelings of value that students with disabilities experience in their PE classes.

While some participants were eager to discuss ways to facilitate their inclusion, such as coordinating accommodations with their teachers, Norman (VI) expressed that he feared his situation was unrecoverable. He felt that his PE teachers were unlikely to change and said, “I don’t know, there is no helping it. I’m just going to, like, deal with this until I can get out of school. Like, please let this hurry up and be done” (interview transcript). These perceptions may characterize reality as research has shown that PE teachers often have little to no interactions with youth with disabilities during their teacher training programs (Hilderley & Rhind, 2012; Holland & Haegele, 2020). Hilderley and Rhind (2012) found that “teachers don’t have a true insight into needs of students with a disability” (p. 10), and a participant in a Holland and Haegele (2020) study disclosed that she had “no real idea” of how to interact with students with disabilities after graduating and obtaining her teaching credentials because she had never interacted with someone with a disability before (p. 10). The findings also align with Haegele and colleagues’ (2020) retrospective study that included participant perceptions that their teachers did not know what to do with or for them.

“I’m a Scared Boy:” Concerns About Injuries and Unsafe Activities

Most of the participants in this study described experiences of feeling unsafe in integrated PE (reflective notes), citing specific injuries that they had sustained during the class. Often, this fear of injury was brought on by a lack of appropriate modifications (Tanure Alves et al., 2018a). Kolby (VI), for instance, recalled the exact date several years ago that she was hit in the face with a basketball because she had been left under the basket while other students were shooting. She said that the incident changed her feelings about the sport, and she has not wanted to play it since (interview transcript). Norman (VI) feared this exact scenario and said, “Sometimes in PE I’m a scared boy and am always afraid that [a ball] is going to hit me in the face” (interview transcript). Likewise, Jordan (VI) described a similar incident that occurred when the PE teacher standing next to her during a kickball game to prevent her from being accidentally

hit by the ball, left her to go deal with another student. While he was gone, Jordan stated that she was hit in the chest with a ball so hard that it left a bruise, an experience that greatly decreased her desire to participate in PE moving forward (interview transcript). In this instance, Jordan perceived that her safety was not important to her PE teacher and that she was valued less than the peer he had left to speak with.

For Mark (OI), these experiences of getting hurt were frequent occurrences in PE. He said, “I’ve gotten multiple injuries from PE because the activities are just not safe. It came to the point where it was becoming too dangerous for me to even go there” (written prompt). He explained further that “every time I go, I get hit,” leading to feelings of frustration, anger, and being unsafe, resulting in his preference for non-attendance. Mark often felt as though he was intentionally targeted by his peers, which increased his feelings that he did not belong in the group. Descriptions of safety needs being left unmet for students with VIs (Bredahl, 2013; Haegele & Kirk, 2018; Holland et al., 2020) and OIs (Bredahl, 2013) are present throughout PE literature. Physical and emotional safety is vital for student success in PE (Healy et al., 2013); therefore, PE professionals must be diligent about reducing hazards and modifying their instructional practices accordingly (Holland et al., 2020).

“I Get to Hang Out with My Friends:” Interpersonal Relationships and Feelings of Inclusion

Research has shown that students with disabilities are more likely to make friends during the school day than outside of school hours when compared to their peers without disabilities (Seymour et al., 2009). These friendships are often fostered in PE, which can influence the perspective that students with disabilities have about the subject (Seymour et al., 2009; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010), helping them to feel included (Tanure Alves et al., 2018b), and potentially motivating them to participate more in PE activities than they would have otherwise (Li & Chen, 2012). While participants seldom experienced feelings of inclusion (see Themes 1, 2, and 3), they noted that these feelings were available in instances when they were able to interact with their friends during PE (reflective notes). Usman (OI), for example, enjoyed spending time with his two closest friends in PE, specifically because they were “always willing to pick

things up for me when I drop them” (interview transcript), which made him feel valued in his PE class. Having friends attend the same PE class also helped promote feelings of acceptance for Mark (OI), as his “friends know what I can and can’t do, and they respect that” (interview transcript). When he was participating alongside his friends, he felt accepted for who he was and did not feel as though he had to explain or apologize for the way he did things. Examples of self-supporting peer interactions have been commonly found to improve the quality of experience in PE for students with disabilities (Goodwin, 2001). When peers provide consensual, caring help, such as Usman’s friends helping him pick things up off of the ground, students with disabilities can maintain control, dignity, and autonomy in the exchange (Goodwin, 2001).

The participants appreciated having friends in PE classes largely for the social benefit and sense of belonging that resulted (reflective notes), which aligns with the value of friendship and camaraderie as described by Healy and colleagues (2013). Jesse (OI) identified interpersonal relationships as the biggest benefit of attending PE classes and said that his favorite part of PE was taking breaks to talk to his friends when he was tired, saying, “I feel included because I’m with my friends” (interview transcript). Similarly, Norman (VI) said, “PE is not that bad because I get to hang out with my friends” (interview transcript).

For all participants, the only feelings associated with inclusion that they experienced in PE were directly tied to socializing with friends (reflective notes). Interpersonal relationships have been found to play a key role in determining the quality of experiences for youth with disabilities in PE (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000) and are an important facilitator of feelings of acceptance, belonging, and value, as per these participants’ testimonials. It is important to note, however, that socialization is not the intended outcome of PE, but rather a potential benefit of participation. As such, interpersonal relationships should not be confused with access to the intended goals of a PE curriculum (i.e., to produce physically literate individuals with a desire to be active throughout their lifespan; SHAPE America, 2013). PE professionals should examine the content and delivery of PE curriculums for youth with disabilities and develop plans to use the benefits of interpersonal relationships as a tool for success rather than accepting them as desirable outcomes.

Conclusion

This study is among the first to interview youth in the United States about their current experiences of inclusion in PE. The key themes revealed not only what participants had experienced during integrated PE, but also how they felt about those experiences. Generally, participants did not feel they were accepted or valued by their teachers and peers in their integrated PE classes, which diminished any sense of belonging they may have experienced. The participants did enjoy the social aspect of PE but felt that a lack of accommodations, safety measures, and teacher preparation hindered their overall feelings of inclusion. Researchers should continue to explore the experiences of youth with disabilities in PE contexts, and specifically their feelings about the inclusiveness of their integrated classes. To date, the literature has been limited in the range of disabilities and geographical locations included. Future research should broaden this literature base to be more inclusive and encompass the experiences of a more diverse group of participants.

Limitations

Some limitations existed in this study. First, the authors selected participants from a convenience sample with whom they had previously developed relationships. These relationships may have influenced the degree to which participants were willing to share information about their experiences. It is possible that they were willing to share more because they were speaking with a trusted adult, or less because they viewed the authors in a role similar to that of a PE teacher. Participants were encouraged to share as much or as little as they were comfortable with and were reminded regularly that their answers would not be shared with their PE teachers. Second, the participants volunteered for the study after receiving a recruitment letter, and individuals who volunteer to participate in research studies may have certain similar traits (i.e., being outspoken about their experiences). These two factors may have increased the homogeneity of the group, thus decreasing the transferability of the findings. However, it is important to note that this qualitative descriptive study intended to present the experiences of a particular group of students rather than to provide generalizable findings (Sandelowski, 2000). The small sample size in this study might also be considered

a limitation by some. Small samples, however, have been found to allow for more intensive contact with participants in qualitative studies (Bradshaw et al., 2017) and are considered adequate if the research question is answered sufficiently and with detail (Fawcett & Garity, 2009).

References

- Alquraini, T., & Gut, D. (2012). Critical components of successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities: Literature review. *International Journal of Special Education*, 27(1), 1–14.
- An, J., & Meaney, K. S. (2015). Inclusion practices in elementary physical education: A social-cognitive perspective. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 62(2), 143–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2014.998176>
- Bradshaw, C., Atkinson, S., & Doody, O. (2017). Employing a qualitative description approach in health care research. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, 4, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393617742282>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bredahl, A. M. (2013). Sitting and watching the others being active: The experienced difficulties in PE when having a disability. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 30, 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.30.1.40>
- Coates, J. (2012). Teaching inclusively: Are secondary physical education student teachers sufficiently prepared to teach in inclusive environments? *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 17, 349–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2011.582487>
- Coates, J., & Vickerman, P. (2008). Let the children have their say: Children with special educational needs and their experiences of physical education- a review. *Support for Learning*, 23(4), 168–175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9604.2008.00390.x>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Fawcett, J., & Garity, J. (2009). *Evaluating research for evidence-based nursing practice*. F. A. Davis.
- 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>

- Goodwin, D. L. (2001). The meaning of help in PE: Perceptions of students with physical disabilities. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 18, 289–303. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.18.3.289>
- Goodwin, D. L., & Watkinson, E. J. (2000). Inclusive physical education from the perspective of students with physical disabilities. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 17, 144–160. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.17.2.144>
- Graham, L. J., & Slee, R. (2008). An illusory interiority: Interrogating the discourse/s of inclusion. *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, 40(2), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00331.x>
- Haegele, J. A. (2019). Inclusion illusion: Questioning the inclusiveness of integrated physical education. *Quest*, 71(4), 387–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2019.1602547>
- Haegele, J. A., & Buckley, M. (2019). Physical education experiences of Alaskan youths with visual impairments: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 113(1), 57–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X18818614>
- Haegele, J. A., Hodge, S. R., Holland, S. K., Wilson, W. J., & Zhu, X. (2020). Understanding the inclusiveness of integrated physical education from the perspective of adults with visual impairments. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 37(2), 141–159. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2019-0094>
- Haegele, J. A., & Holland, S. K. (2020). Socialization experiences of first-year adapted physical education teachers with a master's degree. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 37(3), 304–323. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2019-0126>
- Haegele, J. A., Holland, K., & Zhu, X. (2020). “My eyes have nothing to do with how my legs move”: Individuals with visual impairments’ experiences with learning to run. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 37(3), 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2019-0098>
- Haegele, J. A., Holland, K., & Zhu, X. (2019). Fitness testing experiences in integrated physical education as reflected by adults with visual impairments. *European Physical Education Review*. Advanced Online Publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X19882057>
- Haegele, J. A., & Kirk, T. N. (2018). Experiences in physical education: Exploring the intersection of visual impairment and maleness. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 35, 196–213. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2017-0132>

- Haegele, J. A., & Sutherland, S. (2015). Perspectives of students with disabilities toward physical education: A qualitative inquiry review. *Quest*, 67, 255–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2015.1050118>
- Haegele, J. A., Yessick, A., & Zhu, X. (2018). Females with visual impairment in physical education: Exploring the intersection between disability and gender identities. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 89(3), 298–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2018.1484067>
- Haegele, J. A., & Zhu, X. (2017). Experiences of individuals with visual impairments in integrated physical education: A retrospective study. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 88(4), 425–435. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2017.1346781>
- Healy, S., Msetfi, R., & Gallagher, S. (2013). ‘Happy and a bit nervous’: The experiences of children with autism in physical education. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41, 222–228. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12053>
- Hilderley, E., & Rhind, D. J. A. (2012). Including children with cerebral palsy in mainstream physical education lessons: A case study of student and teacher experiences. *Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise, and Physical Education Research*, 1, 1–15.
- Hutzler, Y. S., Zach, S., & Gafni, O. (2005). Physical education students’ attitudes and self-efficacy towards the participation of children with special needs in regular classes. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 20(3), 309–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250500156038>
- IDEA-IA. (2004). Public Law No. 108-446, Federal Register (2004).
- International Blind Sports Federation. (2018). *IBSA classification rules*. <http://www.ibsasport.org/documents/files/182-1-IBSA-Classification-rules-2018.pdf>
- Kelly, B., Margolis, M., McCormack, L., LeBaron, P. A., & Chowdhury, D. (2017). What affects people’s willingness to participate in qualitative research? An experimental comparison of five incentives. *Field Methods*, 29(4), 333–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X17698958>
- Li, C., & Chen, S. (2012). Exploring experiences of physical activity in special school students with cerebral palsy: A qualitative perspective. *European Journal of Adapted Physical Activity*, 5(1), 7–17.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Obrusnikova, I., & Block, M. E. (2020). Historical context and definition of inclusion. In J. A. Haegele, S. A. Hodge, & D. R. Shapiro (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of adapted physical education* (pp. 65–80). Routledge.
- O’Connell, D. C., & Kowal, S. (1995). Basic principles of transcription. In J. A. Smith, L. van Langenhove, & R. Harre (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology*. Sage.
- Qi, J., Wang, L., & Ha, A. (2016). Perceptions of Hong Kong physical education teachers on the inclusion of students with disabilities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 37(1), 86–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2016.1169992>
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health*, 23, 334–340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Sandelowski, M. (2010). What’s in a name: Qualitative description revised. *Research in Nursing and Health*, 33, 77–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.20362>
- Seymour, H., Reid, G., & Bloom, G. A. (2009). Friendship in inclusive physical education. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 26, 201–219. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.26.3.201>
- SHAPE America. (2013). *National Standards for K-12 Physical Education*.
- Spencer-Cavaliere, N., & Watkinson, E. J. (2010). Inclusion understood from the perspectives of children with disability. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 27, 275–293. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.27.4.275>
- Stainback, S., Stainback, W., East, K., & Sapon-Shevin, M. (1994). A commentary on inclusion and the development of a positive self-identity by people with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 60(6), 486–490. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440299406000602>
- Svendby, E. B., & Dowling, F. J. (2013). Negotiating the discursive spaces of inclusive education: Narratives of experience from contemporary physical education. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 15, 361–378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2012.735200>

- Tanure Alves, M. L., Grenier, M., Haegele, J. A., & Duarte, E. (2018a). "I didn't do anything, I just watched": Perspectives of Brazilian students with physical disabilities toward physical education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(10), 1129–1142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1511760>
- Tanure Alves, M. L., Haegele, J. A., & Duarte, E. (2018b). "We can't do anything": The experiences of students with visual impairments in physical education classes in Brazil. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, 36(2), 152–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264619617752761>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2005). *Guidelines for inclusion: Ensuring access to education for all*.
- Walker, S., Reid, S., & Priest, H. (2013). Use of reflexivity in a mixed-methods study. *Nurse Research*, 20(3), 38–43. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2013.01.20.3.38.c9496>
- Wang, L. (2019). Perspectives of students with special needs on inclusion in general physical education: A social-relational model of disability. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 36, 242–263. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2018-0068>
- Wilson, W. J., Haegele, J. A., & Kelly, L. E. (2019). Revisiting the narrative about least restrictive environment in physical education. *Quest*, 72(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2019.1602063>
- Yessick, A., & Haegele, J. A. (2019). "Missed opportunities": Adults with visual impairments' reflections on the impact of physical education on current physical activity. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, 37(1), 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264619618814070>