

# AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SUITABILITY OF INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING FOR THE INCLUSION OF DISABLED CHILDREN IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

## Introduction

The UK Government recommends that children aged 5-18 years participate in a minimum of 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity on average every week (DoH, 2019). Whilst schools and teachers provide numerous opportunities for physical activity (Daly-Smith *et al.*, 2020), physical education (PE) represents one of the main means through which the government guidelines for physical activity are met. Organisations such as the Youth Sport Trust (YST, 2020), governing bodies of sport and schools across the nation advocate high quality PE as part of the National Curriculum and in optional extra-curricular sport to 'all' children.

Evidence suggests that disabled children experience a less-than-welcoming attitude in mainstream school PE and feel marginalised and excluded by their peers, teaching staff and the institutional policies that impact on practice (Rekaa *et al.*, 2019; Dixon *et al.*, 2021; Vickerman and Coates, 2009; Coates, 2011). This is reflected in attitudes towards PE. For instance, in 2013, the English Federation of Disability Sport (which became Activity Alliance in April 2018) conducted a survey of disabled children in England, with the following results: 51 per cent of disabled children did not like participating in PE, despite 70 per cent saying that they would like to take part more often (EFDS, 2013). This paradox reveals disparity between inclusive philosophy and inclusive action for disabled children in PE, a position recognised by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which has called for all educational establishments to ensure that inclusive, adaptive and safe opportunities to participate in PE must be provided for disabled children (UNESCO, 2015). Since previous research has suggested that many disabled children have traditionally experienced exclusion from mainstream PE, the aim of the

current study was to use the experiences of teachers from primary, secondary and special schools in England to investigate the suitability of their initial teacher training (ITT) for ensuring the inclusion of disabled children in PE lessons.

## Methodology

### Design and participants

The School of Health & Life Sciences Ethics Subcommittee at Teesside University approved the study. An online questionnaire was designed using Jisc Online Surveys software and contained a mixture of 15 questions: eight multiple-choice and seven open-response questions. The survey was live between 20<sup>th</sup> July 2018 and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019 and participants were recruited via advertisements in the Association for Physical Education (afPE) newsletters and website and in *Physical Education Matters*. There was a total of 51 respondents (32 female and 19 male); their ages ranged from 22 to 54 (average age 36.5 years). None of the participants identified as being a disabled person. Forty were qualified as teachers of PE, 24 of whom were either heads of PE or directors of sport. The remaining 11 had a responsibility for PE, two in secondary, seven in primary and two in both. Five of the participants identified that their principal role was within special education, either within a mainstream or special school. The sample represented a diverse range of ITT experiences from a total 23 different courses delivered across England. Names of participants, courses and institutions are not provided in order to maintain confidentiality. The participants were given pseudonyms and their age and role are identified in each extract from their answers, along with their setting in primary (P) or secondary (S). For instance, Hana is a 41-year-old teacher in a secondary school responsible for special education (SEN) and a former



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head of PE (HoPE); she is identified next to her extract as Hana/41/S/Former HoPE. It is apparent here that Hana is a qualified PE teacher. Where teachers are not PE-qualified, the word 'teacher' is used to identify this fact; all others are PE-qualified.

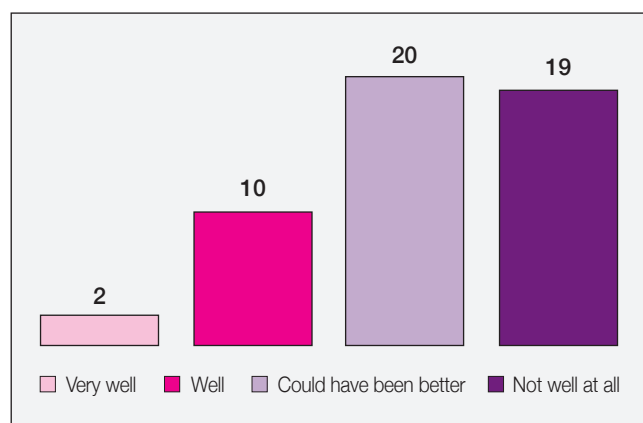
**Analysis of data**

The frequencies for the multiple-choice answers were calculated and descriptive statistics applied using Microsoft Excel. Responses to the open questions in the questionnaire were analysed using thematic analysis (Bryman, 2015). The aim of this analytical process was to produce what Geertz (1973) describes as 'thick description', a thorough and accurate account of the range of responses. This research does not claim to be representative of the ITT experiences of all PE teachers in England. The study does, however, provide views and experiences that can be used to provide some indication of how a diverse sample of current teachers regard the suitability of ITT for the inclusion of disabled children in PE in England.

**Discussion of findings**

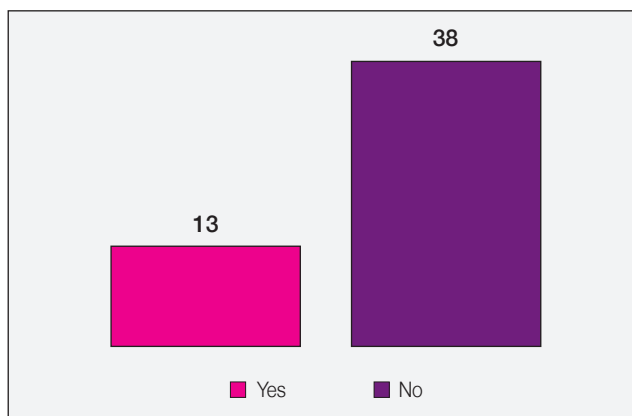
When asked 'How well do you feel your initial teacher training prepared you for including disabled children/young people in PE lessons?' 20 respondents answered: 'Could have been better' and 19 respondents answered 'Not well at all' (see Figure 1). This meant that 39 out of the 51 respondents (76%) did not feel their ITT set them up well for including disabled children/young people in PE. These findings resonate with those of Haycock and Smith (2010) as well as Vickerman and Coates (2009) who have previously suggested that teachers may be either unwilling or feel incompetent when attempting to adapt their teaching to the diversity of pupils' skills.

**Figure 1:** How well do you feel your ITT prepared you for including disabled children/young people in PE lessons?



When asked 'Do you feel confident to work with disabled children/young people in PE lessons as a result of the initial teacher training you received?', 38 out of 51 (75%) responded that they did not feel confident to work with disabled children/young people (see Figure 2). Previous studies have also suggested that teachers feel unprepared in dealing with the needs of disabled students (Hersman and Hodge, 2010; Simons and Kalogeropoulos, 2005), with other studies reporting that teachers needed further support in terms of practice provision (Hurtzler *et al.*, 2019).

**Figure 2:** Do you feel confident to work with disabled children/young people in PE lessons as a result of the ITT you received?



Thematic analysis of the qualitative answers to the open questions was useful to provide meaningful context for the issues raised above. Two main themes arose from this analysis: 'Negative memories of ITT related to disabled children and PE'; and 'Suggestions for changes to ITT for the inclusion of disabled children in PE'.

**Negative memories of ITT related to disabled children and PE**

When teachers in our sample were faced with new and potentially challenging circumstances related to the inclusion of disabled children in PE, the 'problems' as they perceived the situation were often associated with omissions in their ITT. Surprisingly, 48 of the 51 participants did not see themselves as part of either the problem or solution for the inclusion of disabled children in PE. This common position was held by all participants, regardless of whether their training was very recent or decades ago.

The following two extracts from Hana and Mark typified the views of many of our participants who believed that ITT has been continually improving in relation to its focus on the inclusion of disabled children in PE with the need for more to be done:

*"In those days, attitudes towards disability were not great. I don't think that was deliberately being exclusive. More that it sadly wasn't even considered. We have come a long way in the last 30 years, with still a long way to go."*  
(Hana/48/P&S/PE Teacher)

*"I qualified 26 years ago so I am sure initial teacher training has improved in terms of providing skills needed for teaching disabled children. I am unable to comment on current training."*  
(Mark/48/S/Head of PE)

Both Hana and Mark seem to assume that because their ITT took place two to three decades ago, courses *must have* improved over time in terms of preparing teachers to include disabled children in PE. However, teachers whose training was more recent highlighted that little seems to have changed. For instance, Luke highlights difficulties from his ITT:

*"There was not enough work with SEN students in regard to working one-to-one and getting to know students."*  
(Luke/23/S/PE Teacher)



Luke is expressing the point that he thought there should have been more training and, in particular, the opportunity to get to know disabled children to improve his skills. Martha's memories of her ITT were also typical of qualified teachers in their 20s:

*"Unless you specialise in the area, you don't have the training or experience to teach children with disabilities."*  
(Martha/25/P/PE Coordinator)

As Martha seems to suggest, it was typical of participants to see teaching disabled children as a specialism outside of their own expertise. This is an interesting position bearing in mind teachers of PE and other subjects are specialists themselves but do not see themselves as proficient enough to include disabled children. This suggests some element of apathy creeping into participants' overall views. Mei-Lien typifies this stance:

*"There are no resources/equipment to teach disabled students effectively. There are a broad range of disabilities and no 'one shoe' fits all to teach students with disabilities."*  
(Mei-Lien/25/S/PE Teacher)

This response appears to miss the fact that the teacher herself is a resource, arguably *the* resource for inclusion. If teachers responsible for PE believe that the solution to inclusion lies outside of their expertise, then it is no surprise when research demonstrates that disabled children are still excluded from PE (Dixon *et al.*, 2021).

One of the surprising criticisms was the lack of opportunity to come into any kind of contact with disabled children during ITT. Among the participants, 35 (69%) highlighted that this was the case for them and 15 of these had completed their ITT within the last 15 years. For instance, Matthew's experience was characteristic of those who could not recall working with disabled children in ITT:

*"It is very hard to complete activities which are realistic when training (as in isolation lessons which focus on disability specific areas) as you would not have the participants. In addition, it is sometimes therefore difficult to relate."*  
(Matthew/23/P&S/PE Teacher)

The theoretical nature of some one-year ITT limits the opportunity to work with disabled children and therefore develop essential skills. John cited similar experiences:

*"The limitations are vast as the PGCE is much more driven by assignments and literature than the actual capacity to teach young people. There was little or no differentiation to my memory of adapting practice to accommodate disabled or challenging young people."*  
(John/29/S/Sports College Lecturer)

With such experiences, perhaps we ought not to be surprised when newly qualified teachers inform us that they feel unprepared to meaningfully include disabled children in PE lessons. And whilst participants were honest about their lack of training, they were also keen to point out that they would welcome the opportunity to upskill. For instance, Paul explains:

*"My personal ITT didn't cover teaching students with disabilities in any practical sense. From a theoretical standpoint I think we had about an hour dedicated to this only. I completed a GTP so didn't have as many structured sessions like some of the SCITT (School-Centred Initial Teacher Training) students had. This left me feeling somewhat short-changed by my training year in general."*  
(Paul/33/S/PE Teacher)

Paul's expression of inadequate training will have consequences for the disabled children with whom he comes into contact, despite his acknowledgement of that fact. That is because those participants who themselves feel underprepared for teaching PE to disabled children within the school setting tended to believe that real expertise for inclusivity lies outside of the educational sphere. Ruth, a 41-year-old director of sport, typifies the responses related to this issue:

*"You tend to get more information when you attend general sports courses about how to include children, the training [ITT students] now get will very much depend on if the school they are at has students with a disability and*

*requires them to differentiate for students. For example, we have students with cerebral palsy, sight limitations and a child in wheelchair."*

(Ruth/41/S/Director of Sport)

In summary, Ruth's view is typical of the participants who, in this analysis, viewed their ITT as inadequate in relation to including disabled children. Absence of contact with disabled people during ITT training and the apparent sparse course content exacerbates an ongoing deficiency in inclusion.

It is extraordinary that none of the 51 participants expressed any terms that would be recognised as synonymous with the language of equality or rights as is apparent with other marginalised groups. For example, it is a legal right for all schools to provide an accessibility plan for all disabled children. However, according to a report by the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE, 2020), it appears that this is not enforced by local authorities, Ofsted and the Department for Education. ALLFIE's (2020) survey of parents of disabled children and young people reported that 27 per cent of parents said schools were inaccessible and 31 per cent said that they were only sometimes accessible. Disregard for the law by schools and a lack of enforcement by the educational authorities may be one reason why teachers in our survey were seemingly unaware of their responsibilities from a legal perspective.

## Suggestions for changes to ITT for the inclusion of disabled children in PE

Although our 51 participants identified limitations related to their own ITT experiences, they did not express any unwillingness to engage with disabled children. This is evident by their ability to communicate suggestions to change ITT to make it more effective. Of the teachers surveyed, 37 (73%) expressed the need for students on ITT to attend special schools as part of their course. Some of them had done this but did not feel that it was enough, as Esther states:

*"I would like to see regular visits to specialist schools during the teacher training year. We visited one school but didn't get to see a great deal of practical PE."*

(Esther/27/PE Teacher)

This type of opportunity does not appear to have been adequate for Esther bearing in mind the practical nature of PE. Ten participants suggested that a specific module within ITT is necessary to improve skills. Two of these mentioned that this should be optional. However, with 73% recommending placements in special schools, it is apparent that the majority of participants have found modules and assignments insufficient in providing the skills that they desire, as Naomi states:

*"In ITT it would be beneficial to have teacher training in both mainstream and special schools."*

(Naomi/31/S/Head of PE)

This is supported by Simon who reflects on his learning since qualifying:

*"I have gained experience by working with our SEN department to offer an inclusive curriculum. Experience in a school, working with disabled children would be the best way to improve competence."*

(Simon/48/S/Head of PE)

Again, Simon's suggestion reflects the fact that there was no apparent lack of willingness on the part of teachers in this sample to engage in inclusive PE and, as he states, to improve competence once qualified. However, we would argue that training that does not produce actual competence in relation to one specific group of children is problematic. We argue that it ought to be a necessary competence to include disabled children, rather than make it a specialism, as Elizabeth highlights:

*"Unless placements are in schools with disabled children there is limited opportunity to learn teaching skills."*

(Elizabeth/31/S/PE Teacher)

However, in spite of the willingness to enhance their skills to work with disabled children, it is clear that more consistency is needed across the sector in terms of accessing the additional support for which teachers are asking. For instance, one of the participants mentioned working alongside charities for disability sport to help to deliver "more training in schools with significant SEND experiences, plus working alongside [disability] charities." (Simon/38/P/PE Teacher)

It is clear that, whilst external links with disability charities do exist, it is not consistent across all schools and appears to be left up to schools and individuals to develop these links. Nonetheless, teachers responsible for PE do have their own personal obligations to children, as do ITT providers. Anna, a 53-year-old SEND teacher, made the following point:

*"Reassurance [for ITT students] that there will be the correct level of staff support. Not being afraid to differentiate activities, so that the curriculum fits the child, rather than the other way round, e.g. if the main subject being taught is football, but there is a wheelchair user in the group, discuss alternatives WITH THEM [her emphasis]. They should be encouraged to ask questions as well as direct activities. For example, might the student wish to access a more appropriate PE class during football sessions? Do they want to be part of the football sessions and in what capacity? Address the 'elephant in the room' without thinking that this is exclusive, because it is actually inclusive. Reassure them that it is ok to join forces with other schools/ classes to fully accommodate students with disabilities, so that they can access a meaningful curriculum."*

(Anna/53/SEND Teacher)

Anna is advocating a cooperative responsibility between ITT providers and the teachers themselves, which will, in theory at least, encourage the continued dialogue and co-production of the education experience between teachers and pupils.

As mentioned previously, 73 per cent of our participants expressed a desire to see more placements in special schools during ITT. This was supported by 24 per cent who suggested that more time was needed to learn about and connect with national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport and specifically those sports that are targeted at disabled people, as Peter states:

*"I'd like to see more time given to support different groups and more access to NGBs who work with disabled athletes. Teachers should be introduced to disability sports such as goalball and boccia and these games should be taught equal to football and rugby."*

(Peter/45/P/PE Teacher)

Indeed, goalball and boccia are also Paralympic sports that require minimal equipment. A working knowledge of sports such as these would, no doubt, add to the skills of teachers and ought to be thought of as a fundamental aspect of the active and reciprocal process of teaching educators how to effectively teach inclusive PE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The passing on of knowledge about adaptations is necessary, as Andrew suggests:

*"Instruction from qualified instructors who have experience of coaching/teaching students with a disability in PE and school sport."*

(Andrew/27/P&S/PE Teacher)

These suggestions by Peter and Andrew would appear to be simple to implement. However, the problem of consistency of ITT across England implies that, although some solutions appear simple, the reality is quite different. This is supported by Miriam, one of our most experienced participants:

*"I feel there is a lack of teaching training in any form of PE and no one is really a specialist anymore. I feel there is nil training in SEND or inclusion and courses such as IPE [Inclusive Physical Education] which we deliver are becoming ever more important. I feel that all courses should have at least one term working on inclusion, having to adapt activities, producing a timetable that is meaningful and suits pupil cohorts."*

(Miriam/54/Special School/Head of PE)

Aged 54, Miriam completed a four-year BEd (Hons) and, as a consequence, feels that current training is lacking. She alludes to the idea that PE teachers were specialists, some of whom may have been in inclusive PE. Although we have suggested that the expertise of working with disabled children ought to be held by all teachers rather than a specialism, we should defer to Miriam's experience here.

## Conclusion

The majority of teachers in this sample did not feel that their ITT prepared them well enough (76%) or gave them sufficient confidence (75%) to include disabled children in PE lessons. Qualified teachers agree that ITT is lacking in terms of the content that they would like to see being taught. There is general agreement that the opportunity to work with disabled children during training is necessary and that optional and even mandatory modules or placements within their ITT are currently insufficient. The consensus that a placement within a school that has disabled pupils, particularly special schools, would benefit trainee teachers is not in doubt. Introduction to, and ongoing contact with, external agencies is seen as essential, and some consistency across the sector is needed in this regard.

Regardless of the quality of their own ITT, now working as qualified teachers our participants felt that more needs to be done regarding the inclusion of disabled children in PE. We appreciate the fact that once ubiquitous four-year BEd (Hons) courses are now being squashed into one-year ITT courses creates a time issue. It is unlikely that more training regarding disabled children can be shoe-horned into an already full curriculum. Therefore, we propose that, after ITT, teachers should be immersed in contact with disabled children and that this should be in special schools in addition to mainstream schools with enough disabled children for the experience to be beneficial. Although we advocate for all teachers to have the

ability to teach disabled children embedded within their skill set, if there is a need for specialists in this area there ought to be suitably trained and competent teachers of disabled children across educational settings. ■

**Editor's comment:** *We would be keen to hear from any ITT providers – or teachers who have benefited from that provision – who believe they do take pains to prepare trainee PE teachers to include disabled pupils. What do you do and how do your trainees and early career teachers feel about their readiness to teach inclusive PE? Contact [editor@afpe.org.uk](mailto:editor@afpe.org.uk)*

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