

‘Once upon a time’. Exploring the possibilities and limitations for inclusive PE through creative writing: A tale of exclusion, integration and inclusion

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Abstract

This article aims to show and make explicit the exclusion sometimes experienced by children with disabilities and obesity in physical activity (PA) and physical education (PE). Using empirical data from our previous qualitative work, we have engaged in a process of creative writing to present a tale that exhibits how exclusion is experienced by students in PA and PE, as well as ways in which students' integration and inclusion could be fulfilled. The tale presented in this article draws from data generated in in-depth interviews, focus groups and field notes to recreate the experiences of three composite characters: Will, a student with osteogenesis imperfecta; Ella, a wheelchair user; and Josh, a child with obesity. To conclude, we present some evidence-based pedagogical approaches that may be useful for PE teachers, PA practitioners and other stakeholders to foster inclusion, social justice and equality when working with children with disabilities and obesity.

Keywords

Disability, physical education, creative analytical practices, inclusion, teacher education

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'I can't stand the humiliation of playing tag': A tale of exclusion

After three days of persistent rain, the sun finally breaks through the gloom. As is customary during warmer days, the park is bustling with life; people walk their dogs, while the grass is invaded by picnic blankets, barbecues, and groups of friends listening to music under a radiant sun. The school day is over, and children release their pent-up energy among the swings, slides and climbing frames. The colourful tangle caused by flying balls and endless scooter races draws a smile from most passers-by. A sure sign of a carefree youth, the sound of vitality emanates from the park. The idealistic picture of childhood: a time of playfulness and happiness.

But not for Ella. The commotion distracts even the most observant from her physical existence. In contrast to the playful movements of the other children, she remains motionless, watching on despairingly. She couldn't possibly join in; the uneven surface makes it difficult for her to manoeuvre her wheelchair. She therefore sits quietly on the periphery, as she always does. 'There's no point in even trying', she thinks to herself. 'This is just how it is'.

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During physical education During PE the next day, Ella's classmates are playing tag. Josh is 'it', and the other children are running away from him to avoid being tagged. His bright red face and breathlessness do little to conceal the uneasiness of his physical movements. Ella is surprised to see Josh playing, she misses her friend and usual companion during PE. Due to his size, Josh doesn't usually take part, but on this occasion, Ella is pleased to see him getting involved.

In a hopeless pursuit of others, Josh is close to fainting and contemplates giving up. Then he sees the rudimentary movements of a girl seemingly slower than his own. She quickly becomes his target. Knowing she can't escape, the girl uses Ella and her wheelchair as a shield. Neither seek permission before handling Ella's chair in their game of cat and mouse. Josh jerks to his right, and the girl dodges in the opposite direction. Josh moves to his left as the other children close in, circling the trio as they perform their graceless dance. Everybody watches as Josh doesn't give up, and although Ella remains at the centre of this struggle, her disapproval is writ large across her face, and her protestations go unheard.

The girl is distracted by the laughs of the circling crowd so Josh takes his chance. He throws himself towards the girl, using Ella for leverage. Not only does he fail to tag the girl, but in his herculean attempt he also kicks the book Ella was peacefully reading on the sidelines, before she suddenly became the object of their game. Josh, embarrassed, apologises to Ella, while the girl takes her chance to run away. The other children are laughing at the unfolding scene, while Ella wishes she could be sat quietly back on the periphery.

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Later that day, children excitedly fill the playground after school, waiting to be picked up by their parents. They break out into impromptu playfulness; a group of boys kick a ball against a wall, while another group chase each other amongst the playground markings. In a secluded part of the playground, with the hushed sound of playfulness in the background, Ella and Josh flick through a comic together. Annoyed with earlier events, Ella has been mulling over this moment and takes her chance to reproach Josh's earlier actions:

'That was quite a whack you gave me earlier', she says.

'I'm sorry Ella, but I can't stand the humiliation of playing tag', Josh responds.

Ella reflects solemnly, she has some sympathy for Josh, but his own misfortune does little to appease hers. Without realising it, absorbed as they are in the moment, Will approaches them and says 'Hi'. He is unaware of earlier events, because he is exempt from PE due to the risk of his bones breaking. He suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta, so his bones are fragile and break easily.

Ella returns his greetings and asks: 'We haven't seen you all day, where have you been?'

'I've been at the hospital, having one test after another. I have to have more surgery, you know', he explains.

Without giving it much more thought, the three friends revert their attention to the comic. Meanwhile, a group of parents have noticed Will and make him the object of their gossip:

'Poor boy, I feel so sorry for him', one mum says.

'It's really unfortunate', says another dad. 'I don't know why he is attending this school; it's so dangerous for him!'

'They say that he fits in, and he's a good student', responds the woman.

'I know, but can you imagine if he was your son? What if he breaks his arm? It would be so upsetting, how would you comfort him?', continues the man.

'So what does he do during PE then?', someone else asks.

'Rumour has it, he doesn't take part. Instead, he does physio', the mother explains.

'I can do it!': A tale of integration

Upon the sounding of the school bell, the English teacher heaves a sigh of relief and thinks to herself: 'go on kids, go and let off some steam'. Eager for PE, some of the children rush out into the playground to be greeted by Mr Fredrickson. Ella had to get the lift, so she joins the session halfway through the warm-up. Having not noticed her absence originally, Mr Fredrickson greets her politely before turning back towards the sea of motion in the playground. Following her normal routine in PE, Ella stays out of the way so that she's not a nuisance. She heads over to the sidelines, away from any of the action and where Will is also waiting. He is, with Josh, her eternal companion of exclusion. They watch how their classmates run, whilst they get bored reading the notes about muscles and joints that Mr Fredrickson has handed over to them. Ella used to get upset about not being able to join in, but she's now learned to live with it.

Meanwhile, amongst the clamour of PE, the dynamics of the playground expose their nastier tendencies:

'Eh, Big Josh, try to run a bit faster!', howls Ben, one of the cool sporty kids in the class.

The premeditated callousness of the other children has the effect of reducing Josh's efforts to a walk, but something gently simmers inside him. Immediately, another boy shouts: 'Josh, you are so fat!'

It's too much. His anger boils over, and he momentarily loses control and chases his classmates, fully intent on starting a fight. But the other kids are faster and more agile, and easily evade Josh. He is left with no choice but to give up his attempt at revenge, while the embarrassment of it all has reduced him to a saunter.

Ella gazes hopelessly at Josh. She still doesn't like it when the others are mean about his weight. She particularly hates it when Mr Fredrickson ignores the situation, doing nothing other than attentively laying out cones.

Arranging the children amongst the cones, Mr Fredrickson explains the motor skill-based drill. One by one, they must zig-zag between the cones, until they complete the course he has laid out. The next child can only start when he says so. To encourage engagement, Mr Fredrickson incorporates variation into the game by adding different elements such as a walk backwards, a run holding a ball, a hop, and closing one eye.

Sat motionless, Ella watches her classmates move between the intricately laid out cones, her desire to take part having no bearing on her status as a spectator. Ella never participates in PE, not since her parents handed that letter to Mr Fredrickson. Her condition hinders her from being physically active and based on the limitations imposed by the medical note, Mr Fredrickson seems unable to adapt the activities to facilitate her participation.

Ella isn't about to conform with the expectations of others around her. She is just as aware of her capabilities as she is of her physical limitations. She approaches Mr Fredrickson and confidently exclaims:

'I can do this!'

'Yes, I am sure you can, but it is too dangerous for you. Also, someone may trip over your chair'.

Still to be convinced, Mr Fredrickson dispenses with two more reasons that Ella is a regular on the sidelines during PE:

'It will take you too long to complete the drill. What if something happens and your parents put in a complaint?'

However, nothing will hold Ella back, and whilst Mr Fredrickson addresses the rest of the class, Ella propels her chair towards the cones and zig-zags her way successfully through the drill.

'SEE!', she yells towards Mr Fredrickson. 'I told you I could do it!'. In a moment of realisation, and if only for herself, she hollers: 'I can do it!'.

All the while, her classmates look on with astonishment. They had never seen Ella take part before. The most enthused is Will; having shared countless moments of boredom with Ella on the sidelines, he effusively cheers her on. Mr Fredrickson's excuses for keeping Ella on the sidelines don't seem justifiable. He backs down, and no longer objects to Ella's involvement:

'Okay', Mr Fredrickson concedes: 'But don't hurt yourself'. Moments pass before he adds. 'I don't want to be in trouble with your parents'.

Ella's happiness etches across her face. This is the first time she has taken part in PE. Her joy is overt and contagious; even some of her classmates revel in the emotional high.

Mr Fredrickson introduces more variations to the drill with Ella now taking part in each one. She glides down the course circling each cone, before completing the course again, this time in pairs. Ella completes every new variation to the course that Mr Fredrickson sets. However, some children – particularly the sportiest – become a little bored and start to disengage.

Mr Fredrickson notices this, and decides to revert to his tried and trusted methods:

'Okay guys', he projects across the playground as his eyes scan the sea of faces.

'The fun starts now. Ben! Andrew!' he shouts, having located his two favourite sporty children from the football academy he runs: 'Make up two teams please! Relay race!'

Ben and Andrew stand in front of the other children, and with the power bestowed on them as captains, they start to select their teams. As the class forms a line, the sporty boys make themselves known by inflating their chests and stretching their arms to the sky, while the bodies of others only express their anxieties. With each passing selection, the symbolic value of the unselected decreases. As the line of children dwindles, Ben and Andrew increasingly lose their enthusiasm. The unwanted are the usual group of girls, and some boys, while Ella's fate seems inevitable.

Scanning the remaining faces, and with a hidden meaning to his question, Ben asks Mr Fredrickson: 'Are Big Josh and Ella playing?'

Aware that Ben and Andrew are concerned about the quality of their respective teams, Mr Fredrickson concedes:

'Josh', he mumbles. 'You've already run a lot today, have a rest'. He turns toward Ella, only partially aware of his own shortcomings: 'you can officiate if you want, but you can't take part'. Mr Fredrickson pauses before adding: 'you are not quick enough to take part in this race without hurting yourself'.

Pleased with the outcome, Ben and Andrew start to organise their teams. Reduced to spectators, Ella and Josh move to the sidelines where Will fills in his notebook. With a steely determination across her face, and the tension manifesting in her clenched fists, Ella thinks to herself: 'I'll do it on my own then'.

Noticing a pile of unattended PE equipment close by, Ella comes up with her own drill. She ushers Josh into action, and both lay out an intricate web of cones. They move freely between them and enjoy this shared space, free from competition and prejudice:

'Come on Will. Fancy joining us?', Ella asks.

'I can't, I'd like to though. But if something happens to me, my parents will be mad at me', he answers sadly.

Meanwhile, in sight of Ella and Josh, the drill supervised by Mr Fredrickson is reaching a crescendo of competitiveness, orchestrated on the playground by Ben and Andrew. As they hear Ella's giggles, some of the girls decide to join in with Ella and Josh. The relaxed nature of Ella's drill soon attracts others, and a mutiny of sorts is born. Soon, nearly as many children are playing with Ella

and Josh as are in the main race. A puzzled Mr Fredrickson recognises this undermines his authority: 'I have to do something. They are showing me up', he thinks to himself.

'We can do it!': A tale of inclusion

PE again. Ella heads out to the playground and readies herself to sit on the sidelines. As she takes up her normal position next to Josh and Will, she surveys the playground and its inhabitants. She glances at an unfamiliar face, then does a double take, wondering who this new person is:

'Who is that?', Ella queries.

'She is from the university apparently. She is doing a student placement and is helping Mr Fredrickson', responds Will.

With a puzzled expression written across her face, Ella continues: 'Help him with what?'

'To help him improve, I guess', Will shoots back.

Josh intervenes and explains that she isn't the first: 'She is doing it for her studies; at least that's what the last one said'.

Intrigued by her presence, Ella thinks to herself: 'She looks nice', and wonders what will come of today's PE lesson.

At that moment, Mr Fredrickson's voice interrupts Ella's private thoughts, and dampens the commotion encircling her:

'Come on boys, everybody come here!', he shouts in his usual tone. Remembering the presence of the university student, he corrects himself: 'Boys and girls I mean'.

The class gathers around Mr Fredrickson, in the middle of the football pitch marked out in the playground, leaving Ella, Will and Josh as spectators in their usual spot. But only seconds pass before they are approached by the student:

'Hi, my name is Ms Edmondson, would you mind joining the rest of us?'

The three friends start to make their way to the middle, but they don't get far before Ella's curiosity gets the better of her:

'What are you doing here?' Ella questions, without realising her own curtness.

Surprised by her directness, Ms Edmondson explains that she is studying to be a PE teacher, before adding: 'I will be with you for the next three months doing PE lessons with Mr Fredrickson'.

Seizing an opportunity to answer her own curiosities, Ms Edmondson continues:

'By the way, what do you usually do in class?'

'Not much', Ella says glumly.

‘Do you ever participate?’

‘Sometimes’, Josh responds, joining the conversation.

‘Never!’, Will exclaims; ‘I have a brittle bone disease and the doctor won’t let me do any PE’.

These comments leave her somewhat surprised. It goes against what she has been taught at university:

‘I have never participated either’, Ella chimes in, ‘But just last week, Josh and I did our own thing, and we had fun completing a circuit we made up’.

Encouraged by their comments, and fascinated by Ella’s energy, Ms Edmondson leads them into the middle to join the rest of the children. She understands the need to take into account the ‘students’ voices’. They insist on this at the university, and she wonders if she will get a chance to ask them about their wishes and desires in relation to PE. But she will do this later in her placement.

In today’s session only Josh takes part, as Ella and Will make their way back to their usual spot. Throughout the session, Mr Fredrickson thinks that perhaps he should have spoken with them more. He is also intrigued to see if Ms Edmondson will include them in the activities in the classes she will lead. At the end of the last session, they both sit down to review the day’s events.

‘I saw you talking with Ella and her friends earlier?’

‘I have always been interested in the topic of inclusion, and at the university they insist we focus on it’.

Feeling the need to go on the defensive, Mr Fredrickson reminds Ms Edmondson that in his day, nobody talked about inclusion, before asking: ‘So do you think there is anything you can do to include Ella, Josh and Will in PE?’ Before Ms Edmondson can respond, Mr Fredrickson adds: ‘Remember, these are three students and we have to attend to a whole class’.

‘A lot of things can be done’, Ms Edmondson responds, pleased to be given a chance to air her recently acquired knowledge. ‘The first thing is to listen to them. We can also vary the content and plan other types of activities that require different skills. Not everything is about motor skills. We could also design classes based on cooperative learning’.

‘But’, Mr Fredrickson interrupts, ‘Will has a medical condition that prevents him from participating, so we would need to speak to his parents first’.

‘I know, Will is a tricky one, and it won’t be easy but it’s worth a try’, Ms Edmondson contends. ‘I am planning to write my dissertation about cooperative learning, so my tutor will be able to help us too’.

‘Cooperative learning? But how do you get students to get involved without competition?’

‘I am not suggesting removing competition, but instead of competing against each other, they all can compete together to overcome a challenge. It is a very inclusive practice. I designed a few sessions on cooperative learning last year for one of my modules, would you want me to deliver one of them?’

'Sounds good, can you do it tomorrow?', Mr Fredrickson responds. 'Let me see what they are teaching you lot at the university'.

...

The next day, Ella, Josh and Will have PE again. Before the lesson begins, Ms Edmondson approaches the three friends.

'Would you like to take part, guys?', she asks. 'I'm taking the class today'.

They exchange stares, their eyes making visible their shock and excitement. Ella, a sort of unelected spokesperson for the group, summons up a hushed 'yes' before Ms Edmondson adds:

'Good, because this matters to you too. From today, we are going to try to get you formally involved in PE, okay?'

Ella bursts with joy at the simple words Mrs Edmondson has just uttered: 'I'm going to participate!!'

Ella, Josh and Will join their other classmates as Mr Fredrickson addresses the group:

'Okay everybody; today's lesson will be led by Ms Edmondson. She will take over from here'. Ms Edmondson confidently steps forward; 'right guys, we are going to get into three teams'.

Ben and Andrew, right on cue, step forward, but this is no longer the routine they are familiar with, and what Ms Edmondson says next leaves them moving back in line:

'Guys, teams will be selected randomly today, so we don't need you as captains'.

Ms Edmondson sorts the class into groups and then distributes cards between them, with a cooperative challenge written on each one. Instead of competition and team sports, other activities such as dancing and cooperative learning dominate this approach. She has learned that these activities are the cornerstones of inclusive pedagogies in PE.

While each group gets together and reads the challenge they have been given, Will asks Ms Edmondson:

'Am I going to take part?'

'Not today', Ms Edmondson says with some resignation. She explains that because of his condition they need to speak with his family and the doctors first, but that if everyone agrees, he will be able to take part soon.

'But for today we have prepared some games for you to do by yourself, is that okay?'

With the same look of resignation, Will nods.

Whilst the children play, Mr Fredrickson approaches Ms Edmondson as she carefully takes notes of the session. With a somewhat distant tone, Mr Fredrickson comments: 'It looks like they are having fun'.

Ms Edmondson says:

‘They are, and they are not competing against each other. It’s nice to see them working together and talking to each other. Ella and Josh are nicely getting on with it. Hopefully we will see Will in action soon too!’

‘Ella is really embracing the task isn’t she?!’, Mr Fredrickson rhetorically asks.

Ella is actively participating with her group and exchanges comments about overcoming the challenge before them. Mr Fredrickson can hear Ella confidently assert her suggestions to the rest of the group. The unfolding events leave Mr Fredrickson speechless; he watches Ella proceed to lead her group through the challenge, the air filled with shrieks of playfulness, while she throws and catches whatever comes her way.

Whilst the two teachers observe the course of the session, Ms Edmondson comments:

‘Have you seen Josh’s face? He is so happy’.

Mr Fredrickson’s thoughts had exclusively been with Ella, but he is now thinking of all those times Josh sat out of PE looking forlorn. Meanwhile, Ms Edmondson continues to make notes. Observing her with great curiosity, Mr Fredrickson asks her:

‘What do you write about?’

‘Just writing down some reflections about the session. These notes will be useful in future lessons and I can also use them for my dissertation’, Ms Edmondson explains. ‘It can help me develop a critical self-awareness to improve my teaching’.

The session is coming to an end, and the whole class is exuberant and in motion. A delighted Mr Fredrickson is feeling optimistic and hopeful. But Ms Edmondson interrupts his thoughts again:

‘By the way, did you get anywhere with Will’s family?’

‘They seem receptive’, Mr Fredrickson responds. ‘They do not object to him participating in PE, but only if the doctor supervises him. But without doctor supervision, they prefer him to play alone’.

‘Well at least he’s doing something now, it’s always better than just sitting there watching’, Ms Edmondson reflects. ‘I agree’, Mr Fredrickson concludes. ‘But including him in PE will be an ongoing challenge’.

Brief methodological notes

In academic writing, it seems necessary to include long theoretical introductions to give stories an academic touch, moving them away from ‘simple literature’ (Sparkes, 2000). Our decision to place the tale at the beginning of this article is intentional, and like Svendby and Dowling (2013) have

argued, we prefer these stories – as simple literature – to speak for themselves. Furthermore, in one of his most famous books, Paulo Freire states:

I've always thought that the aesthetic merit of language should be pursued by all of us, regardless of whether we are rigorous scientists or not. Rigour in research and our attempts to understand the world is not incompatible with the aesthetic form in which those discoveries are expressed. (Freire, 2004: 99)

Paulo Freire's premise not only encourages us to write aesthetically, but also introduces narrative research. According to Denzin (1997), stories are not 'out there', waiting to be told. Instead, they must be constructed. Therefore, narrative research is a different way of constructing new knowledge; it can facilitate public engagement by reaching non-academic audiences, and it expands the limits of scientific standards (Goodall, 2010; Richardson, 2000). However, narrative research continues to be a generic concept that encompasses different epistemological and even ontological positions, as Dowling et al. (2015) have shown. Such flexibility makes it possible to adopt multiple strategies and styles when presenting research data, including confessional stories, poetry, ethnodrama or autoethnography (Sparkes, 2002).

The tale we have presented in this paper is based on systematically collected empirical data and shaped aesthetically by the authors. To illustrate, Ella was created with data collected in a research project led by the first author about a student in a wheelchair, which subsequently ended up as a life story (Martos-García and Monforte, 2019). Will's character was constructed from data the first author collected while working in PE settings with a student with brittle bone disease (Martos-García and Valencia-Peris, 2016; Sparkes et al., 2019). Finally, Josh derived from the data gathered during interviews with adult men with obesity who talked about their experiences of being 'big' in PE settings (Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2016, 2018). The story is factual in content, but fictional in form (Smith et al., 2016; Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Sparkes (2002) identifies this way of representing data as creative non-fiction. For him, creative non-fictions are written and interpreted by the researcher who creates the story, meaning that the writer of creative non-fiction is not only a researcher, but also a critic who makes judgements about writing.

The above stories also include fictional passages that have been created by us. Similar to Svendby (2016), we have combined real experiences with our own interpretations. The aim of this is primarily aesthetic, as this is a key criterion in creative fiction (Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 1997). The use of creative writing as narrative research allows us to serve two purposes: (i) through creative writing (i.e. fiction) we have been able to create composite characters and compress experiences into unique scenes; and (ii) these scenes make the text flow (Caulley, 2008), whilst highlighting connections between one person's story and a broader social phenomenon (Martos-García and Monforte, 2019).

Thus, the above tale has recreated the experiences of the participants as they were told to the researchers in the original interviews, or as noted during participant observations. In doing this, we believe we have achieved a narrative rhythm that gives coherence and flow to each part of the story, which also enables the tale to work as a whole. We have followed Caulley's (2008) lead in aiming to involve the reader and to hook them into continuing with the tale and Smith et al. (2015) with regard to the plot of the story, the use of credible characters, and the contextualisation of the stories. We have also followed Sparkes (2002) by ensuring the clear presence of the storyteller (ourselves) in the stories. In literary terms, this is known as the 'omniscient narrator',

which has allowed us to introduce a critical element to each story (see ‘Practical implications’ section).

As authors, we worked collaboratively to create the stories. According to Lozano-Sufrategui and Carless (2017), this has allowed us to gain new insights and understandings, in our case about inclusion and exclusion in PE. In creating the story and writing the manuscript, we took the following steps. First, we created the characters, like Orr et al. (2021) did. To do so, and based on our previous research, we wrote down on a table the key characteristics that we believed each student should have. We held several discussions about this as a team, and we edited the table on numerous occasions until we all agreed on how each composite character represented the original data. Second, we put together a story that we believed was coherent, logical, and meaningful. As explained by Smith et al. (2013: 2048), this allowed us to check ‘for the accuracy of research findings within each story along with the cohesiveness, evocation, concision, illumination, social significance and aesthetic value of them’. Third, we checked that the story stayed close to the aims of the research and did justice to the empirical data we had. To conclude, we shared the story with a colleague who is familiar with narrative and qualitative work and who also provided feedback on the story.

Ethical considerations

Neither the use of empirical data nor the use of the term ‘fiction’ absolves authors from ethical dilemmas. In fact, it demands a heightened level of critical and reflexive awareness on the part of the authors, because we appropriate the voice of others to tell their reality. In other words, ‘Contradictions litter all narrative forms. And all narratives about Others both inscribe and resist othering’ (Fine, 1994: 75).

At this point, it seems appropriate to explain that we have followed some of the advice provided by Smith (2016), such as explaining our ethical dilemmas (in this section), showing theory (through the story and after it), trying to show rather than tell, using dialogues, constructing the story in an evocative way and paying attention to the embodiment dimension. Also, despite having written the story ourselves, we have tried to do so ‘with ethical sensitivity and to remain “true” to the participants’ words’ (Svendby and Dowling, 2013: 6).

Moreover, we have also carried out what Smith and McGannon (2018) call ‘member reflections’, a strategy to increase rigour and promote ethical practices. This group reflection has occurred both in the writing of this article and in previous publications, as well as with the participants involved in the different research projects.

Consequently, during the process of writing the story, we have been mindful of doing justice to Ella’s, Will’s and Josh’s voices. Nevertheless, our attempt to be critical and reflexive entails some risks, not only for us, but also for the reader. In our case, although writing creatively allows us to be imaginative, we are aware of the boundaries imagination can pose in creative, but still academic, work. One of these boundaries is to fairly represent the voices of those people our work is talking about. As previously highlighted, the original data this research draws on also have their own limits. Furthermore, our own biographies, embodiment and perspectives (Boyd, 2008; DeLuca and Maddox, 2016; Smith, 2008) also restrict what we have been able to do with and to the story. For example, we identify ourselves as able-bodied, physically fit and with high levels of motor competence.

With regard to our readership (e.g. PE teacher education (PETE) students), pedagogical practices such as those that challenge the status quo, stir up memories and question certain practices that are seen as ‘normal’, are not free of problems. Shelley and McCuaig (2018) wrote about the ‘pedagogy

of discomfort’ as a type of teaching that tries to ‘move students out of their comfort zones, to trouble, disturb or unsettle’ (p. 517); thus, narratives can trigger deep personal and identity disruptions (Devís-Devís and Sparkes, 1999; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2018). This could be the case with any PE teacher like Mr Fredrickson who reads this story, or people living with obesity who read how Josh is being referred to as ‘Big Josh’.

However, we believe that taking these risks is worthwhile if we are to transform the realities we have presented in this article. As suggested by Fitzgerald (2005), superficial remedies do not change anything, and critical pedagogies are in debt with students with disabilities (Erevelles, 2000).

Another ethical consideration relates to the limits of the imagination. Our own able-bodiedness may have narrowed our possible collective imagination (Smith, 2008), which in turn may have shaped our creativity. Thus, in this section, we reflect on the key methodological decisions that have informed this article, including a discussion about the steps involved in the write-up of this research. Some critics of our work may find the social injustices displayed in the above story unbelievable. Therefore, to enhance the transparency, resonance and believability of our work, we have pointed the reader to the published research that includes the empirical data supporting the abovementioned events. In this sense, and as Smith et al. (2015) note, stories have the capacity to be useful for the dissemination of evidence-based knowledge. This connection with reality is evident in creative non-fiction, a genre that aims to generate ‘authentic understandings’, where the reader can – in their own ways – live through the stories that they are immersed in (Denzin, 1994). Hence, even if Ella, Josh and Will do not exist as such and have not met each other before, their stories represent the reality of many children facing barriers to inclusion, as shown by our previously published research.

Some reflections

At this point, it is necessary to remind the reader of the pedagogical aim of this article. As Fitzpatrick (2018) suggested when writing about poetry, the story in this article has been created to be directly used in teacher education programmes. We have explicitly placed this text within the field of critical and reflexive PETE (Dowling et al., 2015). Others before us have walked this path, using various kinds of narratives for it (e.g. Casey and Schaefer, 2016; Oliver et al., 2021; Sparkes, 1997; Svendby, 2016). Therefore, its aim is eminently critical, by not only offering a credible story, but also by promoting empathy and providing potential solutions to the everlasting learning-related barriers caused by exclusion.

Using creative writing based on empirical data, this paper has exhibited the exclusion that children with disabilities and obesity may experience in physical activity (PA) and PE settings (see also Haeghele and Maher, 2021). By showcasing three examples of exclusion, integration and inclusion, we show PE teachers, PA practitioners and other relevant stakeholders the types of practices that they may want to transform. Furthermore, we have suggested some ways in which social justice and equity can be achieved by implementing inclusive pedagogies, such as: using cooperative learning; appropriate teacher education; the importance of listening to students’ voices; reflexive education, for example, using a diary to take notes; and the importance of co-education. Based on our personal and professional experience, as well as the research literature, these practices should be promoted to move towards inclusive education. What follows is a discussion of how this research may contribute to knowledge in critical and reflexive PETE, as well as how it may help PA and PE stakeholders to promote inclusion.

First, the story has followed evident aesthetic parameters. By choosing to represent the data using creative non-fiction, based on the voices of students with disabilities, we believe we have been able to engage the reader viscerally and stimulate their emotions (Frank, 2010; Svendby, 2016). In other words, we have created a series of scenes, which, in Caulley's words are 'essential to creative non-fiction – a way of creating a high sense of realism, of life, of movement, of action' (2008: 429). The reason for this is to try to stimulate the feelings and emotions of the readers, to evoke; however, this does not depend so much on the writer, but on the reader. Echoing Fassin (2014), we have aimed to make the reading of this article more engaging than some traditional realist tales.

Second, a consequence of the empathetic qualities of our work is its potential to be convincing, believable and therefore transformative. In a similar way as Svendby (2016) and Haegele and Maher (2021), if our work has been able to trigger the reader's emotions, empathy and understanding towards children who may be the target of unfair treatment, then we hope it will have invited these key stakeholders to change, challenge and mitigate exclusionary practices. Should this be the case, we will have achieved a key aim of this research, which is to make explicit social injustices in PE and PA.

Third, not only is our story written in a way that invites the reader to act, but it also provides potential solutions to some of the learning-related barriers caused by exclusion. Therefore, there are key pedagogical learnings that can be drawn from our work. For example, the narrative presented above can be used as a pedagogical tool to enrich our awareness, understanding and conversations regarding practices and discourses in PE. For Svendby (2016: 66), 'narrative ways of knowing might eventually contribute to re-storying education and include those who are on the margins', such as Josh, Will and Ella. For these reasons, our work can be used in teacher education programmes framed within critical and reflexive PETE (Dowling et al., 2015). The next section shows how this research can be used in those programmes.

Practical implications

Some parts within this article are worthy of discussion both in PE lessons and PETE programmes. Some of these are explicit, others implicit, and others are related to the hidden curriculum. However, it is not our aim to write a guidebook on how to design inclusive PE classes. Furthermore, a one-size-fits-all approach to inclusivity in PE – or anywhere else in the social world – is just not possible, given the heterogeneous nature of disability itself. Thus, our work encourages readers to 'think with the story' so that they can draw their own conclusions. We hope this sense of autonomy will also encourage some, if not all, to act against injustices in ways that resonate with them. By presenting our work in this way, we believe that we can use it in our own teaching to understand what students see as discrimination and to explore the ways in which they will act in those situations. Such pedagogical approaches could be followed by a group discussion and reflection on topics related to diversity, injustice, our personal and collective responsibility, and other aspects that the students may have identified that are worthy of discussion. Furthermore, to conclude, this could be followed by a proposal on the potential solutions that could be applied in the context of the story.

The events narrated in the first part of the story are explicitly related to exclusion, where Ella, Josh and Will are asked to work independently from the main group (Gordon, 2010) or to watch others (Bredahl, 2013). When encouraged to participate, it is under a reductionist vision of motor ability (Evans, 2004). This can make students with disabilities and/or students living with

obesity become the object of ridicule, as experienced by Josh when playing tag. Calling Josh 'Big' is another way to draw attention to this type of discrimination, in this case through language.

The second part is about integration, where Josh, Ella and Will share a context and have some role within the group, yet their invisibility is still very visible. This is evident when Ella starts her own version of PE. The third part is a tale of inclusion which could become a useful topic for debate in PETE programmes. For example, future PE teachers could reflect on the suitability of involving students with disabilities in highly technical and competitive sessions, ways of adapting sessions to make them more inclusive, and the distribution of power and inequality that this may entail (DePauw and Doll-Tepper, 2000).

Other key elements of the story that may be the topic of discussion in PETE programmes include the low status of PE as a subject, its focus on technical features and the 'normalisation' of leaving students with disabilities on the sidelines. The story also addresses other socially important injustices such as fatphobia (Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2016) or the little attention that is being paid to forming groups in PE lessons.

We believe that the aforementioned practical implications of our work can help improve PE teachers' education, which often fails to meet the requirements of inclusive education (Fitzgerald, 2006; Flem et al., 2004; Morley et al., 2021). The story evolves from a scenario of exclusion towards one that is typical of inclusive education. In the final part of the tale, we have tried to make social injustices explicit by unveiling certain practices that can make PE a discriminatory experience for certain individuals in society. This has included different ways of acting that can support the development of an alternative, more inclusive, way of understanding and implementing PE lessons.

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