



Perceptions of inclusion in physical activity and physical education from the perspective of Finnish students

 Christopher Mihajlovic  . Rohräcker Centre for Learning and Consulting. Esslingen a.N., Germany.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the subjective experience of inclusion in physical activity from the perspective of Finnish students with and without disabilities ($n = 10$). A qualitative approach based on written interviews served to reconstruct potentials and challenges of physical activities and physical education. The interviews were qualitatively content analysed using a deductive-inductive approach. The results of the study showed that inclusion, in general, is closely connected to friendships and a sense of belonging for the study participants. In addition to social relationships, motor skills also impacted on students' opportunities of participating in school-based physical activities. While the pedagogical practices of teachers may maximize student participation in PE, recess situations have greater potential for exclusion. Furthermore, gender-specific aspects played a more significant role in the current study in comparison to the perception of special needs of the participants with disabilities.

Keywords: Sport health, Disability studies, Interviewing, Qualitative research, Pedagogy.

Cite this article as:

Mihajlovic, C. (2025). Perceptions of inclusion in physical activity and physical education from the perspective of Finnish students. *Sustainability and Sports Science Journal*, 3(2), 60-72. <https://doi.org/10.55860/BRIX7358>

 **Corresponding author.** Rohräckerschulzentrum Esslingen, Traifelbergstr. 2, 73734 Esslingen a. N., Germany.

E-mail: c.mihajlovic@sbbzgent-es.de

Submitted for publication September 24, 2024.

Accepted for publication December 06, 2024.

Published January 03, 2024.

[Sustainability and Sports Science Journal](#). ISSN 2990-2975.

© [Asociación Española de Análisis del Rendimiento Deportivo](#). Alicante. Spain.

Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.55860/BRIX7358>

INTRODUCTION

The subjective interpretations of (inclusive) physical education (PE) and physical activity (PA) by individuals with disabilities is a relatively new phenomenon and has become of increasing interest over the past few years. Listening to the voices of people with disabilities can help to provide valuable insights into the ways they experience PA and PE (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Bredahl, 2013; Lamata et al., 2024) and offer the opportunity to facilitate best practices for including these individuals inside and outside of school contexts (Holland et al., 2023; Healy et al., 2013). However, there is still a lack of research taking into account the perspectives of children and youth with and without disabilities (Ruin & Meier, 2018) and broadening the focus of sports and physical activities in different contexts that goes beyond school-based PE (Holland & Haegele, 2021; Holland et al., 2023). The current body of research has mainly examined the reflections of students with certain disabilities, such as visual impairments (Haegele et al., 2018; Ruin, Giese & Haegele, 2021), autism spectrum disorders (Blagrave, 2017; Haegele & Maher, 2022) and physical disabilities (Alves et al., 2018; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). The results of the interview study by Ruin, Giese and Haegele (2021) revealed, from the perspective of students with visual impairments, that the participants were confronted with individually perceived motor challenges (e.g. balancing) and fears in the context of PE. Previous research from the perspective of students with disabilities could also identify various barriers to successful participation in sports and physical activity (Blagrave, 2017; Bredahl, 2013; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010).

The study by Spencer & Cavaliere (2010) showed that social interactions between students with and without disabilities are most likely to occur when friendships exist between the respective students. Bredahl (2013) interviewed a total of 20 adults with various disabilities about their personal experiences regarding their participation in sports and physical activity in Norway. The majority of respondents reported that they were frequently excluded from participating in PE classes by teachers and were often relegated to the role of spectator or assigned individual exercises in separate rooms. This was attributed, among other things, to the teachers' reluctance and missing expertise to adapt classroom activities to the needs of all learners. Several respondents pointed out in this context that they expressed their needs to the teacher but did not feel understood. Thus, the students' individual needs and (dis-)abilities were not adequately taken into account in PE (Bredahl, 2013). In line with the results of Bredahl's study, the research overview by Holland & Haegele (2021) showed, that children and adolescents with disabilities are still often excluded from participating in school-based sports and physical activity due to inappropriate modifications and accommodations. In turn, the study conducted by Lamata et al. (2024) highlighted that the majority of students with disabilities felt included by their peers in the PE class, which is in contrast to the findings obtained in the studies conducted by Healy et al. (2013) and Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson (2010).

The results of the study conducted by Ruin & Meier (2018) taking into account the perspective of both, students with and without disabilities, indicated that the teacher plays a central role in whether the specific needs of learners are taken into account in lesson planning and instruction. Teachers are essential to the quality of experiences of students with disabilities by creating supportive and safe learning environments (Holland & Haegele, 2021). However, attempts to promote inclusion of students with disabilities should start with a reflexive look at the unique needs of each individual student (Holland et al., 2023). Still, more research needs to be done to continue to reveal the perspectives of children with disabilities toward PE and PA, taking into account different disabilities (Holland & Haegele, 2021) and including other dimensions of diversity, such as gender, sexual orientation, and age. Reframing research that expands upon established means of traditional qualitative methods is necessary to include the perspectives of individuals with multiple and more severe disabilities in PE (Fitzgerald, 2007; Bredahl, 2013; Blagrave, 2017).

Yet, no studies, to the knowledge of the author, have explored the perspectives of students in a Finnish school context towards their experiences of belonging in PE and PA. This seems important, as social context and local policies and regulations likely influence the way in which students experience PE (Holland & Haegele, 2021). This article aims to address this research gap and reconstruct potentials and challenges of being included in PA and school-based PE from the perspective of Finnish students with and without disabilities. Consequently, this article is guided by the following research question: How do the study participants experience inclusion in the context of PA and school-based PE?

Conceptual Framework: Inclusion as a sense of belonging and acceptance

In order to understand and analyse the perspective of the participants in the present study, a subjectively shaped understanding of the concept of inclusion was used as the conceptual framework guiding this study (Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Lamata et al., 2024). This understanding is to great extent influenced and shaped by the individual abilities and experiences of the participants (Haegele & Maher, 2023). In recent studies, subjective perspectives on participation and inclusion have been explored primarily in relation to a sense of belonging, acceptance and value (Oldörp et al., 2024; Pesonen, 2016; Pesonen et al., 2015; Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Frederickson et al., 2007). The sense of belonging to other people can be seen as a natural need of every human being in the course of their lifelong development (Maslow, 1962). Within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), the concept of a sense of belonging is not only linked to individual appreciation by others, but also depends on structural conditions (e.g. barrier-free access to public buildings). Following Baumeister & Leary's (1995) understanding, Pesonen (2016) defines the sense for belonging as follows:

“Sense of belonging has been defined in the literature as the extent to which an individual feels socially connected, included, respected, accepted, and supported by others in different social contexts” (Pesonen, 2016, p.6).

This definition suggests that a sense of belonging is a subjective experience that arises in interaction with other people. This feeling can be developed and promoted through active participation and social inclusion. From the perspective of children with disabilities, inclusion is therefore often perceived as a subjective need for belonging and social acceptance and central to its understanding are the feelings and experiences of the individuals (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010; Haegele & Maher, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In view of the above-mentioned points, this research project aimed to understand the students' individual interpretations of inclusion in the context of school-based PE and PA. Due to the methodological difficulties, it is appropriate to refer to this research project as a participatory-oriented project that tried to achieve participation at the individually possible level (Keeley et al., 2019). An orientation towards the respective conditions of the participants was pursued in order to examine individual needs, experiences, and interests from a subjective perspective as best as possible.

Research that expands upon more traditional forms of qualitative methodologies such as participatory action research have been considered useful to take into account the unique needs of study participants with disabilities (Blagrove, 2017; Keeley et al., 2019). In order to take into account the special needs of the participants with disabilities in the present study, written (digital) interviews were conducted with ten students enrolled in public schools in Southern Finland, of which five had certain disabilities. The potential of digital

research approaches, such as written E-Mail based interviews, has recently found its way in qualitative social research (Schiek & Ullrich, 2017). One methodological advantage of written interviews lies in the fact that data categorization can be done more efficiently, as the data is already present in written form and does not have to be transcribed such as in common face-to-face interviews (Meho, 2006). The methodological decision in favour of a written interview instead of a personal interview was also made due to the particular communication needs of several study participants (Keeley et al., 2019). In the present study, the study participants with visual impairments were able to work on the interview questions in digital form with the help of computer-based speech output and their Braille keyboards mostly independently. In comparison to other data collection methods (e.g. face-to-face interviews), there was no time pressure when answering the questions, which some participants appreciated as they had more time to reflect on the questions (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). Moreover, the degree of anonymity or protection offered by an E-Mail based interview offers the prospect of extending interview-based research to interviewer or interviewee who might otherwise consider themselves excluded (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Karchmer, 2001).

Sample

A total of four different schools participated in the study, with a focus on including different types of schools. The schools included two secondary schools (grades 7-9), one primary school (grades 1-6), and a centre for learning and consulting (grades 1-9). The selection of students was realized through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003): The selection of participants was based on characteristics that were regarded relevant for the study. The two diversity dimensions (dis-)ability and gender were particularly considered in the selection of the study participants, as they are of special relevance in sport pedagogical research (Ruin & Stibbe, 2018). A total of ten students with and without disabilities from four different schools participated in the study, including four female students and six male students (Table 1). All students with disabilities were receiving support measures of the third support level ("*special support*") according to the Finnish system of educational support (FNBE, 2016). Beforehand, an information letter was sent to the respective schools, and the consent of the participants or their legal guardians was obtained in written form. Data were collected during a research stay at the Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki. The research procedures followed the "*Ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences*" of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (<http://www.tenk.fi/en>). These guidelines include procedures for handling misconduct and fraud in science, which is primarily the responsibility of each individual researcher. An ethical review was not required for this study because the study did not meet the requirements for an ethical review, as specified by the Ethical Review Board in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Helsinki.

Table 1. Study participants (n = 10).

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (years)	Grade	Disability
Jari	Male	15	9	-
Elias	Male	16	9	-
Kari	Male	14	7	-
Tom	Male	15	7	-
Jussi	Male	10	4	Visual Impairment, Down-Syndrome
Henri	Male	10	4	Autisms-Spectrum-Disorder (ASD)
Kirsi	Female	12	6	Visual Impairment
Ilona	Female	12	6	Visual Impairment, cerebral palsy
Jenni	Female	13	6	-
Kaisa	Female	16	9	Visual Impairment

Data collection

After obtaining demographic data on each school (type of school, number of students, organization of PE classes) and each participant (gender, age, grade, type of disability), written interviews (Schiek, 2014) served for data collection. The students (or their caregivers) received the interview questions by e-mail and had two weeks to answer the interview questions as independently as possible. For this purpose, the interview guide, which was designed in English, was translated into Finnish and made available to the study participants in both languages. The students who were not able to complete the interview guide independently received assistance from a reference person (teacher or parent). The interview guide was adapted to individual needs of the study participants, including digital documents that are accessible to blind individuals and using “easy read” as a method of adapting the interview questions to make it easier to understand for study participants with cognitive disabilities. The interview guide was also adapted to the needs of participants with low vision, using materials in high contrast.

In most cases, the questions were first answered in Finnish. Afterwards, the answers were translated into English by the reference person in consultation with the researcher to clarify the answers and further explanations. For some of the study participants with disabilities, the reference person played a crucial role in supporting the participant in understanding and answering the interview questions, and thus served as a “*interpreter*” in this study. Drawing on previous work by Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson (2010), the questions in the interview guide initially covered general topics related to play, sports, and physical activity (e.g. What are typical activities in physical education lessons? What do you like the most? What would you like to change?). These questions served to attract the participants' interest in the topic. Subsequently, the guiding questions covered experiences of “*being included*” in PE and PA. The questions were structured in two main groups: Two questions related to experiences of “*being included*” in physical activities and two questions related to perceptions of “*being included*” in PE lessons.

Data analysis

The data analysis was based on the model of qualitative content analysis developed by Mayring (2010). The data evaluation was carried out in a deductive-inductive manner. Data from e-mail interviews were generated in electronic format and thus required little editing or formatting before they were processed for analysis (Meho, 2006). Initially, the deductively formed main categories of the interview guide were used to achieve a pre-structuring of the interview data. The two main groups of the interview guide served as the deductively formed main categories (Table 2).

The interviews were analysed separately by first assigning the statements to the main categories. Then, the main categories were differentiated inductively by summarizing thematic similarities in the individual statements of the students within a main category. The subcategories were thus gradually derived from the material inductively, according to Mayring's approach to category formation. From these thematic similarities in the statements, new subcategories were created, for which coding rules were established.

Table 2. Category system.

Main categories	Sub-Categories
Perceptions of “ <i>being included</i> ” in (school-based) physical activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendships and social relationships. • Motor competence as a barrier to successful participation.
Perceptions of “ <i>being included</i> ” in PE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose and typical activities of PE. • Teachers' inclusive practices.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was achieved in various ways. The researcher had experience in interviewing and working with children with and without disabilities in various fields in the school and PE/PA context for over 10 years. These experiences enhanced the researcher's understanding of the various activity contexts participants referred to in the interviews (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010). To validate findings in this study, summaries of each interview were composed and sent to each participant (Bredahl, 2013). Moreover, "*communicative validity*" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) was incorporated by summing up the interviews and asking for clarification in the case of queries. Participants' clarifications were added to the summaries before being approved.

RESULTS

The results of the present study will be presented based on the following two main themes and sub-themes which emerged from the data, including (a) Perceptions of "being included" in (school-based) physical activities (b) Perceptions of "*being included*" in PE. These results reflect the participants' experiences, perspectives and values toward PE and PA.

Perceptions of "being included" in (school-based) physical activities

Friendships and social relationships

The importance of friendships with peers was emphasized in the interviews by both, students with and without disabilities. Participants agreed that friendships play a key role in establishing a sense of belonging to a group. Friendships also played an important role in whether the interviewed students experience access to organized play and sports activities during recess. This is exemplified by the statement of one interviewed student:

"It makes me feel part of a group when my friends want me to join their team. In recess it is really important to have your group of friends. I like recess the most, because then I can play football with my friends." (Elias)

The feeling of belonging to a group and being accepted as a person was also reflected in the statements of students without disabilities. For Henri, it was not just about being part of a team, but also about being included in conversations by their peers and being heard, as highlighted in the following quote:

"In hockey, I feel included when teammates talk and listen to me." (Henri)

In general, the students' experiences revealed that the feeling of acceptance and the sense of belonging were particularly due to relationships with other students showing their interest in the student's hobbies and personal feelings (Pesonen, 2016; Vetoniemi & Kärnä, 2019). However, being on a team seemed not enough to feel included, particularly if a child did not get any playing time. A sense of belonging usually only arises when students experience themselves as equal playing partners and are actually involved in a game (Pesonen et al., 2015). The student's experiences indicated that schoolmates might segregate students with disabilities from physical activities in recess situations. Some students with disabilities highlighted the role of educational assistants as a valuable resource in PE classes and during recess. The following quote by Kaisa, a study participant with an visual impairment, illustrated the supportive role of educational assistants:

"In breaks I am together with my personal assistant. I go for a walk because I don't want to sit somewhere." (Kaisa)

While previous research identified educational assistants as an important partner in developing inclusive classrooms (Mihajlovic, 2024), the physical presence and overprotection of educational assistants may also hinder the development of social skills, distancing students with disabilities from their peers (Goodwin et al., 2022).

Motor competence as a barrier to successful participation

A certain level of motor competence in certain sports was considered necessary to be respected by classmates and to be able to participate on an equal footing in a game. Jari explained that making a contribution to his team and having a valued role made him feel included:

“Well, I think in sports you have to be good in a certain sport or game. Then you feel part of the community because other players will respect you.” (Jari)

The student's statement illustrated that a sense of belonging only arises if the player is actively involved in the game and is considered legitimate participant based on a certain level of (motor) competence (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010).

Competitive sports and games also generated interest among the students with disabilities. One student with an intellectual disability (Jussi) described football as his favourite sport, but he was unable to find access in free play situations on the schoolyard or outside of school. On one hand, the student was not confident to join a football team, and on the other hand, he was afraid of being rejected:

“I really like to play football, but I am not good in playing it. And if I would join a football team they would never let me play” (Jussi)

It became evident that along with positive associations with sports and games, unpleasant statements were also present, which were associated with fears and shame. These experiences or fears of failing were mainly expressed among the students with disabilities, which may impact negatively on their sense of belonging (Pesonen, 2016; Pesonen et al., 2015).

Perceptions of “being included” in PE

Purpose and typical activities of PE

Recent studies concluded with a student view of PE as a break from other subjects and more non-educational than a subject of learning (Lyngstad, Bjerke, & Ligestad, 2019). Students in this study showed a widespread understanding about the purposes of PE, including the promotion of health, fun and wellbeing, as the following quotes illustrated:

“PE is good for health and it is fun.” (Jenni)

“Sport makes you feel better. Sport is a hobby for me.” (Jussi)

Regardless of having a disability or not, participants mentioned similar aims of the subject of PE. However, most participants interpreted PE as fun activities together with friends and not as a relevant learning perspective. When being asked about typical activities in PE, students reported various sports, games and physical activities. Interestingly, the male participants stressed the importance of competitive ball games such as football, floorball and ice-hockey. Female participants mentioned more individual sports such as swimming and skiing. Moreover, one participant with a visual impairment (Kaisa) highlighted the importance of disability sports such as goalball and showdown.

In the four schools that participated in this study, PE classes were separated by gender starting from the 5th grade, which also seemed to have an impact on the selection of specific sports and physical activities. Berg & Lahelma (2010) attributed the country-specific traditions of separating boys and girls in Finnish to the fact that in these situations, the body is the focus of the educational activities. While some participants highlighted gender differences between boys and girls regarding the PE classes, the teachers also seem not to involve the students in the selection of activities, indicating a rather teacher-centred learning approach:

“The activities depend a lot on what the teacher wants. For boys it is more sports like football or other ball sports, but also fitness sports. Girls do different sports like dancing.” (Kari)

It seemed as if gender-specific “traditions” of selecting certain physical activities determined by attributed gender-related roles were not questioned by the PE teacher. A gender difference in Finnish PE has also been identified in previous research: Lyyra (2013), for instance, revealed that girls prioritise health-related PE and social and emotional skills, while boys prioritise more competitive physical activities and challenge. Overall, from the perspective of the study participants, gender-specific aspects were more in the focus of PE than possible challenges of including students with disabilities.

Teachers’ inclusive practices

In PE classes, the pedagogical practices of the teachers played a central role. Most teachers attempted to motivate all learners, including students with disabilities, to participate in class through appropriate modifications and accommodations. Overall, most teachers in this study seemed to create a positive atmosphere and tried to foster feelings of belonging by showing interest in the individual needs and interests of their students. For instance, Ilona reported that:

“Our teacher always tries to help us to participate in class. For example, she talks with us about the rules of the games and really cares about our own opinion.” (Ilona)

During the lessons, physical activities were often adapted to the individual needs by the teacher, which provided greater opportunities for participation. However, a sense of belonging was mainly promoted when the students experienced themselves as a legitimate partner in PE and were prevented from feeling different (Lamata et al., 2024). This was evident in several interviews with the students (Kari, Tom, Jenni, Kaisa, Ilona). In certain situations, the teacher tried to enable the individual students to have the most positive experiences possible. However, this pedagogical approach reached its limits, for example, when the teams are formed independently by the students and certain students are chosen last. In this context, the feeling of mutual recognition played an important role. According to one student, this feeling of being valued as an equal partner by their peers only occurred when the teacher does not interfere in the process of team formation:

“Our teacher always tries to arrange equal teams but this doesn't mean that it feels equal. It sometimes feels as if you play in this team because the teacher wants you to play there.” (Kirsi)

The comments made by the student with a visual impairment in relation to team allocation suggest a strategy characterized by a prosocial approach. Through the pedagogical control of team formation, the teacher apparently aimed to achieve equal teams in which stronger students should help weaker students. However, this did not always meet with approval from the students, as it is calculated that stronger students must often step back and compensate the weaknesses of their partner.

Overall, the interviews did not support the use of certain “*inclusive*” strategies, and instead suggested that PE teachers should try to collaborate and communicate with their students to co-construct inclusive practices that are appropriate in each specific teaching situation (Holland et al., 2023; Haegele et al., 2020). Some respondents also expressed the experience of failing in their attempts to participate in general sports programs offered by sports clubs. The availability of suitable physical activity programs were identified as barriers to participating in extracurricular physical activities and leisure activities.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore children with and without disabilities’ experiences on inclusion in PA and school-based PE. Most of the positive perspectives in relation to peers described by the study participants were associated with feelings about friendship building, which is in line with previous research in the field (Holland & Haegele, 2021). In the school-based physical activities, it was evident that “*being included*” is closely connected to gaining entry to play and being treated as a legitimate participant. In addition to positive social relationships, motor skills also impact on students’ opportunities of participating in physical activities during recess. While the pedagogical practices of teachers have an impact on maximizing student participation in PE, recess situations have greater potential for exclusion. During the PE lesson, the teacher has the main responsibility for including students with disabilities, whereas in free play, opportunities to feel included appear to be child directed and determined (Spencer & Cavaliere, 2010). Gaining entry into free play situations that are less structured, such as recess, may be difficult for children with disabilities because other children can often decide who may participate and who not (Spencer & Cavaliere, 2010; Vetoniemi & Kärnä, 2019). In teaching situations, the participants with disabilities in this study felt marginalized when their teachers tried to compensate their disability without their knowledge. Consequently, PE teachers should try to collaborate and communicate with their students to develop (inclusive) practices that are appropriate in each specific teaching situation (Holland et al., 2023).

Regardless of having a disability or not, participants in the present study mentioned similar purposes of the subject of PE. Most participants reveal a view of PE as being responsible for promoting health, fun and wellbeing, but also as a break from other school subjects (Lyngstad, Bjerke, & Lagestad, 2019). Overall, it is noticeable that the diversity dimension “*disability*” has been mentioned less by children without disabilities than dealing with gender-specific issues in PE. Especially regarding the selection of sports and physical activities, gender-specific differences are evident, which are reflected in the interviews of the study participants. Several male students preferred a “*gender-typical*” selection of competitive-oriented teaching content. Other studies also confirm gender-specific differences in relation to the teaching content of PE in Finland (Yli-Piipari, 2014; Lyyra, 2013): Girls are typically taught more in the areas of aerobics, gymnastics, fitness training, and dance in school sports. Typical boys’ sports, on the other hand, are soccer, floorball, skiing, and ice games such as ice hockey. This way of dealing with gender differences seems to construct gender as dichotomic and hierarchical, placing higher significance on boys’ ability (Berg & Lahelma, 2010). The gender segregation in Finnish schools may stem from educational policies, the position of sport in Finnish culture and the active practice in which male and female teachers construct gender (Berg & Lahelma 2010; Hakala & Kujala 2015). Consequently, I do not argue that co-educational PE would necessarily be a better solution than gender division, but I strongly recommend that teachers would benefit from training of gender awareness (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2021; Metcalfe, 2018).

Limitations

There are obviously limitations to this study. It should be mentioned that due to the language barrier between the researcher and the study participants, certain typical terms or expressions could not be translated directly

in the interviews (some participants mentioned Finnish terms, for example relating to extracurricular sports or different professionals working in the field). Follow-up e-mail correspondence with the participants and the reference person supporting the data collection was utilized to supplement interview data when clarifications or further explanations were needed. The written type of interview was regarded appropriate for the present research to take into account the special needs of some participants. It should also be noted that e-mail interviewing inevitably loses spontaneity in answering the questions, which can be the basis for the richness of data collected in the interviews (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). Moreover, body language and other non-verbal means of communication that are important in face-to-face interviews got lost in the written form of asynchronous interviews (Meho, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper contributes to a growing body of pedagogical research portraying the perspectives of students with and without disabilities in (inclusive) PE and PA. Future research should further take into account the voices of individuals with disabilities to gain a better understanding of what inclusion means to them and to provide important insights for breaking down barriers and thus advancing feelings of inclusion in society (Oldörp et al., 2024). For a long time, adult stakeholders (without disabilities) have been responsible as the “*inclusion experts*”, making decisions about disabled young people, often without their input or consent (Maher & Haegele, 2022). Gaining knowledge concerning (disabled) students’ experiences of “*being included*” are essential for understanding the barriers and facilitators of inclusive education in school and may have an impact on teaching arrangements, modifications and pedagogical approaches. In the present study, most participants with disabilities were visually impaired, some of them having multiple disabilities. As stated by Holland & Haegele (2021), few studies have explored the perspectives of those with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, or hearing impairment. Future research should also take into account these specific disabilities as understanding their perspectives toward inclusion in PE and PA may hold particular value. Moreover, further research should broaden the perspective on PA and also include leisure and recreational sports when designing suitable physical activity programs, as the experiences and interpretations of inclusion from the perspective of individuals with disabilities has been mainly dominated by research within school contexts.

SUPPORTING AGENCIES

No funding agencies were reported by the authors.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants and legal guardians to conduct and publish this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to the study participants, teachers and legal guardians involved in this project who shared their experiences and supported the data collection process.

REFERENCES

- Bampton, R., & Cowton, C. J. (2002). The E-Interview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-3.2.848>
- Baumeister, R.F., & Leary, M.R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Berg, P., & Lahelma, E. (2009). Gendering processes in the field of physical education. *Gender and Education*, 22(1), 31-46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250902748184>
- Blagrove, J. (2017). Experiences of children with autism spectrum disorders in adapted physical education. *European Journal of Adapted Physical Activity*, 10(1), 17-27. <https://doi.org/10.5507/euj.2017.003>
- Bredahl A. M. (2013). Sitting and watching the others being active: the experienced difficulties in PE when having a disability. *Adapted physical activity quarterly : APAQ*, 30(1), 40-58. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.30.1.40>
- Camacho-Miñano, M. J., Gray, S., Sandford, R., & MacIsaac, S. (2021). Young women, health and physical activity: Tensions between the gendered fields of physical education and Instagram. *Sport, Education and Society*, 28(3), 575-593. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2021.1932455>
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods*. London: Sage.
- Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE] (2016). National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014. National core curriculum for basic education intended for pupils in compulsory education. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.
- Fitzgerald, H. (2007). Dramatizing physical education: using drama in research. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 35(4), 253-260. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-3156.2007.00471.x>
- Frederickson, N., Simmonds, E., Evans, L., & Soulsby, C. (2007). Assessing the social and affective outcomes of inclusion. *British Journal of Special Education*, 34(2), 105-115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2007.00463.x>
- Goodwin, D.L., & Watkinson, E.J. (2000). Inclusive physical education from the perspective of students with a physical disability. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 17(2), 144-160. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.17.2.144>
- Goodwin, D.L., Rossow-Kimball, B., & Connolly, M. (2022). Students' experiences of paraeducator support in inclusive physical education: Helping or hindering? *Sport, Education and Society*, 27(2), 182-195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2021.1931835>
- Haegele, J., Kirk, T., Holland, S., & Zhu, X. (2020). 'The rest of the time I would just stand there and look stupid': Access in integrated physical education among adults with visual impairments. *Sport, Education, & Society*.
- Haegele, J. A., & Maher, A. J. (2022). Male autistic youth experiences of belonging in integrated physical education. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 26(1), 51-61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211018637>
- Hakala, L., & T. Kujala. (2015). The ethos of sport as a silent partner in PE curricula. *World Studies in Education*, 16(2), 69-80. <https://doi.org/10.7459/wse/16.2.07>

- Healy, S., Msetfi, R., & Gallagher, S. (2013). 'Happy and a bit nervous': The experiences of children with autism in physical education. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 41(3), 222-228. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12053>
- Holland, K., & Haegele, J. A. (2021). Perspectives of students with disabilities toward physical education: A review update. *Kinesiology Review*, 10(1), 78-87. <https://doi.org/10.1123/kr.2020-0002>
- Holland, K., Haegele, J. A., Zhu, X., & Bobzien, J. (2023). "Everybody Wants to be Included": Experiences with 'Inclusive' Strategies in Physical Education. *Journal of developmental and physical disabilities*, 35(2), 273-293. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10882-022-09852-x>
- Karchmer, R. A. (2001). The journey ahead: Thirteen teachers report how the Internet influences literacy and literacy instruction in their K-12 classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(4), 442-466. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.36.4.5>
- Keeley, C., Munde, V., Schowalter, R., Seifert, M., Tillmann, V. & Wiegering, R. (2019). Partizipativ forschen mit Menschen mit komplexem Unterstützungsbedarf. *Teilhabe*, 58(3), 96 - 102.
- Lamata, C., Grassi, M., Coterón, J., Becerra-Muñoz, W., & Pérez-Tejero, J. (2024). The inclusion of students with special educational needs in physical education according to the opinion of its protagonists: a qualitative study in Spain. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2309350>
- Lyngstad, I., Bjerke, Ø., & Ligestad, P. (2019). Students' views on the purpose of physical education in upper secondary school. Physical education as a break in everyday school life - learning or just fun? *Sport, Education and Society*, 25(2), 230-241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2019.1573421>
- Lyyra, N. (2013). Pedagogical dimensions in physical education inventory: Evaluating reliability and validity by using confirmatory factor analysis. *Studies in sport, physical education and health* 198. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.
- Maher, A. & Haegele, J. (2022). Disabled children and young people in sport, physical activity and physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 27(2), 129-133 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2021.1967119>
- Mayring, P. (2010). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken* (11. Auflage). Weinheim: Beltz Verlag. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92052-8_42
- Maslow, A. (1962). *Toward psychology of being*. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10793-000>
- Meho, L. (2006). E-mail interviewing in qualitative research: A methodological discussion. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 57(10), 1284-1295. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20416>
- Metcalfe, S. (2018). Adolescent constructions of gendered identities: the role of sport and (physical) education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 23(7), 681-693. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2018.1493574>
- Mihajlovic C. (2024). Perceptions of Collaboration Between General and Special Educators in Physical Education. *Adapted physical activity quarterly : APAQ*, 41(2), 306-329. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2023-0104>
- Oldörp, F., Giese, M., & Grenier, M. (2024). The Influence of Blind Tennis on Subjective Inclusion Experiences-An Ableism-Critical Analysis. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 41(3), 420-439. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2023-0140>
- Pesonen, H. & Kontu, E. & Saarinen, M. & Pirttimaa, R. (2015). Conceptions associated with sense of belonging in different school placements for Finnish pupils with special education needs. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 31(1), 59-75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2015.1087138>

- Pesonen, H. (2016). Sense of belonging for students with intensive special education needs. An exploration of students' belonging and teachers' role in implementing support. Research Report 380, Helsinki University Press.
- Ruin, S., Giese, M. & Haegele, A. (2021). Fear or freedom? Visually impaired students' ambivalent perspectives on physical education. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, 39(1), 20-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264619620961813>
- Ruin, S. & Meier, S. (2018). "Fragt doch mal uns!" - Potenziale und Herausforderungen im inklusiven Sportunterricht aus Schülerperspektive. *Leipziger Sportwissenschaftliche Beiträge*, 59(1), 67-87.
- Ruin, S. & Stibbe, G. (2018). Physical education and physical education research. An overview of German language publications 2016 - 2017. *International Journal of Physical Education*, 55(3), 2-55. <https://doi.org/10.5771/2747-6073-2018-3-2>
- Schiek, D. (2014). Das schriftliche Interview in der qualitativen Sozialforschung. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 43(5), 379-395. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2014-0505>
- Schiek, D. & Ullrich, C. (2017). Using asynchronous written online communications for qualitative inquiries: a research note. *Qualitative Research*, 17(5), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117690216>
- Spencer-Cavaliere, N., & Watkinson, E. J. (2010). Inclusion Understood from the Perspectives of Children with Disability. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 27(4), 275-293. <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.27.4.275>
- Stainback, W., & Stainback, S. (1990). *Support networks for inclusive schooling*. Baltimore: P.H. Brookes.
- Vetoniemi, J., & Kärnä, E. (2019). Being included - experiences of social participation of pupils with special education needs in mainstream schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(10), 1190-1204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1603329>
- Yli-Piipari, S. (2014). Physical Education Curriculum Reform in Finland. *Quest*, 66(4), 468-484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2014.948688>



This work is licensed under a [Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).