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Exclusion, inclusion and belonging in mainstream and disability sport: Jack's story

Anthony John Maher ^a, Joanne McVeigh ^b, Alan Thomson^c and Jack Knight^d

^aCarnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK; ^bDepartment of Sport and Physical Activity, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK; ^cSchool of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Central Lancashire, Ormskirk, UK; ^dIndependent researcher, UK

ABSTRACT

Concepts of exclusion and inclusion in sport, physical activity and physical education settings are mostly anchored to discussions about access to and opportunities in physical and social spaces from the perspective of non-disabled adult stakeholders. In this article, we use individual interviews and two creative non-fiction accounts to explore the views of an adult with cerebral palsy (CP), named Jack, who reflects on his embodied experiences of mainstream and CP youth football. This approach enabled us to provide a more nuanced and sophisticated consideration of the exclusion/inclusion dichotomy by centring Jack's construction of identity and feelings of belonging in the spaces his body inhabited. Particular attention is paid to the interactions and relationships that Jack developed with teammates and coaches, and the (often ableist) constructs of ability that pervade mainstream and CP settings, all of which served to influence Jack's sense of belonging. We end by encouraging scholars to centre the experiences and amplify the voices of disabled young people, and to consider inclusion as intersubjective experiences associated with feelings of belonging, acceptance and value that are dynamic and in flux. The concept of embodied belonging can help us to move researchers beyond a simple critique of disabling socio-spatial power relations towards the construction of new knowledge that enhances understandings of disability, place, and space.

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Belonging; cerebral palsy; disability; exclusion; inclusion; youth football

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, policy and research relating to concepts of exclusion and inclusion typically focus on education and, closer to the readership of this journal, physical education specifically. Liasidou (2012) considers exclusion and inclusion as semantic chameleons because the processes and practices associated with them are tied to different histories, cultures, and epistemological assumptions (Kozleski, Artiles, and Waitoller 2011) and can change over time and space (Imray and Colley 2017). The fact that exclusion and inclusion as concepts are not exclusive to disability adds nuance. Concepts of exclusion and inclusion have been constructed and used to discuss other identity markers such as social class, race, gender, and nationality. As such, Nilholm and Goransson (2017) argue that the ambiguous nature of exclusion and inclusion, and variety of meanings associated with them, may hinder our ability to develop, as a field, an understanding of how to embrace, enhance, and utilise this concept in scholarship and practice. Hence, it is crucial that we are

CONTACT Anthony John Maher  Anthony.Maher@leedsbeckett.ac.uk  Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Headingley Campus, Leeds, LS6 3QS UK

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clear about what we mean when discussing exclusion and inclusion and use this as a springboard to justify a focus on feelings of belonging in youth sport.

For this article, we consider exclusion and inclusion in relation to three overlapping and inter-fac-ing strands that are tied to bio-medical, social, and relational understandings of disability. First, exclusion and inclusion relate to the ways and extent to which disabled people have access to and opportunities in social institutions. This conceptualisation developed as part of the disabled people's movement activism and scholarship, which was significantly influenced by neo-Marxist perspectives relating to material and cultural subordination (Goodley 2017), where there was a key focus on equal opportunities and disabled people's access to mainstream education and workplaces. Health ser-vices and social care, housing, transport (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999) and, for our purposes, sport and leisure were later added to this list (Kiuppis 2018). Thus, according to Kiuppis (2018), much of the limited research relating to exclusion and inclusion in sport borrowed concepts and ideas from education and physical education. From this purview, debates about exclusion and inclusion relate to and according to Haegele and Maher (2021) are reduced to, the presence and position (or lack) of disabled people in the same settings and spaces as non-disabled people, such as in mainstream sport teams.

Strand two relates to academic and practitioner attempts to extend hegemonic notions of exclusion and inclusion by exploring the 'inclusivity' of the spaces that disabled people have access to. In a sporting context, the contours of the physical and social environment, the type of activities planned and delivered, the ways that disabled people are coached and supported, and the appropriateness of the equipment used, are key features that shape discussions about how 'inclusive' sport is and can be (Kiuppis 2018; Maher and Haegele 2021). Accordingly, central importance is given to questions about what does or could happen to disabled people when they enter the playing fields of sport (Spaaij, Magee, and Jeanes 2014). Often, the focus here is on endeavouring to understand and subsequently overcome the many barriers that disabled people experience in sport when compared to non-disabled people (Kiuppis 2018). For us, this ties to debates and research relating to the quantity and quality of disabled people's 'participation' in sport (e.g. Valet 2018; Jeanes et al. 2019). This too can be seen in physical education, where research relating to exclusion and inclusion is often tied to discussions about curriculum, peda-gogy, assessment arrangements and support mechanisms (Vickerman and Maher 2018), mostly from a teacher's perspective (e.g. Morley et al. 2021). Notably, some attempts have been made to centre the experiences and amplify the voices of disabled young people in physical education. While the experiences of this heterogenous group are diverse, most of the research highlights the difficulties that disabled young people experience developing social capital and positive and meaningful relationships with non-disabled peers, with some experiencing social isolation and even bullying in the school and PE spaces they find themselves (Fitzgerald 2005; Goodwin, Rossow-Kimball, and Connolly 2021; Haegele and Maher 2021; Rubuliak and Spencer 2021; Sharpe, Coates, and Mason 2021).

Strand three of our conceptualisation is anchored to more critical, nuanced, and sophisticated discussions about exclusion and inclusion, which focus on how disabled people feel in the contexts and spaces they find themselves in. Concepts of belonging, acceptance and value are beginning to become entangled in wider debates about how inclusive a setting is, and the social practices prevalent in those spaces (D'Eloia and Price 2018; Haegele and Maher 2021), from the perspective of disabled people themselves. This move has been part of a broader attempt to empower disabled people by placing their embodied experiences at the centre of research relating to what is and is not inclusive. Indeed, most research relating to exclusion and inclusion of young people in sport, physical activity and physical education is from the perspective of non-disabled adults (Maher and Haegele 2021), none of whom have lived nor embodied disability, and thus do not have the crucial embodied knowledge about the sporting experiences of disabled young people. Hence, this article centres the sporting experiences and amplifies the voice of a disabled person because we acknowl-edge that they have expert knowledge of exclusion and inclusion because of their embodied

experiences. This also ties to the 'nothing about us without us' mantra championed by the disabled people movement (Charlton 2000).

This article is novel because none of the mainstream nor disability sport research currently available explores the overlap and interface of concepts of exclusion, inclusion and belonging from the perspective of a disabled person. The focus of this article is significant because how academics and practitioners in sport, physical activity and physical education conceptualise exclusion and inclusion influence the ways and extent to which they endeavour – or not – to disrupt exclusionary practices and promote so-called inclusive ones (Maher and Haegele 2021). Hence, we argue that the impact of this research will be three-fold: First, it will help sport coaches, development officers and administrators to reflect on their own concepts of and practices relating to inclusion, and critically consider what more they could do to foster a sense of belonging among disabled young people in sport given the important role it plays in psycho-social wellbeing (D'Eloia and Price 2018) and the difficulty disabled people have finding spaces where they feel that they belong (Foley et al. 2012; Robinson et al. 2020). Second, we hope that the research encourages academics, including those who do not 'research disability', to reflect on their own concepts of exclusion, inclusion and belonging and to critically consider how, if at all, their research and practice is contributing to the deconstruction of exclusionary practices. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, our research may help disabled young people to make sense of and construct meaning about their feelings and social status in mainstream and disability sport, particularly those that transition from the former to the latter. Here, we agree with Hall (2010) who argues that in understanding belonging and connectedness for disabled people, it is crucial to appreciate the nuanced ways in which they navigate relationships with others (known and unknown to them), in both mainstream environments and segregated settings.

In this article, we draw on ableism to consider the views of an adult with cerebral palsy (CP), named Jack, who reflects on his embodied experiences of mainstream and CP youth football, to explore concepts of exclusion, inclusion and belonging. Here, we build on the work of Haegele and Maher (2021), who explored the influence of peer interactions and relationships on feelings of belonging of autistic male youths in mainstream school physical education. We hope to extend this work and cast it in new light to add greater complexity to our understandings of exclusion, inclusion and belonging by focusing on Jack's transition from a mainstream to CP football team to consider the temporal and transient nature of the exclusion/inclusion dichotomy. While we leave Jack to decide what belonging is and feels like, our working definition considers belonging as feeling needed, important, integral, valued, respected and/or feeling in harmony with a group, place and/or system (Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013).

Ableism

Our conceptualisation of ableism is inspired by the work of Fiona Kumari Campbell. Campbell's body of writing spans the ways and extent to which race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality intersect with disability. For the purposes of this article, ableism relates to a network of ideologies, values, traditions, and behaviours (in youth sport) that (re)produce a hegemonic, normative, mind-body-self that is projected and celebrated as perfect, species typical, and therefore essential to being fully human (Campbell 2019). From this purview, disability is cast as a 'diminished state of being human' (Campbell 2001, 44). It follows then that ableism in youth sport permeates social relations and interactions, producing processes and systems of entitlement for nondisabled young people and exclusion for disabled young people. According to Campbell (2017), ableist systems such as youth sport involve the 'differentiation, ranking, negation, notification, and prioritisation of sentient life' (287–288). Here, actual and perceived differences in ability are what Goodley (2017) terms the 'elephant in the room'. To borrow a thought from Goodley et al. (2019), youth sport is a literal and metaphorical ableist playground where disabled bodies are pitied and marginalised while the abilities of nondisabled bodies are celebrated, rewarded, and considered a central marker of

successful human accomplishment and progression. According to Giese and Ruin (2018), disabled bodies in sport, physical activity, and physical education are often denied the status of being fully human, especially when they do not conform to ableist perceptions of mind-body perfection. It is because of the importance attributed to normative body aesthetics (Giese and Ruin 2018) and the ways and extent to which ableism permeates sporting contexts (Brittain, Biscaia, and Gérard 2020), that our research is located in those sites. While we realise that this brief discussion falls short of exploring the theoretical complexity and sophistication of ableism, we hope it explained the lens through which we considered Jack's interactions and relationships with others who were part of his relational networks, and the ways and extent to which he experienced feelings of belonging in spaces that his mind-body inhabited.

While we are certainly not the first to draw upon the concept of ableism, it is notable that hardly any of the expansive body of literature that focuses on sport and physical activity draws explicitly on the concept as an analytical tool. Of the limited research available, Brittain, Biscaia, and Gérard (2020) used theories of ableism, social practice, and self-determination, to propose a framework to explain why disabled people are less likely to access and participate in sport and physical activity when compared to nondisabled people. This work was later developed by Ives et al. (2021) who drew upon ableism as a sensitising concept to explore experiences of and attitudes to sport and physical activity for disabled people. Findings suggested that participation was influenced by several external and internal barriers, including the cost of transport and activities, ineffective modes of communication and advertisement, preconceived images of sport as competitive and judgemental, and anxieties about sporting abilities. Ableism has received a little more attention in physical education, with it being combined with critical pedagogy to explore the experiences of nondisabled pre-service teachers (Lynch, Simon, and Maher 2020), challenge the 'disability as a problem' discourse in initial teacher education (Alfrey and Jeanes 2021), and explore normative, ableist practices (Alves et al. 2022) and perceptions of the disabled body (Giese and Ruin 2018) in physical education. None of the research hitherto, however, has used ableism to explore concepts of exclusion, inclusion and belonging in mainstream and segregated sport settings from the perspective of a disabled person. It is here where the novelty of our research lies.

Methodology

Beginning with the assumption that lives are storied (Sparkes and Smith 2014), we adopted a narrative approach to gain access to Jack's story and the context in which it was told. Smith and Sparkes (2009) offer a series of characteristics or principles that distinguish narrative from other ways of doing research and they help explain why it was used for this study:

- (1) **Narrative has a capacity to make meaning** – it was important that Jack's story was told as it allows for greater meaning to be made of the complexities of his disabled body in an abled environment. It offers a window into the embodied experiences of other disabled young bodies.
- (2) **Narrative affords relativeness** – Jack's story was not told or heard in isolation. It involved interrelations with the characters of his story. It involved interaction with the author interviewing him. These add important context to his story.
- (3) **Narratives are personal and social** – Jack told a story of himself; things he was proud of, his fears, and issues that had troubled him. These may have been his own story, but they also tell a story of parents (his own and those of his friends), coaches, friends, and the football clubs he played for.
- (4) **Narratives provide a structure for a sense of identity and self** – Jack's story creates an identity for himself both for his own benefit and for the other characters he mentions. Understanding this formed an important part of the analysis.

- (5) **Experiences of time are structured through narrative** – Although Jack’s story was one about his lived body in younger days, it helped us gain a deeper understanding of his living body and his present (McMahon and Huntly 2013).
- (6) **Narrative recognises the role of the body** – Using narrative offered us a means of understanding the significance of how Jack’s thoughts and actions are embodied through living with CP.

Thus, the study was interpretivist in nature in that it was characterised by ontological relativism and epistemological social constructionism (Papathomas 2019). The focus was on making sense of and constructing meaning about Jack’s embodied experiences of mainstream and CP football. Here, we assumed that there were multiple interpretations of experiences that can be explored and that meaning making should be considered an embodied act by researchers and participants as they interact with one another, and others who are part of their wider relational networks (Sparkes and Smith 2014), such as Jack’s parents, coaches, and teammates at both football teams. Hence, we were interested in storying Jack’s truth, not ‘the’ truth, because we acknowledged that multiple versions of events, incidents and interactions co-exist (Papathomas 2019). Given that researchers’ subjective beliefs, values, and inclinations inevitably shape the interpretive process, it is crucial that we explicate our positionalities so that others can do as we did by considering how they may have shaped methodological decisions and interpretations of Jack’s experiences. All four of us are white, heterosexual and cisgender. Crucially, only Jack identifies as disabled. Moreover, three of us experienced teaching Jack as an undergraduate student. We considered this beneficial to our research because it meant that a relationship had already been established and rapport developed with Jack, which may have contributed to the generation of richer, thicker descriptions of Jack’s experiences during interviews (Goodwin 2020). Nonetheless, we acknowledge and reflexively consider the inherent power relationship and imbalance associated with non-disabled university staff researching with and about a disabled student. Every attempt was made to diffuse power from us to Jack by ensuring that he had ownership over all research decisions.

About Jack

This study is about Jack. When data were gathered, Jack was studying a physical education undergraduate degree at a higher education institution in England with the intention of becoming a teacher of physical education. He was 19 years old and identified as a white British male. Jack has cerebral palsy, which is of course significant to his experiences given that our bodies – all bodies – form the anchors that shape our experiences, perceptions, and knowledge of the physical and social world (MacLachlan 2004) and, in Jack’s case, mainstream and CP football. 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 centre the social and relational aspects of disability rather than focusing on impairment. Saying that, a focus on perceptions of his ‘ability’ in the stories and Discussion is entangled with his embodiment and other people’s perceptions of his CP. The data used to construct the stories presented in this article were from Jack’s undergraduate dissertation, which was supervised by Joanne and focused on his experiences of youth sport. All research protocols aligned with British Educational Research Association’s (2018) ethical guidelines and were approved by Joanne’s university ethics committee.

Data gathering

Four, two-hour, semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data from and about Jack for his undergraduate dissertation. The interview guides were co-constructed by Jack and Joanne in their capacities as student researcher-participant and supervisor respectively. Methodologically, this was in-keeping with duoethnography (Breault 2016) because it moved

beyond the self-interrogation that is indicative of autoethnographic approaches by involving Joanne as the Other in the act of Jack's attempts to make sense of his embodied experiences in youth football. Accordingly, Jack's journey of discovery was collaborative, mutual and reciprocal (Norris and Sawyer 2012). On a more practical level, interview guides were co-constructed because that reflected the support Jack needed as an undergraduate student developing a research project for the first time. This involved Jack developing a draft list of questions and Joanne providing feedback to support Jack to consider the ways and extent to which the questions aligned with his research aims and were able to elicit the data required. Questions were open and followed by expansion, probing, and supplementary questions to encourage Jack to story his lived and living bodies in sport (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Furthermore, emphasis was placed on the relationships that Jack had with significant others in sport spaces given claims by Smith and Sparkes (2008) that stories are relational. Joanne interviewed Jack, using the interview schedule that they had developed together. Conversations were flexible, allowing Jack to dictate the pace and direction as another attempt to give him ownership during data generation (Bryman 2015). Not wanting to perpetuate what Braun and Clarke (2021) call the myth of data saturation as sample size or interview duration, Jack and Joanne decided to stop gathering data after interview four because they agreed that they had generated what Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) term *information power* in that data had sufficient richness, depth, density, diversity, and complexity to build narrative themes (Smith 2019). Interviews were audio recorded and conducted by Joanne in her private work office to ensure confidentiality (Bryman 2015). All interviews were transcribed verbatim by Jack and stored securely. The sharing of audio files and transcripts was confined to the research team and done using a password encrypted portable storage device.

Data analysis

Jack performed his own analysis of data for his undergraduate dissertation. After the dissertation had been formally submitted and graded, Jack and Joanne approached Anthony and Alan about using Jack's data to write an article for publication. Subsequently, Anthony analysed Jack's data without knowledge of the process or outcomes of Jack's analysis. Anthony analysis, which was influenced by the work of Smith (2019), was used as a basis for the construction of the creative non-fiction accounts offered below. Stage one of data analysis involved listening to the audio recordings and reading the interview transcripts until Anthony felt intimately connected to Jack's storied experiences of sport. This process is indicative of narrative indwelling (Smith 2019) and it enabled Anthony to think with, not just about, Jack's stories. Next, labels were given to sections of the text that conferred meaning relating to the embodied experiences of Jack. Labels were descriptive (what was said), analytical (the significance and implications of what was said), theoretical (how what was said relates to ableism) and related to the narrative threads that ran through Jack's stories. To aid sense making, Anthony drew on Joanne and Alan as critical friends. Joanne drew upon her insider knowledge as supervisor of Jack's dissertation and Alan as someone who knew Jack well but was not part of the supervisory team and thus could offer an outsider perspective. The involvement of Joanne and [Author 3] at this juncture served to check and challenge the initial construction of knowledge and supported Alan to reflexively consider his interpretations of Jack's stories. Through these interactions and reflexive engagements (Smith and McGannon 2018), Anthony confirmed that data had sufficient richness, depth, density, diversity, and complexity to build narrative themes (Smith 2019), thus meaning that there was no need for new data to be generated. Such an approach is in keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2021) claim that what constitutes 'enough' data cannot be tied to a number or the duration of interviews because the meaning and meaningfulness of any theme derives from the dataset and interpretative process. The narrative themes constructed through this analytical process were: *Inclusion as interactions and relationships with teammates*; *Inclusion as interactions and relationships with coaches*; *Inclusion as feelings of belonging*; and *Support*

provided by parents. These themes and the associated direct quotes were used to craft two creative non-fiction stories.

Data representation

We are certainly not the first to use creative forms of writing and story-telling approaches in critical disabilities work relating to sport, physical activity, and physical education. Orr et al. (2021), for instance, used an example of a creative non-fiction that (re)presented data from parents of youth involved in an inclusive physical literacy program to promote critical thinking around the challenges that arise from using such an approach. Haegele and Maher (2022) drew upon Caleb's story, a creative non-fiction account crafted from qualitative interview data generated with autistic youth, to explore intersubjective feelings of inclusion in integrated physical education contexts. Lowry et al. (2022), on the other hand, offered an autoethnographic account of a high performance disabled athlete to explore how crip care knowledge and the materiality of bodies intersect in sport, while Williams, Lozano-Sufrategui, and Tomasone (2021) critically considered sport and exercise students' narrative imagination of physical activity and disability through story completion. Although the empirical focus of these studies differ, creative approaches to story-telling enabled the authors to provide powerful insights into embodied experiences of disability, sport, physical activity and physical education to inform, awaken and disturb readers (Sparkes 1997). Accordingly, we took our cue from Sparkes (1997) by using creative non-fiction to provide powerful insights into the embodied experiences of Jack to inform, awaken and disturb our readers by illustrating their involvement in ableist systems and practices, some or much of which they may not be consciously aware.

The first iterations of the creative non-fiction stories were crafted by Anthony. The stories were inspired and influenced by the guidelines offered by Cheney (2001) and Caulley (2008). Interview data were used to provide a concrete basis and verisimilitude to Jack's stories. The first step involved using the interview data to develop the core characters: Jack; his parents; Coach Callum; Jack's friend Fred, and Coach Steve. Using an iterative process, characters were outlined, adjusted, and quotes created and added to character descriptions based on Jack's discussion of the interactions he had with each of them. Next, notes were made about the spaces where these interactions occurred to reflect that the presence and speaking roles of characters were tied to the material and social spaces that Jack inhabited. This helped to emphasise the relational dimension of Jack's stories. Once characters were developed, the narrative themes generated during data analysis were used to sketch the plot of the creative non-fiction stories. Scenes were written to illustrate embodied experiences in motion (Miller and Paola 2004). Moreover, during the crafting of the stories, Anthony ensured that Jack's body had a strong presence because Jack deemed it essential to understanding his experiences and, as Smith and Sparkes (2008) suggest, stories are significant because bodily experience is deeply embedded in narrative. Indeed, the body is a storyteller, and it is partly through the tales it tells that we may make sense of and construct meaning about (disabled) bodies (Smith and Sparkes 2008) in mainstream and CP football.

Both Jack as the core character and the concepts of exclusion, inclusion and belonging served to connect specific scenes and the two non-fiction accounts during the writing process. Anthony wrote using the present tense to position readers as eyewitnesses to stories as they unravel (Caulley 2008). To draw our reader in and excite them emotionally, rich descriptions of contexts and people were provided, and Anthony wrote about and for the senses and emotions. Informal and colloquial language was used, much of which was inspired by the verbatim words of Jack, to increase authenticity, credibility, and accessibility as hallmarks of quality in creative non-fiction accounts (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2015). In this respect, we carefully considered the ethics of speaking to and for the interests of silenced groups such as people with CP. Thus, we took our direction from Sparkes (1997) by drawing upon our power and privileges in the fields of sport, physical activity, and physical education to use a creative non-fiction account to fracture such silences and centre the

experiences of Jack. In turn, we hope that Jack's central and crucial role in the research process, including in the crafting of his embodied accounts, compliment the participatory and emancipatory practices often used by disability scholars (for a review, see Rix et al. 2020). Indeed, the stories that disabled people live and tell are crucial because their knowledge and experiences of disability are lived and embodied.

Once the stories were crafted, they were sent to Jack to carefully consider their resonance and believability (Smith and McGannon 2018), particularly in relation to the characters, scenes, and descriptions of emotions. It was equally if not more important that the stories were respectful and dignified because we were concerned about the ways and extent to which they were written through an ableist lens. Jack added reflective notes to the stories that were conversational in nature as a way of supporting Anthony to reflexively consider the re-crafting of the stories. With Jack's permission, the stories were recrafted and then sent to Joanne and Alan who also added reflective notes to convey the ways and extent to which the stories connected with them emotionally. The creative non-fiction stories presented below are the outcomes of these processes of reflection, revision, editing and (re)interpretation as advocated by Smith (2019). Given the temporality of stories, it is important to note that the non-fiction accounts are set during Jack's early teenage years. This also helps us to situate and understand the (increasing) focus on concepts of competition and winning in youth football as Jack's story unfolds. Jack waived his right to confidentiality as a named author of this article. Nonetheless, he was acutely aware that the details of his stories could compromise the anonymity of other people, places, and organisations. Therefore, pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identity of people and organisations, and every attempt has been made during the crafting of the stories to maintain anonymity.

Findings

Exclusion or inclusion in mainstream youth football? Jack's story

'Come on, son, rise and shine. Time for football. Get ready or we'll be late. How many times did you press snooze this morning, Jack?' Despite now being retired from the army, Jack's dad had not lost any of his enthusiasm for early morning wake ups. Secretly, he missed Reveille. 'I can't remember', said Jack. 'A few. I'm feeling it today, dad. My left side is in bits'. 'What's it today?' enquired Jack's dad. 'Dull, achy. Tingles and the odd shooting pain. You know, the usual', replied Jack. 'Let's get there early then. Warm up and do some stretches. It'll ease off'. 'Okay dad. Five more minutes'. 'See you downstairs in five', replied Jack's dad, before descending the stairs with the vim and vigour of a man half his 55 years. Jack lay there for a while, staring intently at the crisp white speckled ceiling. He wasn't exaggerating. He wasn't trying to get out of football. He liked football. He had been encouraged to join the team by his parents, both keen sportspeople, as a way of making friends now that they were settled. Jack had struggled to make friends because of his dad's job. They moved about a lot and were never in one place long enough for Jack to form meaningful and lasting relationships. Jack never felt that he belonged, well, anywhere.

'Attention everyone. Eyes on me', said coach Callum. 'We're going to play a small-sided match to end the session'. 'Yes!' exclaimed the other boys. Jack smiled and tried to look pleased. It probably looked like a strange, rather uneasy, smile to anyone paying attention, because it was forced. He was trying to mask the deep anxiety he was feeling. Jack had enjoyed ending training with a small-sided match. He is competitive, 'like my dad', he would often say with pride, to anyone that would listen. However, he had recently noticed that his teammates were passing the ball to him less and less during matches. And it wasn't just in training. It was happening in the competitive games too, against other local teams. It seemed that they would only pass to him as a last resort, after all possible options were exhausted.

Jack isn't shy. He certainly isn't passive. He's always prided himself on tackling situations head on, like his dad. So, after training, he spoke to his teammates. 'Jonesy, why didn't you pass when I was in

all that space?' 'I didn't see you, Jack. I had my head down' replied Jonesy, defensively. And Caleb, why didn't you play me through?' 'The angle wasn't there, Jack. Honest. Phil would have blocked the pass' said Caleb, looking sheepish. Bullshit thought Jack. They were lying and Jack knew it. Jack knew the truth. They didn't trust him with the ball. They thought he'd lose it or squander an opportunity to score. They didn't think he was good enough to play with them anymore, and they thought that it was because of his disability. No one had ever said that, probably because they were his friends, but he knew it. He had known it for some time. There had been subtle hints over time that, when added together, formed a critical mass of evidence. It was true that most of the other boys were stronger, faster, and more agile than him. They could move their bodies with greater control than him, but that had always been the case and the other boys had always known it. They just never seemed to care about that until recently.

Coach Callum had changed too. Jack got far less game time over the last couple of months. He now started most competition games as a substitute, and he was only brought on to play if the team was winning comfortably. He stayed on the bench if the score was close, which it often was. Jack had been with the team now for five years and had always felt like an equal and valuable member, until recently. These experiences of gradual and persistent marginalisation and exclusion took their toll on Jack. He felt disappointment, frustration, and anger, all of which impacted negatively on his mental health. There was no one critical incident. It was more a collection of micro incidents that built a critical mass. He didn't want to quit. Like his dad, he wasn't a quitter. 'I want to win my place back. I want to show them I can do it' he said stoically one evening to his parents at dinner, while prodding with a fork the uneaten mound of spaghetti bolognese. 'That's the spirit, son. You show them', said his dad, proudly. But Jack didn't show them. He spent the final four months of the football season trying but they didn't want to know. So, after much discussion with his parents, Jack decided to leave the team at the end of the season.

Exclusion or inclusion in disability youth football? Jack's story continued

The split from the team was difficult for Jack. He loved the team. It provided time and space to make friends and develop a shared identity. Now, that is gone. The friendships did not survive the split. They quickly became fractured and strained. The glue that once bound Jack to his teammates had lost its stickiness. 'I'm struggling' was all he said. All he had to say. His parents knew because he had been sullen and distant since leaving the football team. 'What is it, Jack?' asked mum, gently. 'I miss the team, mum', he spluttered. 'I miss the routine and the boys ... But I'm not going back. They don't want me so I'm not going back' he added, after regaining his composure. 'And that's the problem. I feel miserable. I miss what I no longer want, and don't know what to do about it'.

The dining room became unusually silent and still. Jack's mum, and especially his dad, could always be counted on for words of encouragement and advice. Momentarily though, they seemed at a loss for words ... 'I have an idea', said Jack's dad, after what seemed an age. 'There's a football team in Wood View, for young people with CP. You could check that out. See if you like it'. Jack was intrigued. He knew very little about CP sport and was surprised he had never considered it himself. After further discussion with his parents, he decided to give it a go.

'Hello everyone', said Steve, the coach of Wood View FC, a huge balding man with a pleasant demeanour. 'Before we begin, I want to introduce you to Jack. He comes to us from Rudston Rovers'. A low, heavy, excited murmur filled the sports hall. Jack couldn't quite make out what was being said but he knew it was about him. His face felt hot and flush. He felt like he was being watched and judged by strangers and he didn't like it. He was certain that his awkwardness and embarrassment was now obvious to others. He glanced at the door to the sports hall. It was slightly ajar, approximately 15 metres away. My escape route, he thought. I'll slip out later, unnoticed ...

'Hey Jack. I'm Fred. Nice to meet you', were the words that startled Jack and broke his concentration. Standing opposite was a boy, slightly shorter and slimmer than Jack, with a broad, freckled face, which was wearing a huge toothy smile. His hand was extended, ready to receive Jack's.

Automatically, Jack took his hand, shook it limply, and quickly let go without saying anything. I hope he didn't realise how sweaty my hand was, thought Jack, rubbing it unnoticed against his shorts. 'So, you played for Rudston Rovers? That is so cool. I don't know any people like us who play mainstream footy. You must be really good. I bet we learn a lot from you'. 'I'm ok', replied Jack, looking intently at the newly polished parquet floor, trying to conceal his feelings of pride and embarrassment.

And they did learn a lot from Jack. Jack soon realised, and it was noticeable to his teammates, that he was much better at football than the others. That's not to say that there weren't good players in the team, but Jack was better than them all. On several occasions, Coach Steve had actually asked Jack to demonstrate a number of dribbling techniques to the others, something that had never happened at Rudston Rovers. Jack quickly made friends in the team. It was their shared love of football and their shared experience of CP that bound Jack to his new teammates.

'How was football tonight, Jack?' asked dad. 'Great', he replied, between greedy mouthfuls of cheeseburger. 'Have you settled in?' added mum, silently praying that her little boy had made new friends. 'Oh yeah. The lads are great. They have made me feel so welcome. I really feel like one of the team; like I belong. I definitely made the right decision', he said thoughtfully. 'That reminds me', he added. 'Fred has asked if I want to go to his on Thursday for dinner. Is that ok?' Jack had never been invited to dinner before. 'Of course', replied mum, after a moment's hesitation. Jack's eyes then slowly panned to meet his dad's. Dad nodded enthusiastically, not wanting to talk with his mouth full of homemade potato wedges.

'Fred seems like a nice boy', offered mum. 'Oh, he's the best', replied Jack, reassuringly. 'And his CP is a little like mine; not the same, but similar. We talk about it all the time; you know, how it feels, when and why it hurts, and what we do to manage the pain. It has been really useful talking to someone who has been through the same things. We've learned so much from each other'. For the first time in Jack's life, he could talk about his own CP to others who had experienced CP.

Analysing Jack's story

Exclusion or inclusion in mainstream football

Jack's story is and isn't about youth sport; it is and it isn't about disability sport. While these settings and their shared and specific cultural arrangements relating to established ideologies, values, rituals, customs, and forms of representation provide important contextual nuance, Jack's story is much more about concepts of exclusion, inclusion and segregation, identity (both individual and collective), and feelings of belonging. Jack's participation in a mainstream football team, wherein he, a disabled young person, was in the same physical and social space as non-disabled peers, is often championed as indicative of inclusion (e.g. Slee 2018). Jack's access to and opportunities at Rudston Rovers may be considered a welcome outcome of the campaigns of the disabled people's movement, and particularly disabled activists and scholars who resisted and endeavoured to dismantle oppressive material and social conditions that resulted in disabled people experiencing segregation in education, health, work, housing, transport, and leisure (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999). From this purview, conceptualisations of exclusion and inclusion are attributed, arguably reduced, to considerations about access to physical and social settings and spaces. We argue, however, that this is inadequate because it does not account for the ways and extent to which the (micro) actions, even aggressions, of Jack's teammates and coach, over time, gradually eroded his sense of collective identity and associated feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value (Haegele and Maher 2021). Indeed, the historic drive to 'mainstream' – a process whereby segregated schools, workplaces, and even sports are disbanded – assumed there needed to be increasing opportunities for disabled and non-disabled people to interact and develop relationships, even friendships, to learn from and about each other, thus improving the attitudes of the latter to the former (Finkelstein 1980; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 1994). There is merit to this claim. Research by

McKay, Haegele, and Block (2018) and Reina et al. (2011), for instance, suggests that non-disabled people are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards disabled people and so-called inclusive practices when they gain experience interacting with them. However, research of this nature does not account for how disabled people experience and feel about these interactions; it is for and about non-disabled people. Jack's story highlights the potential negative dimensions and undesirable outcomes of these interactions for disabled people.

Jack often referred to his teammates at Rudston Rovers, the mainstream team, as his friends; the first friends he ever had. Over time, though, an increasing focus on ableist precepts of sporting performance over the more social aspect of football worked to disrupt and unsettle those friendships. Specifically, the increasing perception among his teammates that Jack could not meet ableist expectations about what bodies should be able to do in youth football contributed to Jack's disablism (Thomas 2007) and ultimate exclusion from his peer group and, eventually, the team. This process was exacerbated by the coach who, through sidelining Jack, arguably did more to legitimise – rather than challenge – the exclusionary ideologies and behaviours of the players at Rudston Rovers. The coach was in a position of power and authority. He could and should have acted as an ally (Goodley 2013) by using his agency to create a culture that disrupted ableist perceptions of ability and normalised the presence of atypical or nonnormative bodies in the team. This may have, according to Shildrick (2009), helped to cast disabled bodies as performative entities, illuminating but also potentially refuting corporeal standards. Indeed, the presence of disabled bodies can challenge normative ideas about 'able' bodies. But Coach Callum didn't do that. Instead, he individualised, medicalised and pathologized Jack's (dis)ability (Goodley et al. 2019), whether he realised or not. This should not surprise us though. Think about a social space, any social space. Any consideration of disability in that context will lead you to ableist constructs of ability, perhaps none more so than sport. According to Goodley (2013), the neoliberal ableism that permeates all social spaces clearly values mobility, flexibility, achievement, and success, and mainstream (youth) football is no different.

There are examples in the story of Jack attempting to resist exclusionary practices. For instance, he demonstrated his agency by confronting his teammates after a training session. Often, there is a propensity to cast disabled people as agentless blobs of matter in all forms of cultural representation (Goodley 2017). For us, it is important to acknowledge that Jack, like most disabled people, was not a passive recipient of his exclusion. Nonetheless, the exclusionary practices that Jack experienced resulted in him deciding to leave the team. This is a well-known consequence of the systemic oppression that disabled people experience: exclusionary practices result in self-exclusion (Slee 2018). From an ableist perspective, the decision to leave the team is considered as Jack's and Jack's alone; an ableist exemplar of a disabled person (finally) demonstrating their agency. His teammates and coach can comfort themselves with the belief that Jack left because he wanted to; they can absolve themselves of the burden of responsibility, which is a key feature of disablism (Goodley 2017). For Jack, leaving seemed like the only option. Thus, social barriers and exclusionary practices were represented and cemented as personal problems, which according to Slee (2018) is indicative of victim blaming.

Exclusion as inclusion in cerebral palsy football

While mainstreaming has been cast as inclusion, the segregation of disabled people in separate physical and social spaces, especially when they are grouped in relation to biomedical categories of impairment, is considered exclusion (Slee 2018). Thus, Jack's participation in the CP football team and, arguably, the entire basis upon which disability sport is established, would be considered in some quarters as exclusionary. Tomlinson (1982) described segregation in education as benevolent humanitarianism; ableism disguised behind a cloak of 'segregation for their own good'. While there is of course merit to such arguments, particularly when cast against the historical backdrop of excluding disabled people from the education, health and workspaces and opportunities afforded non-disabled people (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999), we caution against such universal modes of thinking about inclusion. Conceptualising inclusion merely in terms of an autonomous, disconnected, and disembodied individual's presence within a space and proximity of their peers

ignores the meanings disabled people construct about those experiences. For us, that is why Jack's experiences are significant.

By joining Wood View FC, the CP football team, Jack was able to develop meaningful and long-lasting friendships with young people his own age. It was their shared experience of CP that ultimately bound them together as a collective. In this respect, it is not uncommon for disabled young people to develop prosocial relationships with people they identify with, particularly when those people have embodied experiences of disability (Haegele and Maher 2021). Salmon (2013) explained that to negotiate stigma, disabled teens appear to choose to self-exclude from non-disabled peers, instead seeking out friendships with other disabled students where experiences of stigma and disability are shared. Interestingly, this strategy mirrors ableist modes of thinking and ways of doing that elevate precepts of similarity above difference when it comes to group and identity formation (Goodley 2013). This purview certainly aligns with Jack's story. Jack's friendships with his new teammates became so powerful that their meaningfulness and significance extended beyond the football team, which is illustrated by the fact that Jack was invited to a teammate's house for dinner, something that had never happened while he played for Rudston Rovers. Ultimately, it was friendships such as these, together with a sense of importance and acceptance, that contributed to Jack feeling that he belonged at Wood View FC. This allies with the work of Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart (2013), who argue that feeling needed, important, integral, respected, or in harmony with the group or system characterises most definitions of belonging. In this regard, it is crucial that young people feel that they belong in the spaces they find themselves and with the people they interact with because it can impact positively on psycho-social wellbeing (D'Eloia and Price 2018; Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013).

Interestingly, Jack's social status increased when he moved to Wood View FC because of his physical capital. In other words, while it was negative judgements about his body and physical abilities that contributed to him being marginalised at Rudston Rovers, it was those same performative features that gave him kudos at Wood View FC. This example clearly illustrates the contextual and situational nature of the concept of 'ability', particularly as they relate to what bodies can and should be, and what they can and should do (Evans and Penney 2008). It also goes some way to challenging the hegemonic positive eugenics perspective that considers ability as innate and fixed (Kirk 1998), by highlighting its social character and unstable nature. Wood View FC provided a space for more diverse and differentiated interpretations of bodies as bio-socio and aesthetic entities. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the agents at Wood View FC – coach, parents and other players – had constructed their own hierarchy of ability which positioned Jack at the top. Saying that, it was significant that Jack's abilities were no longer being judged through an ableist lens (Maher, Haegele, and Sparkes 2021), which in turn impacted positively on his perception self-value. White and Mackenzie-Davey (2003) defined feeling valued as 'a positive affective response arising from a confirmation, within a congruent set of criteria, of an individual's possession of the qualities on which worth or desirability depends' (p. 228). Thus, Jack's transition from value-less to value-able was because he possessed the footballing qualities that were desirable to both his teammates and new coach. It would be unfair and inaccurate to suggest, however, that Jack would have been less valued and less accepted if he did not possess such capabilities. Indeed, from what Jack suggested, the coach and players at Wood View FC were welcoming and accepting of all newcomers, which according to Pesonen (2016) is crucial for the development and fostering of supportive climates. This is not to say of course that mainstream football teams are not or cannot be accepting of all players, including disabled players. However, for this to happen, the personal and professional beliefs, values and behaviours of all stakeholders must align with creating welcoming and accepting spaces (Pesonen 2016), which was not the case at Rudston Rovers because of the increasing prevalence of an ableist competitive, performance culture.

Concluding thoughts

According to post-structural feminist Rosi Braidotti (2013), the body is neither a biological nor sociological category. Rather, bodies are a field of interface where intersecting symbolic and material forces

converge, and multiple codes of disability, class, sex, and race are inscribed. By accepting this mode of thinking and line of enquiry, we have analysed Jack's body in relation to the ableist values, ideologies and behaviours associated with inclusion in, and exclusion from, a mainstream and CP football team. This allowed us to reflect on, as Braidotti (2013) encourages us to, the value placed on Jack's body and abilities, and to recast him as an embodied entity in two different cultural contexts. This served to disrupt the ableist normative perception of what (able) bodies should look like and how they should move. We encourage sport, physical activity, and physical education practitioners to do the same. Otherwise, biological determinist views will continue to cast disabled bodies as flawed and thus morally bad (Goodley 2017) rather than socio-cultural transient entities that are neither good nor bad, but live in different contexts and spaces. Here, we have focused on embodied experiences in and transition across sporting contexts. Future research could explore the influence of transition from mainstream physical activity or physical education settings to so-called adapted physical activity or education settings, or visa-versa, on feelings of belonging among disabled young people. This focus will help us as a research community to better understand how sport, physical activity and education policy decisions and established practices in these contexts shape feelings of belonging among disabled young people, which is important given that feeling that you belong, are accepted, and valued have been identified as core human needs (Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013) and essential to organisational and individual claims about being inclusive (Maher and Haegele 2021).

Jack's story enabled us to consider exclusion and inclusion in a more nuanced and sophisticated way than has previously been the case in academic literature. The ways Jack felt in and the meanings he constructed about his experiences at Rudston Rovers and Wood View FC allowed us to critique hegemonic, often taken-for-granted, conceptualisations of exclusion and inclusion that we believe are narrow, parochial, restrictive, and deterministic. As part of that critique, we encourage our readers to consider inclusion, as Haegele and Maher (2021) do, as intersubjective experiences associated with feelings of belonging, acceptance and value that are dynamic and in flux. This allows scholars and practitioners to move beyond considerations of inclusion as being tied to the (sports) contexts and spaces that disabled people have access to. How precisely sports environments and patterned relationships can be constructed that foster a sense of shared belonging, acceptance, and value among all young people, both disabled and non-disabled, is something for future researchers to explore. We argue, like Morrison et al. (2020) have, that the concept of embodied belonging can help us to move researchers beyond a simple critique of disabling socio-spatial power relations towards the construction of new knowledge that enhances understandings of disability, place, and space. For us, the experiences and voice of Jack was critical to this endeavour, and we strongly encourage other academics and practitioners to centre the experiences and amplifying the voices of disabled young people in sport, physical activity, and physical education. While the perspective of key stakeholders such as sports coaches and physical education teachers is valuable, too much of the extant literature centres the beliefs and behaviours of adults, very few of whom can claim lived and embodied knowledge of disability.

Do we still have your attention? Have you been interested in, and do you care about, what you have read? If the answer to both questions is yes, then our use of creative non-fiction and the subsequent discussion has served their purpose. According to Gutkind (1997), the aim of creative non-fiction is to capture a subject so that the most resistant reader will be interested in learning more about it. By taking our cue from Sparkes (1997), we used creative non-fiction to provide powerful insights into the embodied experiences of Jack to inform, awaken and disturb our readers by illustrating their involvement in ableist systems and practices, some or much of which they may not be consciously aware. The ways and extent to which we achieved these aims and thus the value of us using creative non-fiction should be decided by our readers.

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Notes on contributors

Anthony J. Maher is director of research and professor of special educational needs, disability and inclusion at Leeds Beckett University, UK.

Alan Thomson is senior lecturer in sport and physical education at University of Central Lancashire, UK.

Joanne McVeigh is senior lecturer of physical education and school sport at Edge Hill University, UK.

Jack Knight in an independent researcher.

ORCID

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

Joanne McVeigh  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7759-4466>

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