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Promoting Inclusive Practice in Physical Education: Preparing the Next Generation

Joanna Hardman, Andrew Pitchford and Jo Shire

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the experiences of a group of trainee teachers who, as part of their PGCE course, organised, designed and delivered a sports festival for a group of disabled students in the local community. Although the aim of the event was two-fold – to provide young people from the local community the opportunity to participate in a variety of competitive sports and physical activities; and to provide trainee teachers with hands on experience of working in an inclusive environment – this article focuses on the impact this event had on a group of trainee teachers and their journeys in becoming physical education teachers.

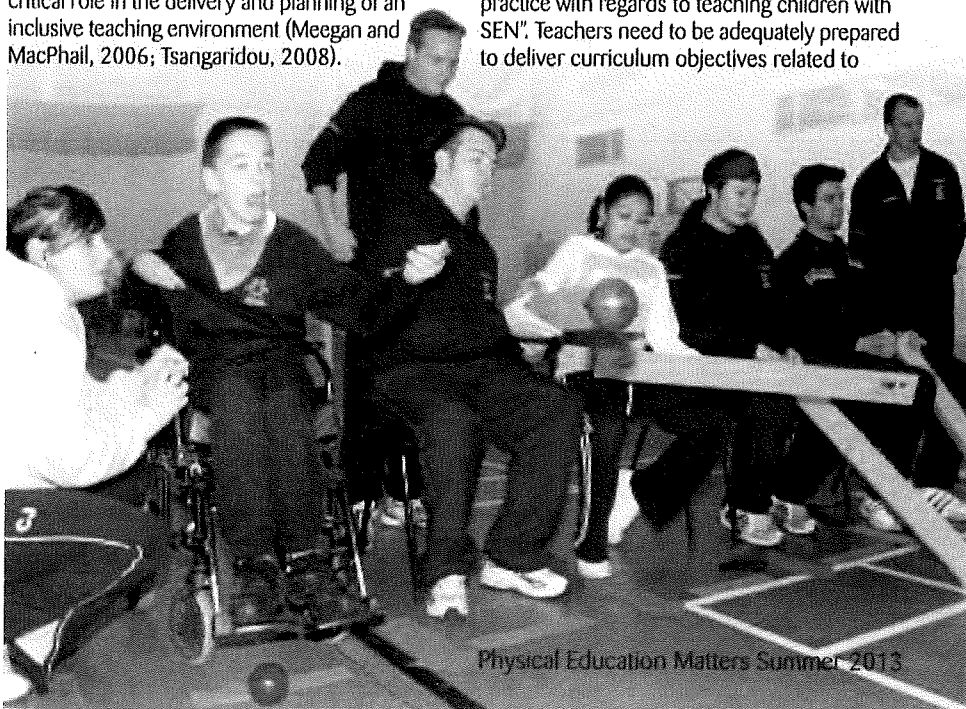
The article explores three notions: whether practical experience leads to a deeper learning that impacts on understanding of theoretical concepts related to inclusive physical education; whether hands-on experience leads to a shift in perceptions towards the notion of inclusive practice; and if the experience was relevant and meaningful to the student from a personal perspective.

Introduction

The statutory inclusion statement in the National Curriculum emphasises that teachers have a duty to: set suitable learning challenges, respond to pupils' diverse needs and differentiate assessment and learning to meet the individual needs of pupils (QCA, 1999). In reality, though, what is written on paper and what happens in practice may be two different

things. Farrell (2001) suggests it is not enough for teachers to recognise and be familiar with current educational policies, issues and philosophies but that they need to practice what is preached, ensuring that good practice infiltrates the field. If teachers are to engage in an educational curriculum that proposes to cater for all, then they need to be aware of their responsibility in the process of facilitating inclusion (Block 2007). They need to recognise that physical education lessons should not only be fully accessible but that they should also be meaningful and challenging for *all* individuals. Teachers' beliefs, values and attitudes play a critical role in the delivery and planning of an inclusive teaching environment (Meegan and MacPhail, 2006; Tsangaridou, 2008).

Pre-service teachers might have positive attitudes towards inclusion (Martin and Kudlacek, 2010:30) but Vickerman and Coates (2009: 137) concluded that, on the whole, they lack a "perceived readiness" when it comes to including pupils with SEN and/or disabilities in physical education. Morley *et al.* (2005: 91) also suggested that "specific and general feelings of 'not knowing' relate to teachers' lack of confidence and knowledge of how to adapt activities". A recent study by Coates (2012: 349) suggested that "PE teachers perceive the training they receive during initial teacher training (ITT) as a constraint on their practice with regards to teaching children with SEN". Teachers need to be adequately prepared to deliver curriculum objectives related to





inclusion (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). How they unpack, translate and ultimately transfer the principles of inclusion into practice is crucial.

Although education policy in the UK is very proactive in terms of inclusive practice there is a need to support teachers to effectively include young people with disabilities and SEN in mainstream education (Florian 2008) and, more specifically, in mainstream physical education (Vickerman, 2007). Hodge *et al.* (2004) and Hardin (2005) emphasised the important role that Initial Teacher Training Institutions (ITTIs) play in preparing the future generation of teachers to embrace and deliver the concept of inclusion.

Intervention

Following Coates' (2012) recommendation that student teachers should engage in a range of practical experiences linked to inclusive practice, staff delivering on a postgraduate certificate in physical education (PGCE) at a university in the south west of England decided to review the inclusive physical education training delivered. Traditionally, students participated in a one-day training programme but feedback from the students suggested that although this training day was "useful", "informative" and "provided ideas on how to adapt activities", it needed to be more "realistic" and "meaningful" – they wanted to actually experience working with young people with varying disabilities and/or SEN.

After consulting with local teachers and the school games coordinator, it was determined that there was a need to develop a sports festival for the local special schools. Subsequently, 15 PGCE students organised, planned and delivered the event and 30

undergraduate students supported the process. The PGCE students attended a training day before the event which was delivered by a disability sports coach, the school games organiser and a university lecturer. One hundred young people, with various disabilities, attended the event, called the Hexathlon Sports Festival, where they participated in five different activities: boccia, seated volleyball, table top games, athletics and street dance.

Methods

A social constructivist research approach was adopted, since the focal point of this research was to draw on the critical experiences of the trainee teachers who were directly involved in the design and delivery of the Hexathlon event. Data was collected in the form of open-ended surveys, focus groups and one-to-one interviews. Participants were asked to reflect on the following:

- feelings before and after the event
- what they felt they learnt in terms of subject knowledge
- if the event was meaningful in terms of their personal development and growth
- if the event helped in terms of raising disability awareness.

Underpinned by the concept of Thematic Coding (Flick 2009), significant categories, themes and views related to previous research conducted in the field of inclusive practice were identified in the text. The aim was to develop an understanding of key issues related to the students' constructed views of the impact of real life, hands-on experiences.

Results and discussion

The results are organised, presented and discussed under four major themes:

Attitudes

Learning Experiences

Personal and Social Development

Disability Awareness

Attitudes

When asked to reflect on how they felt immediately before the event the following adjectives were used by the students:

"Nervous" "Unsure" "Apprehensive"
"Overwhelmed" "Worried" "Anxious"

Students responded that they felt like this because they:

...lacked awareness of various disabilities... I was worried I might say or do the wrong thing.

...worried about their opinion of me... I wanted them to have a good day but I was worried that they wouldn't because of me and my lack of knowledge.

...worried about pitching it at the right level so they could all do it and get something out of it.

However, a number of students commented, *"That once the young people arrived any negative feelings I had disappeared"*. The results also suggest that they felt *"uneasy"* and *"nervous"* due to a lack of training and knowledge of inclusive practice, as concluded in earlier work by Vickerman and Coates (2009).

Learning experiences

All of the students involved in the Hexathlon event commented that it had been an extremely positive learning experience because it provided them with the opportunity to:

Work with a variety of disabilities and try new activities and sports in a real life environment.

Apply what they had been taught in lectures by planning and designing activities for actual people.

Experiment by differentiating and adapting activities to meet the needs of all individuals.

Two sub-themes emerged through the data collection process in terms of specific learning areas.

Connecting theory to practice

When reflecting on what they had gained from participating in the Hexathlon event, students responded that the opportunity to participate in *"real life experiences was amazing"* as it gave them *"hands on experience"*. A number of students commented that the experience allowed them to *"connect theory to practice"*. Specifically, students responded that the experience had *"...allowed for the application of the theory"*.

Through the Hexathlon event the community became part of the classroom where students were able to *"see theory through reality"* (Conville and Weintraub, 2001:7) and were able to make *"direct contact"* with issues that substantiated theoretical concepts rather than just thinking about an *"abstract encounter"* (Eads 1994:35). An example of this was when students were required to think on their feet and adapt an activity session so all individuals could participate. During the training session students had been introduced to the concept of Adaptation Theory and various inclusion strategies (see the STEP principle – Haskins, 2005 and the Inclusion Spectrum – Black and Stevenson, 2011). After the event, one of the students recounted how, during a game of

seated volleyball, they realised that one of the participants, who had a visual impairment, was struggling to see the volleyball. They showed the young person a variety of coloured balls and asked him which one was the easiest for him to see. They subsequently swapped the ball they were playing with for a bright pink training volleyball. On reflection the student commented, *"How easy it can be to get everyone involved with some thought"*. Through this practical example the students experienced a light bulb moment when the theory they had been introduced to in a classroom became real.

Reciprocal learning

Students commented that they, *"Learnt a lot from the teachers and they were very supportive"*. Kolb and Kolb (2005:207) emphasise, *"Human beings naturally make meaning from their experiences through conversation"*. There were numerous opportunities during the training day and the sports day for the students to engage in conversation with each other and practitioners (community coaches, teachers and teaching assistants) from the local community. The students received direct feedback from staff throughout the day and, in the post-event meeting, a number of the teachers commented that they had also learnt a lot from observing the students.

Personal and social development

Students commented that throughout the day there were specific moments when they found themselves thinking about *what* they were doing, *why* they were doing it and *how* they were doing it. When asked to reflect about the event, participants commented that the experience had helped them to develop and think critically about certain personal skills including their role and responsibility, their communication and social skills, and their leadership and delivery skills.

Role and responsibility

Carver (1997) suggests that programmes, such as the Hexathlon, provide opportunities for students to start to think about their role in the community. One student reflected, *"I felt like I had done something for the local community and the young people. A lot of the time on this course it's just about ticking a box but this was different"*. This illustrates that programmes that provide real-life learning experiences can help to develop and strengthen links between higher education institutions and the local community.

At the start of this programme students felt unprepared and they focused on their own insecurities, specifically on how they would manage to provide a safe, welcoming and

stimulating learning environment for all individuals. Lieberman and Houston-Wilson (2002) and Smith and Green (2004) suggest that, very often, teachers feel uneasy, challenged and out of their depth when it comes to inclusive practice because they have not received adequate training in this area. The students in this case study were taken out of their comfort zone and, because of this, began to question what their role and responsibility were in ensuring the young people who turned up on the day participated fully in the activities, enjoyed themselves and developed their social and physical skills.

Communication skills

One particular student described how they found working with a young person with autism very challenging during the event:

It was really difficult at the start trying to communicate with him and I was really nervous... I didn't know what to do... but the teacher explained that when he looked up it meant yes and when he looked down it meant no, so I started asking him direct questions... it was still hard but I learnt to pay attention to the signals.

This scenario not only illustrates how the students developed their own personal communication skills but that they also started to think about how they communicated with partners – teachers, teaching assistants, peers and lecturers for example.

Leadership and delivery skills

Students also commented that they felt their leadership skills developed during the day, as there were times when the students were required to take control and lead by example. The schools arrived at the start of the day at a fragmented pace! There was a constant flow of participants turning up which meant that students had to adopt specific roles so that the event ran smoothly. Some students met the buses and guided participants in, others allocated name tags and organised students into teams whilst others set up equipment. A group of students recognised that some participants wanted to get started so they organised a warm-up activity that all participants could join in with as they arrived.

Increased disability awareness

During the training session students were introduced to Lieberman and Houston-Wilson's (2002) levels of disability awareness: exposure, experience and advocacy. A sport student (who was an elite level boccia player and coach) delivered a practical session, where members of the local boccia club taught the

trainees how to play the game. The students reflected that being taught boccea by someone who actually played the game was really meaningful and that being able to ask specific questions about issues related to disability had a major impact on them.

Talking to Joe on the planning day was brilliant... explaining it from his experience was a lot more beneficial and really insightful.

I have so much more respect... boccea is really hard, really skilful – working with Joe and the others has really changed my view about it, I thought it would be easy but it wasn't. Joe and the others made me realise how it works and I really enjoyed the competition.

The students also commented that the day made them think carefully about what young people "can do" rather than what they "can't do". It changed their perception of how they saw the young people:

I was amazed how good some of the young people were at playing Boccea – they were really skilful.

Conclusion

The trainee teachers commented that taking part in the Hexathlon event made them:

Think more when I am teaching PE in schools... I feel more confident now... and think back to what we did that day and think about how I can make sure that everyone is involved... whether they have a disability or not.

The trainee teachers were given the opportunity to engage in a real life experience that helped to prepare them for their career in teaching. The event made them think critically about their role and duty to meet the statutory inclusion statement. After taking part in the Hexathlon event, the trainee teachers felt "very passionate" about inclusion because they could "see how important it was to provide opportunities for everyone to take part". The students on this programme were exposed to disability sports and given the opportunity to experience this event first hand; the next step is for them to fully embrace Lieberman and Houston-Wilson's levels of disability by becoming advocates in the field of inclusive physical education, by sharing this knowledge and putting it into practice in the schools they might teach in.

Recommendations

Although the students responded very positively to the programme, there were some specific issues that were raised. Students commented that they found it difficult "learning the best way in which they can understand and communicate together". They also worried about using the correct terminology "knowing what to say – what was acceptable." Quite a few students found

it difficult to manage some of the challenging behaviours, "When a girl with autism wouldn't take part in activities... I didn't know how to manage the situation".

Based on this feedback, the training day next year will include sessions on managing challenging behaviour, terminology and communication techniques, which will be delivered by practitioners from the local community.

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