Learning about 'inclusive' pedagogies through a special school placement

Abstract

Background

It is well-established that traditional approaches to initial teacher education do not adequately prepare physical education (PE) teachers for teaching pupils with disabilities. Consequently, pupils with disabilities participate less frequently and in fewer PE activities than their age peers. School-based placements, which form a cornerstone of the professional socialisation phase of teacher education, can help to prepare prospective and pre-service teachers for the demands of working in educational settings. We should not assume, though, that placing prospective or pre-service PE teachers in a school impacts positively on learning about inclusive pedagogies and, consequently, the educational experiences of pupils with disabilities.

Purpose

We used a special school placement and created opportunities for students to critically reflect on situated learning experiences to challenge normative perceptions of pedagogy and facilitate their learning about more inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. Specifically, we explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective PE teachers' learning about inclusive pedagogies.

Methodology

Twenty-six first year undergraduate students, all of whom aspired to become PE teachers, participated in focus group interviews and were selected because they had attended a placement in a special school. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

Findings

The findings were underpinned by situated learning theory and suggested, for the first time in research terms, that through a special school placement prospective PE teachers learned about: adapting activities; breaking activities into smaller, more manageable parts; demonstrating activities; pacing the delivery of activities; when to repeat activities; non-verbal communication; and managing disruptive behaviours. We conclude by arguing that this pedagogical learning will contribute to preparing our participants for teacher education programmes and a career teaching PE, given that it aligns with the criteria used to judge the performance of pre- and in-service teachers in England (see DfE 2011). Thus, we advocate for such placements to become a more frequent feature of the learning experiences of prospective and pre-service teachers. However, we do question and therefore call for future research that explores the longer-term influence and transferability of what is learned during special school placements.

Key words

Inclusive pedagogies; Physical education; Pupils with disabilities; Teacher preparation; Special schools

Introduction

Research relating to the socialisation of PE teachers is buoyant (e.g. Curtner-Smith 2017; Richards et al. 2014; Stran and Curtner-Smith 2009). While these studies have contributed significantly to our knowledge of how key socialising agents influence pre- and in-service PE teacher behaviours, nearly all of it focuses on mainstream school teachers teaching typically developing pupils. To the best of our knowledge, only research conducted by Park and Curtner-Smith (2018), Richards and Wilson (2020) and Wilson and Richards (2019) in the United States, and O'Leary et al. (2014, 2015) in England, has focused on the teaching of pupils with disabilities in special schools. We aim to add to this paucity of research by exploring, for the first time, the influence of placement in a special school on prospective PE teachers' learning about inclusive pedagogies. This, we hope, will help teacher educators to better prepare PE teachers for teaching pupils with disabilities given the ever-growing body of knowledge suggesting that traditional approaches to PETE often fail to achieve this goal (see Vickerman and Maher 2018).

Centring pedagogical practices is important because they have been found to impact on pupil achievement and success (Lingard and Mills 2007), especially for those who experience disadvantage (Overton et al. 2017), such as pupils with disabilities. A focus on pedagogical practice is crucial given that such measurable pupil outcomes are now very much a part of the expectations placed on teachers because of the ways and extent to which Neo-Liberal discourses pervade schools in England. Hitherto, much of the research relating to preparing PE teachers for teaching pupils with disabilities has focused on legal entitlement, school inclusion policies, concepts of disability and educational 'inclusion', improving attitudes towards pupils with disabilities, working with support staff in schools, and increasing teacher confidence and empathy (see Vickerman and Maher, 2018). Thus, there is an obvious need to explore the development of pedagogical practices for teaching pupils with disabilities.

School-based placements have become a cornerstone of the professional socialisation phase of teacher education (Christenson and Barney 2011; Ulvik, Helleve and Smith 2018) as a way of preparing pre-service teachers for the lived and embodied demands of working in an educational setting. We should not assume, though, that placing prospective or pre-service teachers in a school impacts positively on, for instance, learning about inclusive pedagogies. Instead, Richards et al. (2014) suggest that school placements should enable prospective teachers to reflect critically on already developed beliefs. This is because, according to

Tannehill and MacPhail (2014, 149), "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 that cause them to recognise and value the change process and its consequences for themselves and their learners". In this respect, we are aware that our prospective PE teachers, all of whom are able-bodied and have limited experience interacting with people with disabilities, may have established ableist ideologies about pedagogy. Ableism is a worldview that focuses on disability as a bio-medical construct, expects pupils to assimilate into cultural arrangements, and posits pupils with disabilities as outsiders who are inferior to their age peers in PE (Lynch et al. 2020). We endeavoured to address this and extend existing research by using a special school placement and creating opportunities for students to critically reflect on situated learning experiences to challenge normative, ableist perceptions of pedagogy and facilitate their learning about more inclusive approaches to teaching and learning.

It is noteworthy that we are not the first to explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective PE teachers. For instance, Maher et al. (2019) examined the experiential mechanisms that influenced perceptions of competence and confidence when it comes to teaching pupils with disabilities. This work was extended by Maher and Morley (2019) who explored the ways in which prospective PE teachers reflected on and demonstrated empathy during a special school placement. Neither of these studies, though, focused on the influence of a special school placement on prospective PE teachers' learning about inclusive pedagogies. It is here where the novelty of our research lies.

Inclusive pedagogies

Research, thinking and practice relating to 'inclusive pedagogy' is complex and nuanced. It overlaps with and at times is tied to the founding ideas of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993). For us, inclusive pedagogies are anchored in values and practices relating to equity, social justice and inclusion, whereby teachers – and, indeed, all of those working in schools – are committed to disrupting able-bodied normativity by ensuring that pupils with disabilities have access to appropriate learning spaces and activities; are stretched and challenged, particularly in relation to their capabilities; feel empowered; experience a sense of belonging; feel valued and are respected in PE (see Haegele 2019, Lynch et al. 2020, Maher 2020; Terzi 2010). Achieving these expectations is, undeniably, an ambitious project for teacher educators and teachers.

Nonetheless, our commitment is crucial given that it is now well-established that pupils with disabilities participate less frequently and in a narrower range of activities in PE than their age-peers both in curriculum time (Haegele and Sutherland 2015) and as part of extra-curricular offerings (Stride and Fitzgerald 2011). Moreover, pupils with disabilities are more likely to be bullied by their peers and think that PE teachers have negative perceptions of their bodies and ability (Haegele et al 2018). While the research intersecting disability, pedagogy and PE is scarce, it is noteworthy that McNeil et al. (2017) reviewed academic literature and found that inclusive pedagogies are inconsistently embedded in teacher education programmes, thus affecting how pre-service PE teachers think about and support pupils with disabilities. Such inconsistent practices require, according to McNeil et al. (2017), teacher educators to critically (re)consider how inclusive pedagogies are incorporated into the learning outcomes and expectations placed on pre-service teachers. More recently, Maher et al. (2020) and Sparkes et al. (2019) used a critical pedagogical approach with a specific focus on inclusive pedagogies to explore the use of disability simulations as a PE teacher education tool. Whilst inclusive pedagogies were not specifically mentioned by Lynch et al. (2020), their research attempted to disrupt ableist ideas of ability and physicality among university PE students through a tennis unit that had critical and inclusive intentions. No research, however, has yet used situated learning theory to explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective PE teachers' learning about inclusive pedagogies.

Situated learning theory

We use situated learning theory (SLT) considering claims that school placements are crucial to facilitating teacher learning as social and situational (Chambers and Armour 2012), thus contributing towards the construction of contextualised knowledge (Maher and Fitzgerald, 2020). While SLT was first advanced by Lave and Wenger (1991), it has since been used as a theoretical tool to examine the continuing professional development (CPD) and learning of PE teachers (see Hanuk et al, 2019; Patton and Parker, 2017). In the development of pre-service teachers, SLT was applied by Herold and Waring (2018), who identified school placements as important sites, or communities of practice (CoP), where learning takes place. This was crucial in developing students' knowledge and understanding of teaching spaces and helping them operate effectively – something that is particularly pertinent for students with no prior special school experience. More recently, Maher and Fitzgerald (2020) used SLT to analyse how

thinking and learning had developed among special school PE teachers through CoP membership.

CoPs are groups that operate collectively, contributing to shared or public practices (Kirk and Macdonald, 1998). Involvement in community practices should be meaningful (both individually and collectively) as it is the shared values and interests that work to keep the group together (Wenger, 2013). Relations are grounded in SLT perspectives as learning is developed through the ongoing interactions of the group (Goodyear et al, 2019). Learning about culture(s), situational language and behaviours through interactions allows participants to move from the periphery of CoPs towards gaining full membership (Lave and Wenger 1991). SLT therefore offers a framework that allows for meaning to be made through the identification of the specific social contexts and activities that shape learning within these communities. Thus, what our students learn about inclusive pedagogies while on their special school placement is influenced by the social actors they interact with and is tied to the context and situations they find themselves in.

Methodology

Philosophical position

With five researchers involved in data generation, it was important that there was philosophical alignment as a means of ensuring research quality (Tracy 2010). Each of us held an internal and relativist ontological position that took phenomenon such as undergraduate student placements in a special school to be a humanly constructed social reality. As such, understandings of students' situated experiences in the school are multifaceted, each with subjective realities that 'exist' regarding phenomena and depend upon how those involved position themselves in relation to it. In seeking to advance the understanding of special school experiences, we acknowledge and report students' differing realities through listening to their voices and representing them in the form of extended quotes (Sparkes and Smith 2014). Epistemologically, we hold – albeit nuanced versions of – a subjectivist and constructionist epistemology that rejects the separation of knower and known, thus acknowledging that we cannot stand 'outside' of ourselves and produce theory-free knowledge (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

Positionality

Given our positionality, it would be epistemologically wrong to deny the situatedness of the self (Coffey 1999) and as such, we consider our own roles within the inquiry (Collins and Gallinat 2010). Each researcher identified as white, working-class and able-bodied. Four of us worked together delivering a BA (Hons) Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) undergraduate programme, while the fifth was a recent graduate who is undertaking a PhD at a different university. The principal researcher and first author currently leads the undergraduate PESS programme, conveys the research group four of us are a part of, and has responsibility for a special educational needs and disability (SEND) in PE module. Members of the research team have historically contributed to and/or led health weeks in the school that forms the setting of our inquiry.

Setting, participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited from three separate year groups of the PESS undergraduate programme at a University in the North of England. While the programme does not give graduates qualified teacher status (QTS), it does seek to develop a detailed understanding of the PE landscape to best prepare students for entry into a teacher education programme. Historically, most graduates have progressed to a PETE pathway.

During scheduled lecture time information was provided about an opportunity to gain experience in a special school delivering a health programme to pupils in the primary and secondary phases. Borough Woods[1] is a local school that offers specialist provision for pupils aged between 5 and 16 years old with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) to support their learning. While the pupils have a range of complex learning and/or medical needs, Borough Woods holds high expectations and aspirations for the pupils and aims to provide them with a safe, calm and supportive environment.

The school has traditionally offered students from the PESS programme an annual opportunity to gain 'hands-on' experiences working with pupils, teachers and teaching assistants (TAs). There is a collective partnership from the very beginning, as students in self-selected peer groups meet with an allocated class teacher to develop a better understanding of what pupils' needs are and to plan lessons accordingly. The students then work with their

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[1] Pseudonym

respective classes in some capacity for one week, observing, supporting and teaching health-related activities. The teachers and TAs are ultimately responsible for their pupils and, together with university staff, guide student learning. This experience was not tied to an accredited module but instead part of the PESS programme's added-value voluntary opportunities for student personal and professional development.

While over seventy students from across the three years of the programme had volunteered to undertake the placement at Borough Woods, 26 first year students were purposively sampled for the study (Cohen et al. 2017) on the basis that that they had no prior experience of having been in a special school and aspired to become PE teachers. Moreover, it is noteworthy that at the points of placement engagement and data collection, the first-year students had not yet been exposed to the concepts of critical or inclusive pedagogy. This would come later in the PESS programme. Here, we wanted to ensure that the participants selected had limited exposure to children with disabilities and inclusive pedagogies so that we could more precisely explore the influence of the special school placement.

Method

To move beyond description (Merrill and West 2009) to explore the meanings of participants' perceptions, focus groups were chosen to generate responses that captured in rich detail collective and singular expectations, fears, assumptions, thoughts and experiences. The research team collectively co-constructed interview questions through meetings to discuss potential content, discounted irrelevant material and clarified ambiguities to ensure that there was consistency across the questions (Bryman 2015). Students were split into five mixed gender focus groups and each of the research team were allocated to a single focus group. The four university lecturers taught all of the students on the programme and had responsibilities for assessment. Students were assured that non-participation in the research would have no detrimental impact on staff-student relationships or their future studies. Efforts were also made to neutralise any power relationships (Ennis and Chen, 2013) by focusing upon what students would collectively gain from the process in terms of learning and experience – i.e. new experiences of PE other than mainstream schooling, transferrable skills, and an additional placement when it came to PGCE applications. The grouping allowed for discussion, researcher-student and student-student interaction, and collated both singular and collective perspectives about situated learning experiences. While some voices were louder, researchers

endeavoured to prompt and promote thinking and reflection to ensure that no voices or conceptions were silenced (Cohen et al. 2017). As there was two weeks between completing the special school placement and data capture, memory would have contributed to how the participants made sense of the field (Coffey 1999). Interactions between the researchers and participants during the questioning process furthered the recall of forgotten situated experiences. For this inquiry, focus groups were therefore a useful means of generating data that was dependable, confirmable and credible (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

Ethics

Ethical approval was given by our University Ethics Committee before the research commenced. BERA's (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research guided the process. As participants were working with vulnerable children and young people, the researchers were mindful to ensure that all were familiar in advance with the ethos, operations and procedures of Borough Woods School. An induction to the school was led by one of the school's Senior Leadership Team before any contact with pupils took place. Written consent was attained from each participant and they were reminded that they could withdraw from the placement and/or the research project at any time. All interviews were recorded on digital voice recorders, transcribed verbatim and stored centrally by the principal researcher on a password encrypted USB memory stick.

Data analysis

Using reflexive thematic analysis to make sense of participants' individual and collective views and situated experiences linked ontologically and epistemologically to our positionality (Braun et al. 2018). It enabled us to move data beyond description (Merrill and West 2009) and make meaning from students' preconceptions and realities of their special school situated learning experiences. The interview transcripts were read multiple times by all researchers to increase familiarity with the dataset. Anthony performed the thematic analysis. Initial codes were constructed by giving labels to sections of the texts, which were the participants' narratives that would be used to explore the essence of meaning (Lopez and Willis 2004) based on situated experiences in special schools. Labels were descriptive (what was said), analytical (significance of what was said) and theoretical (tied to situated learning theory). Here, attempt

was made to move beyond the coding of superficial, semantic meaning, towards the construction of latent codes (Braun et al. 2018). Themes were then generated as patterns and relationships within and between initial codes became clearer (Mills and Morton 2013). This resulted in codes being clustered together, collapsed and/or selectively removed during the construction of established themes. As an ongoing process, themes were reviewed until Anthony was confident that the themes accurately and authentically reflected participants' views and situated learning experiences. Finally, interview transcripts were harvest and direct quotes were identified relating to the established themes, which were missed during initial coding (Braun et al. 2018).

Findings

The seven themes constructed during data analysis, which encapsulated participant views of and learning about inclusive pedagogies, were (1) adapting activities; (2) breaking activities into smaller, more manageable parts; (3) demonstrating activities; (4) pacing the delivery of activities; (5) when to repeat activities; (6) non-verbal communication; and (7) managing disruptive behaviours. These themes structure the Findings and represent thick textual descriptions that engender honesty and transparency as hallmarks of quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). In the Findings we 'show' the data and invite readers to construct their own knowledge and explore the ways and extent to which these data resonate with them (Smith, 2017), before we draw on situated learning theory and published literature relating to inclusive pedagogies to offer our analytical 'tell' in the Discussion.

Learning about adapting activities

A key area of growth for our participants related to their learning about how to adapt activities while on placement. Caleb (FG1), for example, suggested: 'the placement was a great experience. I feel like I needed to broaden my teaching. If you know how to adapt lessons, you can adapt lessons in mainstream schools'. Many talked about adaptations based on the needs and capabilities of the pupils they were working with:

> We gained experience delivering an inclusive lesson all week to a group of kids that need to have that because of their differences. However, we had to adapt that, adapting something so that somebody can do it, and you wouldn't have to do it that often in a

mainstream, whereas here it's every day you would have to adapt things to someone's level of ability. (Wayne, FG2)

This point was reinforced by Kate (FG2) when she discussed her experiences of planning lessons while on placement:

> When planning we had to look at what the children could do and go from there. We tried to base it on their strengths. Sometimes we had to choose quite a broad activity and adapt it in the actual lesson, especially when we did not know the group.

For Kate and others, knowing the learners was crucial for planning and delivering so-called inclusive lessons; that is, lessons that were tailored to the needs and capabilities of the pupils they were working with. When this was not possible, participants responded to the needs of learners by adapting what they had planned:

> The lesson plans were like a baseline so we knew what we were doing but we didn't stick to half of our plan. Some activities took longer than we thought and then we changed some of the activities that weren't quite working. So it gave some understanding of what we were going to do that day but then we changed it the next day. We actually planned our lessons for the whole week but had to change that after the first day (Isla, FG3).

Break it up, demonstrate, pace the delivery and repeat

The initial discussions about adapting activities developed into conversations about specific teaching strategies that were learned and used while on placement. The importance of activities being broken into smaller, more manageable parts, was emphasised:

> Caleb: You have to break the activity down into parts because most of the kids just really struggle with it. It has to be broken down so it is as simple as possible.
>
> Tasha: Yeah, make it more simple. It has to be made more simple so they can cope with it. Otherwise, they really struggle. (FG1)

For others, the breakdown involved more focus on skill development phases and less on team game activities:

> Neil: I think the kids should be doing basic skills.
>
> Kate: But then you said the basic skills are shooting and passing, you said they shouldn't be doing that.

Mark: No, we're [Neil and Mark] saying the kids should be learning that but they shouldn't be learning that in a basketball game because they try and learn passing, shooting, dribbling, evasion, like team sports and it is too much for them to learn in that one space. It should be stripped down and literally brought back to key stage one level of throwing and catching. The fundamentals. (FG2)

For participants in focus group one, demonstrations and a slower pace of delivery were key in this respect:

Dawn: Because a lot of our kids had that global delay, when you were explaining something, I don't think things can flow as fast as they would in like a mainstream school. We were watching the basketball, dribble the ball, like okay now use your other hand, and then they'd be using the same hand and you'd have to literally show them one by one, use your other hand.

Sara: Yeah, repeating a lot. Lots of repetition so they could practice and loads of teaching demonstrations.

Facilitator: Why loads of demonstrations?

Sara: Because they seemed to learn better from seeing you do it, because they kind of liked to copy what you do. I think that's what our teacher also said to us, that if you're doing something they'll do the same as you.

Interestingly, this purview transferred to classroom-based learning contexts, as illustrated through the following discussion between Tanya, Louise and Erica (FG4), who talked about their experiences of teaching nutrition:

Tanya: On Tuesday we did the treasure hunt in the morning and then they tasted the fruit.

Erica: Oh, the fruit. Even if they didn't want to, they'd sniff it or they'd put it on the tongue.

Louise: Yeah, we had to devise a step by step guide of how, because they were quite fussy eaters, especially one of the little lads. They didn't want to touch it, they didn't want to smell it, so we had to coax them through it.

Tanya: They were fussy eaters.

Louise: So then you'd have to go through like stages, break it down for them and go through it with them. We had to show them and do it too. They'd have to pick the fruit up, they'd have to smell it, they'd have to touch it with their tongue, bite it, and then you'd have to tell them to chew it and then swallow it. (FG4)

Learning about non-verbal communication

Some participants gained experience working with pupils who experienced communication difficulties:

> Etta: We were just getting the fruit, we brought it in, and then we were… like some of the kids were non-verbal weren't they?
>
> Kelly: Yeah. Some could say some words but some could only make noises that were difficult to understand. Others didn't say anything.
>
> Etta: It was so difficult to work with them at first. You'd have to put your hands up and be like "Is it orange or is it green, is that like toffee or whatever". They had to point to a hand to answer. (FG3)

The reading of facial expressions was identified by another group as being a key element of the interactions they had with pupils in special school PE:

> Isla: We had to learn and try and understand facial expressions. We'd have to try and guess what they [the pupil] was thinking because they couldn't tell us. I had to use this to judge if they were liking the lesson, or if they understood what I was saying.
>
> Aoife: Remember Tasha [pseudonym]? If she didn't like it her bottom lip would go or if she was happy she had a proper smile on her face. (FG3)

Some of the participants had to learn hand signals and make their own judgements about facial expressions during the placement experience, while others were given guidance by the teacher:

> Tanya: We just picked up the hand signals through the week.
>
> Louise: But when we went in to meet the teachers the day before, for the day, they did tell us the signs didn't they?
>
> Erica: Yeah, they did that.
>
> Louise: Like the basic like no, yes, good, bad, whatever. (FG4)

These initial discussions with teachers were also accompanied by access to an information board, which participants claimed supported their learning on placement:

> Isla: Each child had a board on the wall and you could just go over and on them boards, it was like how that individual child learnt best or how they communicated. We had a read over and it told you about how to look out for facial expressions and look out for like nodding and stuff even though sometimes it's not a significant nod, it might only be a little one, but they nod the answer.
>
> Aoife: It was really good. Really helpful because I hadn't known any of that stuff before. I would have just thought they were ignoring me or didn't understand. (FG3)

Together with learning about non-verbal cues, our participants also gained experience using technology to communicate with pupils. Leroy, Jade and Harriet (FG5) used iPads to facilitate communication:

> Leroy: [pupil] communicated through a programme on the iPad. We would ask him questions and he would reply through the iPad. It was only very basic stuff like how he was feeling. That was useful, being able to understand his emotions, but it was mostly basic stuff, like yes and no type questions.
>
> Jade: Yeah, the teacher showed us but it was dead easy to pick up.
>
> Harriet: Apparently, the programme is free. You can get it on your phone. I bet that would be useful for teaching other kids, not just those who can't talk.

Learning how to manage disruptive behaviours

The final theme related to participant learning about behaviour management techniques. Caleb (FG1), for instance, talked about the importance of learning how to read the body language of pupils so that he could prevent disruptive behaviours from developing:

> I don't know what it was, it was some things like his facial expressions and like tense, you know, tensing of the fists but the teachers know that he was going to kick off so she took him out the class for a walk. That was her experience and I learned from that.

Kelly (FG3) was another who talked about the importance of diffusing situations. For her, the use of music was key:

> When we were getting to the end of an activity and the kids were getting a bit restless, we didn't really know how to control them and like calm them down, so the teacher would play soothing music and the kids would love it. We stole that idea and used it when we were teaching.

Phil (FG4) experienced teachers using a different technique for relaxing and calming pupils who were getting agitated and liable to engage in disruptive behaviours:

> Phil: One of the kids in our class, it was difficult to get him on task and keep him on task because he would just flip. When he flipped it scared some of the other kids. He was a big kid.
>
> Facilitator: How did you deal with that?

Phil: We got him, the teacher got him, something to play with. It was like a stress ball. He used to smell it and rub it against his face but it did work. It seemed to relax him.

The use of incentives was also identified by participants as being a valuable tool for preventing disruptive behaviours:

Louise: We used our incentives quite a lot. All the kids had their own bar chart, a sticker chart.

Facilitator: Did you make that yourself?

Louise: Yeah. So we had like stickers for them, like planets and like dinosaurs and they stuck them on.

Tanya: We just drew the box out didn't we? And then they…

Louise: They coloured it in with their name, yeah, made their own.

Tanya: They coloured it and wrote their names. They decorated them basically. (FG4)

Discussion

In keeping with the underpinning constructivist tenets of SLT (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998), for the participants in our study, an inclusive pedagogical approach was child centred, which aligns with research on this topic (see Maher 2020; Terzi, 2010). The importance of 'knowing' the needs and abilities of learners and, on that basis, planning lessons that catered for those learning needs and capitalised on capabilities was emphasised. Such learner-centred approaches, which are tailored to the individual and centre on what learners need and how learners learn, are said to be important for 'effective' pedagogies (Chow et al. 2011; Renshaw et al. 2016). Perhaps more interestingly were the discussions among our participants about the strengths and abilities of the children with disabilities they supported and taught. Indeed, while deficit discourses of disability pervade educational landscapes and society more general (Oliver 2013), the attitudes of and language used by our participants to discuss inclusive pedagogies were, unknowingly to them, often tied to a 'capabilities approach'. Operating in a community of practice, it was these discussions and interactions that contributed to participants' understanding of the Borough Woods environment and the pupils in that context. Students moved from the developing stage to becoming actively involved in the life of the school (Lave and Wenger, 1991). For some time now, many of the critical disability studies community have championed the capabilities approach as a way of emphasising a social understanding of disability, seeing disability as a form of difference to be valued and celebrated, and ensuring

that people with disabilities can achieve and flourish (see Terzi 2010). Thus, one outcome of situated experiences in a special school and a key area of growth for our participants was that they began to think about and value the capabilities of pupils with disabilities. This way of thinking is a crucial aspect of an inclusive pedagogical approach because pedagogical values can shape pedagogical actions, if given the expressive freedom to do so (Maher 2020). It is noteworthy here that many of the Teachers' Standards (DfE 2011), which are used to judge whether a preservice teacher gains QTS in England, emphasise the importance of knowing the needs and capabilities of your learners so that they can be stretched and challenged. The participants in our study learned about children with disabilities through the situated experiences (Lave and Wenger 1991) of spending time interacting and communicating, observing PE lessons, reading information about pupils, and teaching PE lessons in a special school. This mutual engagement (Wenger, 2013) meant that relationships with each other and with the teachers and pupils of Borough Woods developed as the routines, characteristics and idiosyncrasies were learned through the CoP. Therefore, many of these situated learning experiences, which were supported by an experienced special school teacher, may have gone some way to better-preparing our participants for later attempts to gain QTS.

While emphasising the significance of learning about well-planned lessons, participants also discussed how crucial it was from an inclusive pedagogical perspective to be responsive – in a contextual and situated sense – during teaching episodes by modifying activities that were inappropriate for learners with disabilities. This finding is supported by research conducted by Overton et al. (2017, 420), who drew on social justice discourses of redistribution and recognition to analyse how in-service primary PE teachers adapted games "to a student's level of ability so as to facilitate authentic participation and learning in these high-profile aspects of the curriculum". By learning how to change the intention, environment, rules, equipment and space of PE activities, it has been said that prospective and pre-service teachers will be more able and willing to provide meaningful experiences of PE for pupils with disabilities (Beamish and Saggers 2014; Davis et al. 2012). This inclusive pedagogical learning aligns with the STEP principle of the inclusion spectrum (Black and Stevenson 2011), which was developed as a pedagogical tool to help PE teachers to plan and teach learning activities to children with disabilities. Unlike prospective teachers in research by Maher et al. (2019) though, our participants, as far as we know, had not learned about STEP. They certainly had not been exposed to it during their undergraduate studies at the point of data capture. Therefore, their learning about activity modification, as an inclusive pedagogical approach, occurred

during the special school placement as a contextualised, situated experience (Lave and Wenger 1991). This is a clear indicator of how pedagogical and curriculum considerations are bound together when it comes to issues relating to inclusion and social justice (Overton et al. 2019).

When it came to what had been learned about how modified activities should be taught, our participants attributed an inclusive pedagogical approach to breaking up the task into smaller, more manageable parts, slowing the pace of delivery, and repetition. These principles align with 'inclusive practice' guidelines identified by Vickerman and Maher (2018) for working with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in PE, particularly those who have trouble processing information. Accordingly, there is a fine balance here between ensuring that the task, pace of delivery and number of repetitions are appropriate, while avoiding tokenism and patronising practices (Vickerman and Maher 2018). It is notable that some of the prospective teachers in research by Maher and Morley (2019) experienced frustration vis-a-vis the number of times they had to repeat learning tasks, mostly because their perceptions of pedagogy were anchored in normative, ableist ideas about what (typically developing) children should be taught, and what those children should be able to do and achieve. It is important, therefore, that those who undertake a special school placement as a situated learning experience are supported by university staff and teachers to reflect critically on their ableist normative perceptions about inclusive pedagogy and pupil progress. While pupils with disabilities should be stretched and challenged like their peers (DfE 2011), it should be appropriate to their needs and capabilities for it to align with established ideas about inclusive pedagogies (Haegele 2019; Lynch et al. 2020; Maher 2020; Terzi 2010).

Another notable area of growth vis-a-vis participant learning about inclusive pedagogies related to using non-verbal cues to interact and communicate with pupils with disabilities. Specifically, learning how to read the facial expressions of those pupils who experienced communication difficulties was considered crucial for everyday interactions and knowing how learning activities in PE were received and experienced by the pupils. According to Hughes (2016), this is vital when working with children with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) because teachers need to be able to read and react to social situations by modifying their behaviours to overcome barriers to learning. Similarly, the use of non-verbal cues is an established inclusive pedagogical approach when working with pupils with hearing impairments, many of whom require, according to Friedner and Block (2017, 293), teachers to draw upon 'a wider range of semiotic and communicative repertoires and communication modalities'. Interestingly, prospective PE teachers in research by Maher and Morley (2019)

also talked about how their 'readings' of the bodies of pupils with disabilities helped them to make pedagogical adjustments. Thus, our students learned through situated experiences (Lave and Wenger 1991) in a special school to communicate in a way indicative of inclusive pedagogical approaches because it is child-centred and tailored to the needs and capabilities of pupils rather than teachers (Maher 2020; Terzi 2010). However, we acknowledge that our participants were not qualified teachers, who had never been situated in a special school space previously, and were on placement for only a short time, all of which may have influenced their learning about reading bodies. Indeed, this is a pedagogical skill that requires time and experience to develop (Hughes 2016). The longer students had been able to spend as members of the community of practice, the further they would have moved away from the periphery towards achieving legitimacy and with it the accumulated learning, not just of Borough woods school, but of working in special schools more generally.

A perhaps more 'concrete' element of inclusive pedagogical learning centred on the use of non-verbal gestures. Through discussions with teachers at the school and via interacting with pupils in situated experiences, our participants learned aspects of sign-language and Makaton. The benefits of using non-verbal cues to communicate with children, especially those with ASC, hearing impairments and intellectual disabilities, are numerous. For instance, the use of non-verbal methods of interaction and providing children with regular opportunities for communication is said to significantly increase the frequency and duration of spontaneous communication initiated by those with ASC (Kossyvaki et al. 2012). It also disrupts phonocentric approaches to teaching and learning by giving pupils with hearing impairments access to a speaking and hearing education system (Friedner and Block 2017, Maher 2020). Therefore, the use of sign and Makaton is an inclusive pedagogical approach because it enables teachers to communicate with pupils with ASC and hearing impairments, but also contributes towards increasing confidence and communication abilities of those pupils, whilst reducing feelings of helplessness and anxiety (Chen et al. 2015; Kurkova 2009).

A final notable area of development for our participants related to their learning about techniques for managing disruptive behaviours. The working climate of a classroom, sports hall, gymnasium or outdoor space is tied to the learning of pupils in schools (Evertson and Weinstein 2013). A disciplinary climate often impacts on student achievement given that learning and progress can be constrained if a negative behaviour disrupts the learning environment, whereas a positive classroom climate can lead to improved satisfaction, motivation and academic outcomes (Reyes et al. 2012). For our participants, positive behaviour

management techniques entailed keeping the pupils occupied and on task, using the techniques they had learned from experienced others (Lave and Wenger 1991) on placement – typically a teacher – to calm those children who were exhibiting early signs of disruptive behaviours through the reading of body language, and learning what the students liked so that they could provide relevant incentives to modify negative behaviours. All three of these strategies fall into the category of what behavioural psychologists call 'positive reward', rather than 'punishment', which Dovey et al. (2017) suggests is an atypical finding in a special school context.

Concluding thoughts

The research aimed to explore the influence of a special school placement on prospective PE teachers' learning about inclusive pedagogies. Through situated experiences, our participants learned about adapting activities; breaking activities up into smaller, more manageable parts; demonstrating activities; the pace of delivery; and importance of repeating activities. Crucially, our participants suggested that pedagogical decisions should be tied to the needs and capabilities of learners. All these pedagogical strategies, it is noteworthy, align with established ideas about inclusive pedagogies which emphasise the importance of a child-centred, capabilities approach (Terzi 2010). This opened up an opportunity for our participants to reflectively challenge normative, bio-medical perceptions of pedagogy that form part of our socio-historical, cultural and political landscape. Our participants also suggested that the construction of a positive learning environment and the management of disruptive behaviours were aspects of an inclusive pedagogical approach that they learned on placement, something that is absent from the extant literature. While belonging, respect, value and empowerment also form part of notions of inclusive pedagogies, these did not come through the data generated from prospective PE teachers. This is because they relate to how pupils with disabilities 'feel' about and during PE. Hence, there is a need for future research to gather data with pupils with disabilities to explore feelings of belonging, respect, value and empowerment to gain a stronger and more rounded sense of the inclusivity of the pedagogical approaches our students learned. While it was not our intention, we argue that the pedagogical learning that our students did experience may contribute towards better preparing them for their teacher training and, indeed, the teaching profession, given that much of what was learned aligns with the Teachers' Standards (DfE 2011).

We hope that our research has contributed to broader research agendas by using situated learning theory and focusing specifically on prospective PE teacher learning about inclusive pedagogies through a special school placement. What we have not done, though, is distil how experiences prior to the placement may have shaped the ideologies and practices of our participants while on placement. Nor have we analysed the extent and ways in which learning about inclusive pedagogies while on placement influences the beliefs and practices of prospective PE teachers later on, during their teacher training and teaching careers. This is especially important given some or most of it may be washed out (Zeichner and Tabachnick 1981). This is something for future research to consider. Similarly, the learning we explored was contextual and situational. Therefore, we need to know and understand how, if at all, this learning is transferred to other educational settings such as mainstream schools given that most of our participants, and many others who experience a special school placement, will become mainstream school teachers. We are (quietly) optimistic about transferability given that what our participants learned aligns with principles of inclusive practice, which are relevant to all children, not just those with disabilities (Vickerman and Maher 2018). Thus, it is recommended that PETE programmes take time to embed discourses of inclusion and social justice in their modules/courses to encourage and develop inclusive pedagogical thinking and action among prospective PE teachers. To end, like Maher et al. (2019) and Maher and Morley (2019), we advocate special school placements as a teacher education tool for those who aspire to teach, though we acknowledge that there is still much to know about the longer-term influence and transferability of what is learned.

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