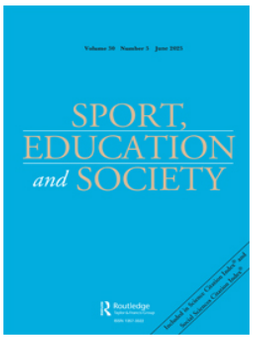

Sport, Education and Society

ISSN: 1357-3322 (Print) 1470-1243 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cses20

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To cite this article: Joanne McVeigh, Anthony J. Maher, Alan Thomson & Jack Knight (31 May 2025): Physical education teacher education: disrupting ableism in gymnastics, Sport, Education and Society, DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2025.2511987

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2511987

SPORT, EDUCATION AND SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2511987

Physical education teacher education: disrupting ableism in gymnastics

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ABSTRACT

Physical education teacher education (PETE) has been identified as fertile ground for preparing teachers for teaching disabled pupils. However, there is an absence of visibly disabled bodies in PETE. Our research explores (1) how disabled bodies navigate the ableism that saturates PETE; and (2) how teacher educators can work with (disabled) prospective teachers to disrupt ableism through a critical perspective. This article generated data through four semi-structured interviews with Jack, a disabled prospective teacher with cerebral palsy, to capture his embodied experiences of gymnastics as part of his PETE. The interviews were recorded, transcribed with the analysis resulting in the following themes: (1) Internalised ableist expectations about bodies in gymnastics; (2) Hiding the disabled body from the able-bodied gaze; (3) Experiencing exclusion and learning about disability; and (4) Co-constructing anti-ableist pedagogies in gymnastics. We conclude with a call for research and practice relating to challenging, disrupting, and transforming ableism in PETE.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 November 2024
Accepted 22 May 2025

KEYWORDS
Ableism; cerebral palsy; disability; gymnastics; physical education; teacher education

Introduction

It is well established that physical education (PE) teachers lack the knowledge, experience, and confidence to teach disabled pupils together with their same-aged peers in mainstream schools (Haegele et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2021). As such, increasing emphasis has been placed on physical education teacher education (PETE) for better preparing prospective teachers as inclusive educators (Lynch et al., 2023). In this respect, most of the empirical research relating to better preparing teachers for teaching disabled pupils through PETE focuses on: (1) developing theoretical and conceptual knowledge of disability and inclusive practices (e.g. Alfrey & Jeanes, 2023); (2) gaining disability teaching experience through special and segregated school placements (e.g. Coates et al., 2020); (3) simulating embodied disability as a means of learning inclusive practice (e.g. Ross et al., 2023); and (4) learning about disabled pupils' experiences of PE through critical consideration of their narratives to aid prospective teacher reflection, and inform pedagogy and practice (e.g. Haegele & Maher, 2023a). While the studies mentioned suggest that such approaches contributed to better preparing prospective teachers for teaching disabled pupils, research relating to disability and PETE is not without limitations; chief among them is the notable absence of research and knowledge about visibly disabled bodies in PETE (Sparkes et al., 2019).

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We aim to address this epistemic absence by exploring the embodied experiences of Jack, a prospective PE teacher with cerebral palsy. Specifically, we centre Jack's experiences of learning to teach gymnastics during PETE, which is where the novelty of our research lies. We do this as part of our endeavour to challenge epistemic injustices in PETE research, by casting disabled prospective teachers such as Jack as expert knowers (Fricker, 2007) because of their embodied experiences of disability, PETE and how they themselves were included into PE lessons during their own schooling. The significance of Jack's lived realities and embodied knowledge offers teacher educators, academics, and others such as school leaders and teachers with a sense of what disabled people like Jack know, desire, need and can do across PE and teacher education landscapes. While Jack can only offer an account of his own experiences, as other disabled bodies will have their own stories to tell, we agree with Sparkes et al. (2019) that the impact of this research may help teacher educators to foster co-constructed teaching and learning with disabled people through their engagement with and reflection on Jack's story. Secondly, our research, as argued by Maher and Haegele (2024), may help academics who research disability in PE and sport to understand the significance of listening to the voices of disabled people when designing curriculum and pedagogies. Finally, and importantly, it offers disabled prospective teachers the opportunity to make sense of their selves and the meaning they make from their experiences across PE contexts, something which is notably absent from extant literature.

Crucial to our research was Jack's gymnastics experiences on his PETE programme. We decided to focus on gymnastics for three primary reasons: (1) it was the PETE unit that Jack was most excited and apprehensive about because he had never experienced it during his schooling because of teacher, peer and self-exclusion; (2) there is no extant research that has explored the visibly disabled body in PETE gymnastics; and (3) it became obvious, through [Author 1's] teaching of Jack, that gymnastics provided fertile ground to problematise ableism in PETE because of its focus on normative corporal movement, and body aesthetics and capital (see Evans, 2013). We deem it useful, therefore, to now provide a brief overview of how gymnastics has been constructed in the English PE curriculum over time and the positioning and assessment of the body in relation to it, given the significance of Jack's own body and the corporality evident during interview discussions.

Going back to the 1950s, gymnastics in English schools was part of the emerging dichotomy between movement and skill-based approaches. Female educators had adopted Laban's exploratory work on weight, space, time, and flow (Bailey, 2010), subsequently prioritising corporal movements that focused on aesthetic expression and creativity. Contrary to this, male educators grounded their gymnastics lessons on skills epitomising strength and work that rewarded the physical, performative body. According to Kirk (1992), such practices reflected, reproduced and perpetuated gendered ideologies relating to feminine and masculine bodies and modes of embodiment. Despite the plethora of research in PE centred on embodied experiences of pupils (see Aartun et al., 2022 for a review), current discourses around the objective body continue to be reinforced through 'physical education – as – sports – techniques' (Kirk, 2010, p. 41). Nonetheless, the most developmentally appropriate approach to delivering gymnastics in a curriculum with diverse bodies of varying abilities is said to be educational gymnastics, as it teaches pupils to learn through curiosity, exploration and developing an understanding of their own body's capabilities (Pickard & Maude, 2021). Although educational gymnastics encourages multiple interpretations of movement, its emphasis is on the aesthetic body, which is subject to the judgment and assessment of, typically, nondisabled teachers. Pupils who achieve these physical and/or aesthetic expectations are often valued by teachers (lisahunter et al., 2015). This is problematic for some disabled bodies that cannot reproduce movement that align with ableist ideals on how bodies should look and move. Consequently, nonnormative bodies are viewed negatively through the ableist gaze (Haegele et al., 2021). In this article, we explore how educational gymnastics has the potential to offer learners an inclusive experience, when practitioners and young disabled people, like Jack, work together to co-construct anti-ableist pedagogies. Before exploring the methodological decisions that guided the research, we briefly unpack ableism from a critical perspective to provide the theoretical bedrock of our research.

Ableism in physical education teacher education

Through our work, we aim to challenge, disrupt, and transform ableism in all its forms in education. Ableism, for us, refers to established and taken-for-granted knowledge, beliefs, logics, discourses, values, practices and behaviours that (re)produce a hegemonic, normative, body-self that is positioned as perfect, species typical, and crucial to being considered fully human (Campbell, 2019; Rudd et al., 2024). As such, disability generally (and cerebral palsy specifically) are positioned as less-than-human states of being because they perceivably do not conform to ableist expectations about how the body-self should move, look and learn (in PETE). Consequently, ableism is intersubjective because it permeates all social systems, structures, relations, and interactions, including in PETE, producing structures of entitlement for non-disabled people, and oppression, marginalisation, and exclusion for disabled people, because they do not conform to normative expectations (Rudd et al., 2024).

Ableist cultural norms pervade PETE, and hegemonic traditions relating to policy development and implementation, pedagogy, teaching practice and curriculum enactment, act as mechanisms of cultural (re)production that engender a hierarchised body-self through the 'differentiation, ranking, negation, notification, and prioritisation of sentient life' (Campbell, 2019, pp – 287-288). PE is one cultural site in which neoliberal performativity is played out (Evans, 2013), with its continued prioritisation of physicality, bodily performance and corporeal dominance. As noted by Rudd et al. (2024) 'neoliberal cultures [in PE and PETE] shape perceptions of corporeality and thus the construction of legitimate forms of ability-related (physical) capital' (p.6). Thus, those who are considered as experiencing such capital are privileged over others (Croston & Hills, 2017). Too often, established ideologies about (physical) capital are anchored to normative perceptions of (able) body-selves, one consequence of which is that many disabled people have their bodies and movement patterns judged inappropriately through an able-body gaze (Lynch et al., 2023). In this respect, Maher, van Rossum, et al. (2023) notes how the able-body gaze pervades processes and practices in PE, working to police and regulate the nonnormative body-self by, for instance, using normative assessment tools as a way of (re)producing ableist normalcy (Maher, van Rossum, et al., 2023).

Ableism saturates the cultures to such an extent that, according to Wolbring (2008), it manifests as common-sense cultural values and assumptions underpinning taken-for-granted logics and thus is considered the universally 'natural' way of being. Ableism becomes internalised; that is, it moulds the self (Elias, 1978), and as such is structural, cultural, intersubjective, intrasubjective, and psycho-emotional in its nature (Reeve, 2020). It is important to note that disabled people themselves internalise ableist modes of thinking, doing and being, which may negatively impact upon mental health and general well-being as they attempt, (and frequently fail), to reach often inappropriate and unrealistic ableist expectations (Reeve, 2020). Hence, it is crucial that ableism critical perspectives are draw upon, as we do here, to disrupt, dislodge, and transform hegemonic logics, discourses, and practices (in PETE) that work to subordinate the nonnormative body-self because of the negative consequences it can have for their sense of self, personhood, and psycho-emotional wellbeing. We hope that this article, which centres a prospective teacher with cerebral palsy using an ableism-critical perspective to make sense of his embodied knowledge, experiences, and beliefs, contributes to that cause.

Methodology

Philosophical positioning

This article is drawn from a larger research project that explores Jack's biographical accounts of PE and sport (Maher, McVeigh, et al. 2023) and [Author 1's] reflective accounts of delivering gymnastics to Jack during his experiences of PETE. Interpretivist in nature, the focus of this article was on making sense of and constructing meaning about Jack's embodied experiences when learning to teach gymnastics. We assumed a relativist ontology, where multiple realities exist and meaning making is considered an embodied act by researchers and participants as they interact with one another and others across relational contexts (Sparkes & Smith, 2008), e.g. Jack's teachers, lecturers, and his

peers. Our positionalities as researchers are crucial, as intersubjective beliefs and values shape the interpretive process, influencing the methodological decisions, and interpretations of Jack's embodied experiences. Thus, all four of us are white, heterosexual and cisgender and thus were cognisant of the privileges associated with being positioned in such ways. Accordingly, we used reflexive diaries and conversations to illuminate the ways and extent to which these embodied identities, and the knowledge, values and assumptions that permeate them, may have influenced the relationships that we had with each other, our beliefs about PE, teacher education, gymnastics and disability, and the research decisions that we made collaboratively. Crucially, only Jack identified as disabled. [Author 1], [Author 2] and [Author 3] taught Jack as an undergraduate student across several modules, with [Author 1] delivering the module on teaching and learning in gymnastics. We considered this as beneficial to our research because it meant that the already established positive relationships with Jack may have contributed to in-depth conversations during interviews, leading to the generation of rich multi-layered data (Wolcott, 1994).

Through a process of ongoing reflexivity, we considered the inherent power relationships and imbalance (Berbary, 2014) associated with nondisabled lecturers researching with and about a disabled student by working collaboratively with Jack at all stages of the research processes. Jack's priority was to qualify as a PE teacher and thus it is important to acknowledge that he may have been cautious when making comments about the people that powered his success. Every attempt, therefore, was made to diffuse power from us as co-researchers to Jack by ensuring that he had ownership over research decisions and that any criticality made by Jack regarding [Author 1's] teaching of him, would be embraced as part of this collaborative process. While this collaboration endeavoured to disrupt epistemic injustices by positioning Jack as an expert knower (Fricker, 2007) because of his lived, embodied knowledge about and experiences of disability in the context of teacher education, PE and gymnastics, we should note that Jack was a developing researcher having only experienced undergraduate research methods training. As such, [Author 2] supported Jack to make methodological decisions through discussions about the benefits and pitfalls of each decision, while ensuring that the framing of the research demonstrated philosophical coherence as a hallmark of rigour in qualitative research (Maher, 2025).

About Jack

This research examines the post-reflections of Jack (19-year-old, who identifies as a White British male) on his experiences of a 12-week module that focussed on the teaching and learning of gymnastics. The motivation for this research were two-fold: (1) Jack was interested in this topic for his undergraduate dissertation, especially considering he had never experienced gymnastics before; and (2) [Author 1] was interested in the topic because of the notable absence of research about visibly disabled and non-normative bodies in a subject that reveres corporeality and the normative body aesthetic. As such, a collaborative project was developed between Jack and [Author 1] in the first instance, with [Author 2] and [Author 3] being invited to join the research team because additional theoretical and methodological expertise was required.

Jack has cerebral palsy (CP) and given that our lived bodies shape our experiences of our present living bodies (McMahon & Huntly, 2013), it was essential to hear how his embodied perceptions and knowledge helped to shape the realities and actualities of his physical and social world (MacLachlan, 2004). This significantly affected the way Jack experienced a practical gymnastics module. We decided not to describe Jack's CP here even though there can be significant variations in how CP is experienced and embodied because we wanted to focus on the social and relational aspects of disability rather than the pathology of impairment that is anchored to medical models of disability and ableist modes of thinking (Giese et al., 2024). It is important to note that Jack waived his right to confidentiality as a named author of this article. However, the identity of other people, places, and organisations detailed in Jack's interviews, were concealed by using pseudonyms.

Data collection

Jack and [Author 1] discussed several methods that could be used to generate data. The benefits and pitfalls of each were carefully considered before Jack decided that individual interviews, framed as conversations, should be used to capture his lived, embodied experiences. The main reasons for selecting individual conversations were that Jack: (1) wanted to use them as preparation for interviews for teaching positions; and (2) felt it was the clearest way that he could communicate his experiences of gymnastics. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researchers to design a schedule that was structured under loose headings, with questions remaining open to enable Jack to discuss his beliefs freely and story his experiences without constraint. Questions revolved around Jack's past experiences in sport and PE and, more specifically for this article, reflections upon his gymnastics experiences. The interview schedule and conversations were flexible, allowing Jack to dictate the pace and direction in another attempt to counteract social power concerns and to give him ownership during data generation (Bryman, 2015).

All research protocols aligned with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (2018) and the research was approved by [Author 1]'s University Ethics Committee. The written participant information sheet and verbal briefing highlighted Jack's right to withdraw from the study any time before or up to 28 days after the interview and explained how anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained. Before all interviews, Jack was asked to give consent and onsite permission arrangements were made to conduct the interviews at the university in a private room. Each interview lasted around two hours, was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Jack was invited to carefully consider the transcripts and to add any additional points of significance that were not captured during interview, as part of a process of member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Data analysis

[Author 1] led the analysis of Jack's reflections about gymnastics. The analysis was influenced by the work of Corbin and Strauss (2008), using a process of open and axial coding. We used this approach because it enabled for the systematic and rigorous analysis of the entire dataset (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Whilst [Author 1] already felt connected to the data due to her role as teacher educator, the initial stage of analysis involved listening to the audio recordings and reading through the transcripts to, as Saldana (2018) suggests, increase familiarisation and begin to make sense of Jack's story. Next, open coding, which involved assigning labels to words or phrases taken from the data, was used to construct meaning about Jack's embodied experiences of gymnastics. These codes were then scrutinised, challenged, and compared to other codes through a process of focussed coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to ensure that they adequately reflected the richness and density of Jack's story. Axial coding involved moving developed concepts into a series of maps to illustrate what themes had been constructed so that [Author 1] could consider thematic linkages and narrative coherence (Haegele & Maher, 2023a). To aid sense making of these initial themes, [Author 1] shared the maps with [Author 2 and 3] who acted as critical friends. This supported [Author 1] to reflexively consider her interpretations of Jack's reflections. Finally, a hierarchy of themes were constructed, and used to structure the Findings and Discussions below. These are: (1) Internalised ableist expectations about bodies in gymnastics; (2) Hiding the disabled body from the able-bodied gaze; (3) Experiencing exclusion and learning about disability; and (4) Co-constructing anti-ableist pedagogies in gymnastics. As part of our continued commitment to member reflection, Jack read the themes and associated quotes, and provided feedback about the ways and extent to which they represented his lived, embodied values, assumptions and experiences of disability, PE, teacher education and gymnastics.

Internalised ableist expectations about bodies in gymnastics

A key feature of the discussions that [Author 1] had with Jack related to the ways in which his disabled body shaped his experiences. According to Jack, his CP meant that some bodily movements in

gymnastics, particularly those requiring strength and flexibility, were especially challenging. For Jack, his inability to do some of the normative activities that some of his nondisabled peers seemed to perform effortlessly left him unsettled: 'It was a bit degrading because I knew I could do it if I didn't have the disability but because I have a disability, I need to do it in different ways, so it was frustrating, often humiliating'. As teacher educators we are of course concerned that Jack – or, indeed, any prospective teacher – would experience such negative feelings during activities that are supposed to facilitate their embodied learning. We certainly should have done more to check in with him because we were blissfully unaware that he experienced humiliation, a feeling bound to the psycho-emotional framework of ableism (Shildrick, 2020). More broadly, this finding is indicative of issues that threaded through many of the conversations that we had with Jack in that he often embodied and perpetuated an individual, deficit perspective about his own (dis)ability (Barnes, 2020) by attributing blame to his disability and embodied self rather than the way that activities were delivered. The representation of social issues (i.e. curriculum and pedagogical decisions) as personal problems is indicative of victim blaming (Slee, 2018) and a key feature of internalised ableism (Goodley et al., 2019).

The inherent corporeality of gymnastics means that the bio-social body is on display. For Jack, this was problematic. Jack knew that his disabled body did not conform to or represent normative, ableist expectations. He knew that it looked different and moved differently to his nondisabled peers, especially during an activity that prioritises aesthetic corporeality. Jack said:

> … it's hard for me. Because one leg's shorter than the other, it makes my body uneven as I'm standing up. So, because I'm putting on one leg, because it's got more weight than the other, I've got to make sure the weight's equal, so I may have to do a different pose and do a different thing but that will make sure I don't fall over.

Despite evidence of Jack's internalised ableist expectations about bodies, he was also keen to emphasise that his bodily movements were not wrong or incorrect, only different to his nondisabled peers based upon perception of how his own body moves:

> Because it's [his body] uneven doesn't make it wrong, just makes it the same but different because I have a disability, and they don't. They might not see it as the right way, but I do in my eyes. So, because it's uneven makes it not right, it makes it even in my eyes, not their eyes.

From conversations with Jack and through the data analysis, there seemed to be an inherent conflict when it came to his perceptions of his body and ability as a mode of embodied knowledge (Dixon & Senior, 2011). Indeed, he had clearly internalised ableist assumptions about living bodies but, at the same time, said that his movements were different but not incorrect. While at first this may seem paradoxical, it is indicative of the complex and nuanced ways in which Jack tried to make sense of and narratively construct meaning about his disabled body as part of what Standal (2022) terms severely able bodies. That is, Jack's sense making was situated in a cultural terrain inhabited by mostly very 'able', performative bodies.

Hiding the disabled body from the able-bodied gaze

Jack had said that his body felt uneven, making aspects, such as counterbalance with his partner during a routine, affect his equilibrium. Despite saying that he felt comfortable about the way his body looked and moved, Jack was concerned about how it would be judged by nondisabled others. Consequently, if he could see parts of his body looking unusual, based on ableist expectations that he had seemingly internalised and embodied (Campbell, 2019), he would: 'immediately find other ways of doing it'. He said: 'I sometimes do get afraid that people are looking at me and what their opinions will be about me'.

Accordingly, it was evident that Jack tried tirelessly to manipulate his body and bodily movements to conceal his disability for fear of being judged (negatively) by his nondisabled peers. In this regard, Maher, van Rossum, et al. (2023) problematised the use of an ableist gaze to judge disabled people in corporeal activities and physical cultures because it is based upon normative

hegemonic assumptions about how bodies should look, move, and learn, thus contributing to subordinating the abilities, achievements and embodied knowledge of disabled people that do not conform to ableist expectations. From what Jack said, it was not clear whether his beliefs about the judgements of nondisabled others were perceptual or actual. Nonetheless, he internalised them, and it contributed to him self-excluding during gymnastics because of a fear of performing in the presence of his nondisabled peers. For example, Jack said that he practiced a front somersault on the trampoline (a skill taught on the module) 'when I was in the trampoline park, when no one was looking at me, I think I had more confidence'.

It was important to Jack that he could execute the skills that his nondisabled peers were able to demonstrate, even though this meant pushing his body to its physical limits, often inflicting pain. However, he masked the pain from his peers because he did not want to feed the ableist perception that his disabled body was weak:

> I want to show my ability, that I can keep up with it even though I'm in a lot of pain … … and I think I did, I sort of concealed it, a lot of pain because I didn't want to stop. I wanted to keep going. I didn't want anyone to see that I was struggling because I didn't want to be taken off things; I wanted to learn.

Stories of pain and strategies that disabled people use to manage – even conceal – pain have received very little attention in PE and sport literature. Of the limited research currently available, most has focused on pain and the disabled body as social-cultural-historical constructs (Sparkes & Smith, 2008), which aligns with a social-model of disability (Hughes & Paterson, 1997).

Feeling pain and navigating activities that caused pain were an important part of Jack's stories about gymnastics. Jack talked about the fact that he also concealed the pain he was experiencing from [Author 1] because he did not want the activity being modified or changed for him:

> I just didn't want to tell her [Author 1]. If I told her what pain I was in, I think she would of taken it easier with me. You know, 'you don't have to come to the practical session because we are doing this, it will give you more pain'. I think she would of taken it easy on myself and make it less hard gymnastic moves, which I didn't want. I wanted to do everything she was teaching so that was in the back of my mind and all I was thinking about is, I don't want to say something that would affect my experience. That's why I didn't talk about the pain.

Modification and adaptation in corporal activities such as gymnastics is often championed as indicative of inclusive practice (Vickerman & Maher, 2018), especially when framed as differentiated instruction for personalised learning (Winnick & Porretta, 2021). However, as Maher and Haegele (2024) note, there is scant evidence supporting the efficacy of differentiation in PE despite many practitioner-based journals and textbooks explaining how to do it and promoting its use (e.g. Colquitt et al., 2017; Jarvis et al., 2017). In fact, there is an ever-growing body of literature from disabled young peoples' perspectives suggesting that such practices do more to highlight difference, feed ableist perceptions of disabled people being less-able, and subsequently result in their subordination and marginalisation (Haegele et al., 2021). Jack was indeed concerned that this would happen to him. Equally, he was concerned about what he would miss that would help his development as a prospective teacher. Despite pain shaping his experiences, Jack wanted to 'see what different challenges I would face doing gymnastics for the first time and to see how strenuous it would be on my body'. For Jack, gymnastics offered an opportunity to test his body; to see what it was capable of. Hence, Jack was eager to learn as much about his body and self as he did about the associated pedagogy.

Experiencing exclusion and learning about disability

Jack talked openly about experiencing peer-exclusion whenever asked to work in groups: 'They [his peers] didn't want to work with me. You could tell'. While the concept of exclusion, especially when considered in relation to the experiences of disabled people, is often considered as, even reduced to, a lack of access to physical and social spaces (Slee, 2018), that was not the case for Jack. Indeed, [Author 1] did provide access and opportunities for Jack in her role as teacher education. Instead,

Jack's experiences shed light on more complex and nuanced understandings of exclusion, conceptualising it as an absence of feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value in the spaces disabled people find themselves (Haegele & Maher, 2023b). However, rather than centring his own feelings and embodied experiences, Jack focussed on how his peers were missing out by not wanting to work with him: 'in the lesson of gymnastics, I think they [his peers] would have learnt more if they had me and worked with me, rather than want to avoid me by doing their own things'. Jack focused specifically on the (inclusive) pedagogical knowledge that he could help others develop and embody:

> if they [his peers] got partnered up with me or put in a group with me, how would they be able to adapt to include me in different ways? You know, learn how to teach someone like me. I think it would've given them more experience to be in my group, rather than not have me in the group.

In this respect, research suggests that working directly with disabled pupils can increase the confidence and empathy (Maher & Morley, 2020) of prospective teachers as inclusive practitioners. Moreover, listening to and gaining experience of teaching disabled pupils is said to be crucial to the development of so-called inclusive pedagogies (Coates et al., 2020; Maher & Haegele, 2022) as they hold expert knowledge about disability, disabled bodies, and 'inclusion'. In interview, Jack stressed how he had to think harder than some of his peers about how to manoeuvrer his body, making him even more of an expert in his disability, while learning about inclusion:

> I think I learned more on the movements side than everyone else because they don't really think about it the way I do. I need to sometimes overthink it, then dumb it down a bit so I know how to do it and go through it step by step so that I can move my body, modify my body, to be able to go into that position. I would be able to do it in a different way but still get the end product that the teacher wants.

It is noteworthy, however, that ideas, theory, policy and practice relating to 'inclusive pedagogy' is complex. It intersects with and is bound to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993). According to Maher and Haegele (2022), 'inclusive pedagogies are anchored in values, principles and practices relating to equity, social justice and inclusion' (p. 263). To be considered inclusive pedagogues, it has been argued that teachers and teacher educators need to be demonstrably devoted to challenging ableism by, for example, ensuring that disabled pupils have access to appropriate learning spaces and activities; are stretched and challenged, in relation to their capabilities; feel empowered; experience a sense of belonging; and feel valued and respected in PE (see Haegele & Maher, 2023a; Lynch et al., 2023). Hence, what Jack articulates falls short of the high expectations we set for inclusive pedagogies. Nonetheless, it is a step in the right direction.

During interview, Jack placed the onus on his peers to recognise the benefits of working with him, suggesting that they should have used their agency to actively seek him out: 'if they had the right confidence in their ability to come over and help me rather than just sit and watch me struggle doing the same movements they can do already'. Interestingly, despite Jack's best efforts to conceal his disability and move his body in a normative way, he wanted [Author 1], the teacher educator, and his peers, to learn about and understand him, his disability, and how to teach someone 'like him'. Jack reflected on his own embodied experiences at school to illustrate that understanding needed to be specific to his CP and his needs and capabilities:

> other pupils with CP have had different experiences than me. They have gone through different things than me, and PE teachers need to understand that everyone with a disability goes through a different path in life and they experience different things.

Universal perspectives on disability, which assume that 'one size fits all', are indicative of ableism and can result in some disabled young people being marginalised in PE when their needs and capabilities are not considered during planning and teaching (Vickerman & Maher, 2018). While increased awareness of disability is said to impact positively on attitudes towards disabled people, especially when considered through an anti-disablist lens (Beckett & Buckner, 2012), there is research problematising claims that nondisabled people can develop the empathetic capacities required to

cognitively and affectively imagine themselves as disabled in order to 'understand' disability given that they have never embodied it (Cooper, 2011).

Co-constructing anti-ableist pedagogies in gymnastics

For Jack, anti-ableist pedagogies had a temporal dimension in that he talked about wanting and needing 'more time than the other students to do the activity. To find a way of doing the activity'. Well theorised in the field of disability studies and compatible with anti-ableist perspectives, 'crip time' (Kafer, 2013) is relevant here because it accounts for the variations in the temporal resources that Jack needed to successfully accomplish gymnastics movements. In this respect, we note that crip time challenges and disrupts the naturalised assumption that clock time, rooted in neoliberal and ableist assumptions about sentient life, can be used to quantify, standardise, and organise life (Katzman et al., 2020). For Jack, additional time meant that he could explore new ways of moving his body, through trial and error, to embody the knowledge required to perform a gymnastics routine.

When tasks were difficult, Jack welcomed advice and guidance from [Author 1], the teacher educator, about how tasks could be approached and performed in ways that were compatible with his bodily capabilities: 'the lecturer made it easier for me to understand what limits I could go to and how to adapt in the right way, to make it easier for myself and be able to do the right task but in a different way'.

While the relationship between the two began as hierarchal, with [Author 1] as teacher educator and gymnastics expert dominating instructional conversations, it quickly shifted to a dialogue of (more) equal partnership, which involved Jack and [Author 1] working together to find solutions to problems rooted in ableist pedagogies of movement:

> … because you have that range of motion, that movement, how do you think you can do it in a different way? She [Author 1] worked off this question and what she had learned, and we just passed ideas off each other and how we can do it in the correct manner, and she would help if I needed support. We talked about what to do. We tried different things. Some worked, some didn't, but we did it together.

For Jack, the construction of pedagogical strategies between himself and [Author 1], which were then 'tested' and refined, when necessary, was indicative of inclusive practices in gymnastics. More broadly, any attempt to diffuse power more evenly between teacher and learner, especially when the latter is disabled and the former not, is anti-ableist in nature and indicative of a critical pedagogical approach that may, over time, facilitate the empowerment of Jack as a learner and prospective teacher (Freire, 1993). Furthermore, this serves as a good example of knowledge as a social construct wherein the expert pedagogical and gymnastics knowledge of [Author 1], and the expert CP knowledge of Jack, coalesced to inform movement experimentation. For this mutually beneficial partnership to be effective, Hunuck and MacPhail (2023) conclude that both the prospective teacher and teacher educator share a vision of working together through interacting and co-constructing in a supportive learning space. For Jack, a strong rapport with [Author 1] was crucial; so much so, that, it increased Jack's confidence to ask for help when exploring alternative ways of moving his body:

> if I did struggle then I would go to her [Author 1], but, if she saw that I was struggling, she would come and tell me what I should be doing and how others could help me in that way. I think she had confidence in me, but it works two ways. We need to have that bond to go to each other to say if I need to do this or I wanted her to understand what to do in my situation, we can go back and forth and that's when the confidence started to grow.

As part of his discussion about this positive relationship, Jack drew attention to the importance of [Author 1] believing in him and his embodied ability: 'I think she believed in what I can do … …. if she saw that I was struggling then she would come in and tell me what I should be doing and how the others could help me in that way', For Jack, her assurance worked to increase his confidence, particularly when she was present during the tasks. In fact, Jack preferred the teacher educator to

interact with him: 'so it was good for her to show me and then stand there and help me go through it in different ways but when she came to tell us to think about it ourselves, I would still want her over to bounce ideas off'. Whilst these embodied interactions were evidently important to Jack and his increasing confidence, it was [Author 1's] expertise that empowered Jack to believe in his own body and its movement potential. He said: 'I knew how much experience she had and she knows how to do everything gave me more confidence to say I can do it'.

It was evident that the relationship between Jack and [Author 1] was dynamic and in flux – because it shifted and evolved over the course of the gymnastics sessions, providing opportunities that facilitated empowerment.

> … she tried to do it step by step and then if she couldn't do it she would try to go over it again to see what she done wrong, so it made the learning both ways because it made it easier next time if she came across it again she will be able to do it because she done it before.

This two-way process was an interesting one with [Author 1] problematising ideas but more importantly sharing them and, it should be noted, her frustrations. The fact that the teacher educator was learning from Jack and not always able to provide solutions facilitated Jack's empowerment because he could see how his body was challenging [Author 1's] thinking beyond normalised, ableist PE practices.

While Jack's discussion about the importance of their interactions and relationship he developed with [Author 1] is a unique feature of discussions about anti-ableist pedagogies in teacher education generally and gymnastics specifically, it is noteworthy that research by Crouch et al. (2014) has suggested that disabled students that have a prosocial relationship with teachers – and, indeed, other students – are more likely to experience feelings of belonging, acceptance and value. Hence, probably without knowing, Jack's comments shed light on complex and sophisticated notions of inclusion that move beyond simple ideas about access and opportunity by centring how disabled people intersubjectively feel in the groups and spaces that their bodies inhabit (Haegele & Maher, 2023b).

Jack recognised that finding alternative ways to meet learning outcomes in gymnastics was a two-way process and required two-way engagement (Hunuck & MacPhail, 2023) that was mutually beneficial. He said: ' … we worked in tandem we worked together to a point where we knew what to do at a stage and go through the different stages. We were both learning as we were going'. Jack was learning how to move in new ways and the teacher educator was learning about Jack and his body. As such, we suggest movement away from teacher education as a process of modelling and instead towards a co-constructed pedagogical design where the teacher educator shares their ideas and supports students to exercise their agency (Hunuck & MacPhail, 2023), helping prospective teachers to understand and be reflective of what they do.

Concluding thoughts

Through the power of Jack's narrative, we have endeavoured to explore the ways and extent to which ableism permeates PETE, while equally shedding light on how teacher educators can work collaboratively with (disabled) prospective teachers to challenge and disrupt ableism through an anti-ableist perspective and critical pedagogical practices. Specifically, we heard about how Jack began his journey into gymnastic by internalising ableism, masking his pain and shame, and engaging in self-exclusion for fear of his disabled body being judged negatively through an ableist-gaze. However, over time, Jack said that he developed a strong, positive, trusting, and supportive relationship with [Author 1], in her capacity as teacher educator, to collaboratively construct pedagogical solutions to the problems that Jack was experiencing as his disabled body endeavoured to conform to ableist expectations in a subject that demands (normative) aesthetic corporeal outcomes. In this regard, we do not want to revisit well-worn ground. Instead, we switch our framing to speak directly to you, our reader, as we invite you to pause and reflect on your own experiences,

what you already (think you) know, and what you have read here. We encourage you to think about the ways and extent to which Jack's story and our discussion of it resonates with you, and how it can be transferred to your own settings and practices. It is through these forms of empirical transferability (see Smith & McGannon, 2018) and conceptual generalisability (Maher, 2025) that theoretically informed, empirically driven research such as ours may be valuable, significant, and impactful. We end this article with recommendations as part of our call to action.

There is a need for more research that explores disabled bodies in PETE because we argue that it is conspicuous by its absence. Specifically, but not exclusively, there is a need for researchers to build on what we have done here by exploring how PE teacher educators can utilise the expert embodied knowledge of disabled prospective teachers – and, dare we say, disabled pupils – by working collaboratively with them to construct anti-ableist pedagogies. Before that, however, it is crucial that teacher educators experience anti-ableist training, which includes a critical reflection on their own embodied knowledge, experiences, values, assumptions and pedagogical practices to develop their understanding of ableism (Beckett & Buckner, 2012) because we postulate that many – readers of this included – know little about it despite ableism saturating the cultural terrain of education (Maher, van Rossum, et al., 2023). More practically, universities need to do more to proactively recruit disabled prospective teachers to PE courses specifically because disabled bodies are an absent presence. A stronger manifestation of disabled bodies in teacher education and teaching spaces may work to disrupt ableism and normalise what is currently considered as nonnormative ways of looking, moving and learning. This will have the added benefit of disabled pupils seeing disability represented and role-modelled in the teaching workforce which may work to empower disabled pupils, although more research situated in schools is needed to test this claim.

Disclosure statement

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

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