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Inclusion of pupils with SENs into mainstream Physical Education – potential research ideas to explore issues of engagement

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Abstract

One consequence of the 1981 Education Act (DES, 1981) was that there began a transference of pupils from special educational schools to mainstream schools over the coming years. Thus, for the first time in many cases, mainstream schools were expected, through policy developments, to provide an inclusive education culture for pupils with SEN (Special Educational Needs). The aim of this paper is to analyse some of the consequences, intended or otherwise, of including pupils with SEN in mainstream school National Curriculum Physical Education (NCPE) lessons and extra-curricular physical activity. In this regard, it is argued that team games and competitive sports are activities which teachers find particularly difficult to plan for and deliver in an inclusive way, whereas more individual activities such as dance, gymnastics, tennis, badminton and athletics are identified as activities that may be easier to plan and deliver inclusively. The paper is punctuated with potential field research ideas; being possible investigations prompted by this critique of literature. These ideas typically involve suggestions for primary data gathering in the school setting with either pupils or staff, exploring issues for engagement (and non-engagement) with PE and physical activity. The paper concludes that an over emphasis upon *competitive team sports* and *performance* in PE may be eroding the quality of learning experience for all pupils, not least those with SEN.

Introduction

Although sometimes considered a contemporary development, the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools is in fact a long-term process, which has roots that can be traced beyond the mid-1800s (Thomas and Smith, 2009). Nevertheless, from around the 1960s there was growing support in society for young disabled people to be educated alongside their age-peers in mainstream schools, rather than in the so-called ‘special schools’ which had been established through the passage of the 1944 Education Act (DoE, 1944). Calls for the mainstreaming of a hitherto segregated education system were largely based on the matter-of-fact assumption that the inclusion of young disabled people in

mainstream education would help facilitate their access to, and participation in, social life more generally (Thomas and Smith, 2009). It was the Education Act of 1981, influenced by the 'equalisation of opportunities' rhetoric that had swept North America and much of Western Europe since the 1960s as part of the human rights movement, which further consolidated this inclusive ideology by explicitly stating that young disabled people should be given the opportunity to be educated in mainstream schools. This was seen as a way of ameliorating social barriers between disabled and non-disabled people in society (DES, 1981).

One aftereffect of the 1981 Act was that there began a transference of pupils from special to mainstream schools which has created challenges for teachers, that they may not have been prepared for, to achieve an inclusive educational experience in schools for *all* pupils. This problem of training may be exacerbated by typical demands for team sports and the concept that improved performance in those games equals success in education. Before exploring some issues further it is useful to conceptualise SEN for clarification purposes. The term SEN refers to those pupils who,

...possess a learning difficulty (i.e. a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of the children of the same age, or a disability which makes it difficult to use the educational facilities generally provided locally); and if that learning difficulty calls for special educational provision to be made for them (i.e. provision additional to, or different from, that made generally for children of the same age in local schools) DfEE (1997:12).

It is important to recognise that SEN is a contextual concept insofar as an individual may have a SEN in a classroom-based subject but would not necessarily have a SEN in PE. For instance, an individual who has dyslexia may have a SEN within an English lesson but they would not necessarily require additional provision to be made for them in a physical-orientated subject such as PE. On the other hand, an individual who requires a wheelchair for mobility would not necessarily have a SEN in an English lesson but may require additional provision in a PE lesson. The kernel of this point is that SENs are relative to environments, subjects and tasks with different the degrees of support needed by a pupil altering with every lesson change.

RESEARCH IDEA

Compare and contrast, and analyse:

How do pupil's SENs change from subject to subject?

For example:

- What are their barriers to learning – condition wise in a given subject?
- What are the barriers to learning – environment wise in a given subject?
- How does the SEN condition affect engagement in learning in specific classes?
- When is there a learning atmosphere [in different settings]?
- How is learning in PE different for a given observed pupil compared to other classes?

Field researcher role:

Relevant consent and permissions gained.

Observer (overt) shadowing pupils through a timetable of lessons.

Data: structured field notes (see applications in Palmer and McCabe, 2007; Palmer and Griggs, 2010; Palmer and Hughes, 2010):

- Descriptive notes: describe what you see – don't judge.
- Theoretical notes: make inferences/envisage theoretical implications.
- Methodological notes: researcher constraints; biases, impacts, freedom or restriction within participant observation.

Output: construct a narrative description – what was observed during the field research episode to inform the next phase of the study.

National Curriculum Physical Education

Many suggest (see, for example, Green, 2008; Maher, 2010a; Penney and Evans, 1999) that since its inception in 1992, one salient feature of the new NCPE has been its prioritisation of competitive sport and team games. It may be of particular interest to note that team games have formed an integral part of the culture of many British schools for a long time; that is to say, their roots far exceed the genesis of the NCPE and can be traced as far back as the early nineteenth century in English public schools (Dunning, 1977; Dunning and Sheard, 2005). Nonetheless, several studies suggest that one consequence of the emphasis placed on performance, achievement and skill development in competitive sports and team games is that some pupils with SEN have been and continue to be excluded, by degrees, from the same opportunities and experiences afforded their age-peers in curricular PE (Maher, 2010a; Morley *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2004; Smith and Green, 2004). Research undertaken by Sport England (2001), for instance, highlights a disparity between the amounts of PE that pupils with and without SEN had experienced. They suggest that 64 per cent of pupils with SEN had participated in PE 'frequently' – on at least 10 occasions in the last year – in school, whereas during the same period 83 per cent of all pupils had participated in PE on at least 10 occasions (Sport England, 2001). In a

similar vein, a more recent study by Atkinson and Black (2006) suggests that only 50 per cent of the 170 pupils with SEN in their study received the government-recommended two hours or more curricular PE.

In many cases, teachers are unable to plan and deliver differentiated lessons when competitive team games are the focus because of a lack of knowledge, skill and experience vis-à-vis how to adapt these activities in a way that ensures, first, the inclusion of all pupils and, second, that the more able pupils are also able to progress and achieve their full potential (Maher, 2010a; Morley *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2004; Smith and Green, 2004). In short, many teachers find it difficult to achieve what may appear to be incompatible objectives in PE: inclusion and achievement in competitive sports and team games (Maher, 2010a). Notwithstanding obvious concerns regarding the notable disparity between the opportunities available for pupils with and without SEN in mainstream PE, it is perhaps more important to note that young disabled people in special schools are more likely to participate in PE than those attending mainstream schools, both at 'least once' (93 per cent and 89 per cent, respectively) and on more than 10 occasions (69 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively) (Sport England, 2001). Thus, it seems that despite persistent calls for pupils with SEN to be educated in mainstream schools in order to increase their power and, perhaps, challenge dominant ideologies and traditions (Maher 2010b), one consequence of the so-called inclusion process has been that the opportunities for some pupils with SEN – in PE, at least – appear to be limited with regard to their age-peers in special schools. In short, some evidence suggests that the mainstream education system has done more to reinforce, rather than challenge, the subordination of some pupils with SEN.

Research conducted by Fitzgerald (2005) and Smith (2004) suggests that it is not unusual for some pupils with SEN to be removed from a PE lesson (particularly if it was a team game or competitive sport) and, perhaps more importantly, their age-peers, to do other activities if the pupil was unable to integrate themselves into what had been planned for the rest of the class. Similarly, some of the pupils with SEN interviewed by Fitzgerald *et al.* (2003a) highlight a tendency for them to be involved to a much lesser degree when the activities being taught were team games. When pupils with SEN do participate in the same activities as their age-peers, some are often excluded, from fully participating in the activity by the actions of some of their apparently more able peers. For example, in a study conducted by Fitzgerald (2005) some of the pupils with SEN suggest that there is a process of peer-led exclusion whereby they are often bypassed in certain activities, particularly in team games for example, during a passing move, because of their seemingly inferior capabilities. Thus, it appears that some pupils without SEN are constraining, intentionally or otherwise, the extent to which some pupils with SEN can actively participate in the

PE lesson. Conversely, although some of the participants in a study conducted by Brittain (2004), which examined the educational experiences of a group of Paralympic athletes, revealed that they were bullied by their non-disabled peers, some reported experiencing success in school sport, thus resulting in the acceptance of their ability and an increase in their self-confidence. Mainstream PE, it appears, does have the potential to go some way to challenge dominant ideologies, which view some pupils with SEN as a subordinate group in terms of their sporting capabilities.

RESEARCH IDEA

Analyse, probe, assess:

What are the challenges to PE teachers towards achieving inclusion and promoting performance in their subject as they see it?

For example:

- What are the challenges to manage classes with such a diverse range of ability?
- Are there any constraints preventing meaningful inclusion? For example, Environmental / social / professional development / legal risk assessment.
- What are the teachers' aspirations as professionals in a mainstream school?
- Can performance in a given sport help with assessment in PE?
- Are there any positive aspects to the challenges of inclusion in PE for all pupils at the school?
- Is there anything which might be improved from a teacher's perspective to raise the educational performance of SEN in mainstream schools? And, is this a realistic challenge?

Field researcher roles:

Relevant consent and permissions gained.

Interviewer first and observer second (overt) for extension if need.

Interviews provide a staged, removed and rationalised account of experience/views.

Observations provide an insight to raw actions in reality, in context.

Data: Interview(s) – recorded (if appropriate, otherwise summative notes). Transcribed verbatim with themes and inferences. Verify with respondents.

Observations: observing for 'challenges to teachers' as may have been identified from the interview transcripts. Make structured field notes (see applications in Palmer and McCabe, 2007; Palmer and Griggs, 2010; Palmer and Hughes, 2010):

- Descriptive notes: describe what you see – don't judge.
- Theoretical notes: make inferences/envisage theoretical implications.
- Methodological notes: researcher constraints; biases, impacts, freedom or restriction within participant observation.

Output: Compose a summarised account of challenges to PE teachers to teach inclusively – stemming from interview transcripts and observations of reality in classes.

Or, compose an Ethnodramatic account of teaching PE inclusively to highlight the challenges and protect identities.

For some pupils with SEN their limited experiences of the breadth of activities offered to all pupils, in tandem with negative perceptions that both they and their age-peers have about their bodies and capabilities, is said to have a pernicious effect on their confidence and self-esteem in PE specifically, and school life more generally (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b). Many of the pupils in research conducted by Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) reported feeling embarrassed by their disability, which developed from the behaviour of their age-peers. Moreover, in a study undertaken by Fitzgerald (2005) some of the pupils with SEN suggest that they regularly experience varying degrees of social isolation in PE when they participated in separate activities, which often had a detrimental effect on their social interaction with pupils without SEN. Similarly, while some of the participants in a study by Pitt and Curtin (2004) report having a small group of friends at school, most experienced varying degrees of social isolation. In fact, all reported being both overtly and covertly bullied whilst at mainstream school, thus resulting in many feeling depressed and lonely (see, also, Carter and Spencer, 2006).

It is worth noting that those more individualised activities that are often at the periphery of PE culture, most notably, swimming, dance, gymnastics, tennis and badminton, have been identified as particularly appropriate for facilitating the full inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE (DES/WO, 1991a; Maher, 2010a; Morley *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2004). That is to say, it has been argued that more individualised activities are generally more inclusive by design and, thus, perhaps less likely to necessitate significant adaptation in order for pupils with SEN to be included (Meek, 1991). Moreover, there is much more scope for PE teachers to plan and deliver differentiated lessons, to give some pupils more tailored support, and allow individual progress, without it having a negative impact on the development of other pupils (Maher, 2010a). To summarise, research suggests that the further schools move away from individualised activities towards competitive sport and team game activities, there appears to be a correlative increase in the possibility of the exclusion of some pupils with SEN (Smith, 2004).

What must not be overlooked is that it is the specific nature of a pupil's difficulties and the level of support those difficulties necessitate, in tandem with the nature of the activities being delivered, which can also determine the extent to which pupils with SEN can participate with their age-peers in PE (Smith and Thomas, 2006). For example, there appears to be a growing consensus among teachers of all subjects that pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) pose the biggest challenge to inclusion (Morley *et al.*, 2005; OFSTED, 2003; Smith, 2004). Pupils with learning difficulties and those whose difficulties are more physical and sensory in nature are, on the other hand, viewed more favourably by many PE teachers (Morley *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2004), possibly because they constrain, to a lesser

degree, teachers' ability to teach the rest of the class. So far, the paper has explored the consequences of mainstreaming for some pupils with SEN. The next section will explore potential consequences of mainstreaming for some pupils without SEN.

RESEARCH IDEA

Secondary literature review:

Pupils experiences of an inclusive PE curriculum?

For example:

- What are the mainstream pupils' perspectives about the abilities of SEN pupils in their class?
- Does the pupil with no SEN think they get a fair deal in PE? (whatever fair deal may mean for them).
- Does the pupil with SEN think they get a fair deal in PE? (whatever fair deal may mean for them).
- What does 'performance' mean to a pupil in PE?

Field researcher roles:

Secondary literature review

Whilst these questions may be interesting areas to pursue first hand, relevant consent and permissions may be difficult to obtain. Reporting may be problematic.

Data: search out studies in UK relevant to inclusion in PE, that incorporate some aspect of pupil voice. Compare and contrast with studies from other cultures to expand concepts and inform future inquiry from data.

Output: Draft a critical literature review based upon secondary sources.

The perceived impact of pupils with SEN on pupils without SEN

Among some PE teachers, concerns have been expressed that including pupils with SEN – most notably, those with EBD – in mainstream PE lessons can have a negative impact on the learning, development and experiences of other pupils with SEN and their age-peers without SEN (Morley *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2004; Smith and Green, 2004). The crux of these concerns are expressed in the following statement: you want to give them [pupils with SEN] a good deal and then I do think about the other members of the group, wondering if that person [pupils with SEN] is holding them back' (teacher cited in Morley *et al.*, 2005:92). Another teacher in the same study echoed this view: 'you have to be careful you don't negate the point of it for the more able pupils, so that they're bringing the level of their play down to include others (teacher cited in Morley *et al.*, 2005:92). Here, it appears that the success of the lesson is determined by the level of performance achieved and not the extent to which it is inclusive. The nature and purpose of PE aside, these comments were made despite research which suggests that the presence of pupils with SEN in mainstream school lessons has little to no negative impact on the academic achievement of pupils without SEN (Kalambouka *et al.*, 2007). Social benefits such

as increased tolerance to individual differences, greater awareness and sensitivity to human diversity and the needs of others are positive outcomes of a programme of physical education which contribute significantly to overall educational aims. However, it may be worth noting that the research cited relates to classroom-based subjects, rather than a more physically orientated subject such as PE, where the learning environment and demands placed on teachers can be different. Indeed, during an English lesson, for example, the progress and success of an individual pupil is not as dependent on the progress and success of their age-peers as it may be during a team game where teamwork and group cooperation and coordination are essential for team success. Nevertheless, these comments highlight the fact that teachers may be constrained in their practice to achieve what are potentially conflicting objectives in PE. That is, teachers must simultaneously promote the inclusion of pupils with SEN with some expectation that a competent level of sports performance may be demonstrated (Maher, 2010a; Smith, 2004; Smith and Green, 2004). In short, teachers are expected to achieve a difficult balance between meeting what they perceive are the needs of pupils with SEN, whilst attempting to ensure that the whole class meets their educational potential (Kalambouka *et al.*, 2007; McKay and Neal, 2009).

RESEARCH IDEA

Focus group, explore ideas and concepts, envisage:

PE with no sport!

Would PE be more inclusive if codified sports (particularly team sports) were not part of the typical PE curriculum?

For example:

- What might PE without a codified sport, like football, look like?
- What could you do instead of rule-bound formalised games?
- How could lessons be managed?
- What would be taught? – would it be demanding? If so on whom? How?
- How might ipsative assessment and differentiation be implemented? To what educational effect?
- Are there any opportunities for inclusive educative activities that are cross curricular but stem from PE? – if so what subjects what activities?

Field researcher roles:

Relevant consent and permissions gained.

Focus group: teachers

Focus group: pupils

Focus group: teachers and pupils

Data: audio recorded if appropriate. Charts, diagrams, posters, written summaries of thoughts and explorations on topics.

Output: Posters and presentations of ideas, links and practical benefits and implementation.

RESEARCH IDEA

Focus group, explore ideas and concepts, envisage:

Written homework for PE at Key Stage Three.

For example:

- What might having written homework for PE do to the status of PE as a subject in the eyes of pupils/ non PE staff/parents?
- Could homework at KS3 help or hinder: assessment, differentiation, motivation?
- How would homework at KS3 alter feedback and interaction with pupils? – is this a good thing?
- What are the pros and cons of having homework in PE at KS3? Categorise as e.g. practical, educational, motivational, performance based.

Field researcher roles:

Relevant consent and permissions gained.

Focus group: teachers

Focus group: pupils

Focus group: teachers and pupils

Data: audio recorded if appropriate. Charts, diagrams, posters of thoughts and explorations.

Output: Posters and presentations of ideas, links and practical benefits and implementation.

Extra-curricular physical activity

Extracurricular physical activity, which may encompass activities outside of the PE curriculum – mostly undertaken at lunchtime, weekends and before and/or after school – is frequently viewed as an essential link between curricular PE and young people's involvement in sport and physical activity in their leisure time (Smith *et al.*, 2007). Involvement in extracurricular physical activity is often seen as playing a significant role in laying the foundations for lifelong participation in sport and physical activity among young people (Fairclough, Stratton and Baldwin, 2002). That is, young people are making positive healthy choices about how to spend their non-directed time. It may be of some concern for pupils with SEN to hear that, much the same diet as curricular PE; competitive sport and team games have continued to dominate extracurricular physical activity in many schools in Britain (Green, 2000; Smith, 2004). Clearly, this narrow range of activity may be off putting and SEN students, and others, are making a positive choice to avoid it. Perhaps one consequence of the prioritisation of competitive sport and team games in extracurricular physical activity is that only 40 per cent of young disabled people – some of whom, although it is not specified, have SEN – participated in extracurricular physical activity, compared to 79 per cent of their age-peers (Sport England, 2001). Additionally, Atkinson and Black (2006) suggest that just 15 per cent of pupils with SEN participated in sport at break-time and only 29 per cent at lunchtime. In fact, almost all of the teachers interviewed by Smith (2004) suggest that very few if any, pupils with SEN participated either recreationally or

competitively in extracurricular physical activity. It could be tentatively concluded, therefore, that extracurricular physical activity offers 'limited opportunities to only a minority of pupils' with sporting ability (Penney and Harris, 1997:42) at the expense of, not only, some pupils with SEN.

Some pupils with SEN find it difficult to participate in physical activity outside of school because of 'transport issues' (Connors and Stalker, 2007; Smith, 2004). That is to say, on the one hand some pupils with SEN require specialist transport to travel to leisure facilities outside of the school premises whilst others some get picked up at an allocated time by community transport. Hence, there may still be some merit to comments made over 15 years ago by Thomas and Green (1995) who suggested that some pupils with SEN are not receiving the same extracurricular opportunities that they might have done had they had been educated in the special school sector.

RESEARCH IDEA

Debate, explore ideas and concepts:

Meaningful inclusive education is an unattainable ideal – or is it?

For example:

- What appear to be the consequences of inclusion in education (+ve and -ve)?
- Are there any benefits of having PE on the curriculum re: inclusivity?
- Personal development over academic attainment – where are you interests?
- Does PE present more barriers than challenges to pupils?
- Does equal an opportunity for all pupils to play competitive sports in school discriminate against pupils with SEN?
- Does having sport on the 'PE menu' have an effect upon equal opportunity to an education through PE?

Field researcher roles:

Observer/reorder of the debate/discussion comprising:

A school Governor, school PTA (Parent Teacher Association) representative, Head teacher, HE academics in PE, LEA representative, private company representative (employer), authority figure – Police.

Data: video/audio recorded if appropriate. Chart patterns of thought and explorations, summaries of arguments or perspectives. Make structured field notes (see applications in Palmer and McCabe, 2007; Palmer and Griggs, 2010; Palmer and Hughes, 2010):

- Descriptive notes: describe what you see – don't judge.
- Theoretical notes: make inferences/envisage theoretical implications.
- Methodological notes: researcher constraints; biases, impacts, freedom or restriction within participant observation.

Output: A research paper (conference or journal) drawing upon comments from the debate: 'Interests in inclusive education from sectors of society'.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyse some of the consequences, intended or otherwise, of including pupils with SEN in mainstream school NCPE and extra-curricular physical activity. In this regard, it has been argued that team games and competitive sports are activities which teachers find particularly difficult to plan and deliver in an inclusive way, mainly because there is limited opportunity for individual planning or support. On the other hand, individual activities such as dance, gymnastics, tennis, badminton and athletics have been identified as activities that are easier to plan and deliver inclusively because they offer the opportunity to support individuals on a one-to-one basis without it impacting upon the development and achievement of the rest of the class. Thus, teachers and extra-curricular providers may need to plan and deliver a more balanced programme, which places more emphasis on individual activities, if they want to ensure that all pupils have meaningful experiences of PE and extra-curricular physical activity. Given recent comments made by Prime Minister David Cameron (Telegraph, 2012), however, it appears unlikely that the dominant position of competitive sport and team games will be challenged anytime soon. Cameron stated,

I want to use the example of competitive sport at the Olympics to lead a revival of competitive sport in schools. We need to end the ‘all must have prizes’ culture and get children playing and enjoying competitive sports from a young age, linking them up with sports clubs so they can pursue their dreams.

Upon Cameron’s premise, sport is an exclusive act that produces winners and losers. Thus, if sport remains at the heart of Physical Education it may never be inclusive and may be educative for all the wrong reasons, some not to do, from an SEN pupil perspective. Therefore, when team games are planned by PE staff it is important to start from the premise of full inclusion. Teachers seemingly need to be able to adapt and modify the activity in an inclusive way for it to warrant its place within the curriculum, and not after school. On the basis that exclusion and rejection from school life is a harmful lesson to learn, being destructive to a pupil’s education, the research ideas may help interested parties to develop strategies towards more meaningful inclusion experiences for pupils with SEN in PE activities.

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JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote

1. *Author's reflective comment:* Having completed transfer from MPhil to Ph.D., I am grateful to Clive Palmer for stimulating ideas for stage two (and possibly three) of data gathering. The research notes will help me to provide a broader and more in-depth understanding of the inclusion of pupils with SENs in mainstream PE.
2. *Author profile:* Anthony Maher currently works as an associate lecturer at University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). He has a degree in sports development with physical education, a PG Cert in business and management research methods, and a MSc in the sociology of sport and exercise. His Ph.D. analyses the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream school PE.
3. *Dear reader,* if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: Anthony Maher amaher@uclan.ac.uk and Clive Palmer capalmer@uclan.ac.uk.

Reviewer's comments:

An innovative approach to potential problems faced by pupils with SENs in mainstream education. Highly applicable also to outdoor education students, particularly those studying aspects of the National Curriculum re: applications of their particular skills and knowledge in areas of formal education. Many outdoor pursuits may be suitable for SENs and inclusion generally being non-competitive (overtly) and also lending themselves to meaningful differentiation in the 'classroom'. The approaches/opportunities for field research outlined are also very useful to guide student readers in their thinking about constructing research projects using qualitative research methods and the reasoning underpinning the use of many tools to collect data. It is mentioned that the article would be of use to Sports Studies students, but should also be conceptualised more broadly to include outdoor education, inclusion being a major issue for both areas.