

Episode six, December 2022, transcript

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Interviewer(s):

Respondent(s):

INT: Hello and welcome to another physical activity and well-being and education podcast episode with me, <Kate Stevenson>, Education Adviser and Physical Education Specialist in <County Durham>. We continue our PE, School Sport, Physical Activity and Well-being dialogue today with another one of our delightful guests.

[Music plays]

Hello listeners. Today I am joined by my esteemed colleagues from <Durham University>, <Dr Patrick [unclear 00:00:47]>, <Dr Mary Hanley> and Masters student, <Esther Waddington>. In this episode, they're going to tell you a little bit about their backgrounds, experience and work within autism and in particular their current research studies involving autistic children and young people and autistic adults with regards to physical activity and sport.

The National Autistic Society describes autism as, and this is a quote, "A lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Autistic people see hear and feel the world differently to other people and this may of course impact on their experience of play and physical activity from an earlier age and participation in sport and physical education throughout life." Latest figures, guys ,estimate that there are 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK, approximately 1% of the population, that I've taken from the public material in the National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults 2021 to 2026. We can discuss those figures and what we feel about them as we go on.

So today, <Patrick>, <Mary> and <Esther> are going to open discussions around barriers to participation in physical activity and sport for those individuals with an autism spectrum disorder and encourage our listeners to reflect upon how we as educators in schools and settings, or those of us working with adults or youngsters in the community provide an inclusive provision for such individuals and groups to access physical education, sport and physical activity.

I'm going to start with <Patrick>. <Patrick>, would you mind introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about your experience within the world of education and research?

RES1: Okay, thanks so much for having me today. I'm <Patrick [unclear 00:03:09]> an assistant professor at <Durham> University in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences. My journey in this world actually started as a physical educator. I did my undergraduate degree in physical education and it was kind of in my practical year where we had a lot of autistic children in a class that I was in that weren't participating. What was challenging was this kind of pervasive, you know, fear among some of our teachers who were like, "We don't know how to engage them. They don't want to participate. This is really hard. There's often meltdowns." So I was kind of like, *I like challenging behaviours. I love physical activity, I mean, that's been a big part of my life, and let's see what I can do about it in a research context.* My doctoral research in <Toronto, Canada> looked at how do we support autistic children and youth in physical activities settings broadly but also physical education, and now, since coming to the UK, I've been looking at more so autistic adults, so trying to take more of a life course approach because we know that autistic children become autistic adults and I think if we're going to develop supports and inclusive approaches, we have to look at the life span as a whole. So that's my background, thrilled to be here today and thanks so much for having me again.

INT: You're very welcome. I'm sure your contribution to our discussion here is going to be vital. You've touched on a really significant point there about the life cycle, you know, from diagnosis or not, a child is living with autistic tendencies and how us as educators support a child through into young adulthood and indeed how us, as a community, understand and support autistic children to function normally in normal society because for them there's no difference, is there, to what their perception is, they've always been autistic, and forgive

me if I'm not using appropriate language here, and you can correct me, but there's often a stigma, isn't there, around misinterpretation of a child, for instance, and how they present their understanding of themselves and the world around them as misbehaviour, for instance, and you mentioned there about the fear of how to teach appropriate [s/l 00:05:27 being] and ensure all individuals, neurodivergent or [s/l 00:05:33 SEND] and disability or including gifted and talented, are appropriately supported to engage across education and indeed physical activity and physical education in particular for health and well-being agendas.

<Mary>, I'm going to bring you in here as well because obviously I started to go down that route into children in particular, and I know your work with <Esther>, who's also on the call with us today, focuses around schools and settings too.

RES2: Yes, absolutely. Well, firstly, just thanks very much for having me. It's a real pleasure to be here today and to have the chance to discuss some of these things that obviously I'm very interested in. I'm a developmental psychologist and I'm an academic. Like <Patrick>, I'm based in <Durham> University. Unlike <Patrick>, I'm in the <Department of Psychology> and I'm also one of the co-directors for a centre for neurodiversity and development. Along with my colleague, <Professor Debbie [unclear 00:06:34]>, we've set up a research centre within <Durham> University which very much focuses on understanding a lot of the issues which you've already raised about how we can understand strength and difficulties for neurodivergent children and young people and how we can develop the appropriate support to help those children and young people thrive.

As you say, a lot of my work has focused on children and young people in relation to educational settings. So again with <Debbie> and with our students and fellow researchers in the centre, for a long number of years now we've been doing research that has been about trying to understand engagement and learning, particularly for autistic children and young people. Now, a lot of that work and certainly my background isn't physical activity so actually a lot of that work has really been focused on understanding things like attention in the classroom, sensory arousal in the classroom and anxiety in the classroom, and I should say that it's from that work that we have developed a particular package of support for teachers that we call AAA.

So we've developed a support package that's freely accessible to teachers and educators around how to support children and young people, particularly autistic children and young people who experience difficulties with AAA issues at school, and that's really where my interest in physical activity in school has come from because it's been through doing this work on AAA, which is around attention, sensory arousal and anxiety, through talking to teachers and parents and young people, that we've heard a lot about particular barriers and issues with accessing PE at school, briefly that, for example, if you're somebody who has sensory issues, getting changed for PE actually can act as a barrier to partaking in PE, if you're somebody who is very anxious, you might be somebody who struggles with unpredictability and uncertainty, and actually a PE lesson can bring a lot of uncertainty and a lot of unpredictability in a way that maybe some other lessons might not.

Very briefly, that's who I am, what I do and my segue into why I've become interested in understanding physical activity and PE at school for autistic young people.

INT: Thank you so much, <Mary>. You've mentioned there obviously that supporting children across all areas of academia and school and what have you, how challenging physical education is for the teacher to actually deliver appropriate physical education to be inclusive of all children and how children access that and the sporting environment, and what comes to mind is the swimming pool in particular. We know ourselves how noisy that environment is and how a sports hall echoes.

If I'm doing training with adults, teaching staff and what have you in a sports hall, that throwback of my own voice [laughs] well, you hear it enough, can be overloading actually and very difficult for anyone to kind of concentrate or engage, and I've got to be very mindful of how I project my voice, for instance, but that whole sporting environment, that sensory overload, auditory, the sounds, the smells, the visual, the tactile aspects of doing the physical activity too can be hugely challenging.

[00:10:30]

You mentioned PE kit, for instance, too. I know I work with my secondary PE department staff across county, we've talked about barriers to inclusion and things and how the noise

of a sports hall can really affect children's engagement but we also have talked about how staff can, for instance, overcome, small changes can make a big difference for children and young adults in schools, for instance, having staff think about doing sort of a sensory audit of their facility. So is there a window that's creaky all the time that they haven't noticed but your student notices and that's that one little thing that could make a big difference to them being able to concentrate or engage more appropriately or is there some aspect of insulation and padding that prevents that echoing of the sports hall or can some aspects of the lesson be delivered within the classroom environment before they go into the larger facility. All of these small little changes can make a huge difference, can't they?

RES2: Yes, I think that's absolutely right and certainly from our, the AAA work that we've done today, so thinking about learning in the classroom as opposed to PE necessarily, I think one of, well, there's a few key messages that we try to get across from that which resonate with what you've just said and they are about how everybody's different, everybody's an individual and, in fact, different is normal. We really need to change our mindset from "different is something atypical, there's something wrong with me" different to different is normal and less normalised trying to be inclusive for everybody's individual strengths and difficulties.

We also need to really understand and focus on the environment and what the environment brings to allow somebody to thrive because, yes, we also need to understand individual strengths and difficulties, for sure, but I think we've had too much focus on that up until this point and actually we now need to do an awful lot more to understand the impact of the environment, and certainly our work in classrooms and learning speaks to how important the environment can be and how many barriers the environment, the physical environment, the sensory environment can really provide for children and young people. There's a social relational model of disability that underpins our work which says that it's the mismatch between a person's skillset and the environment that creates disability and that really underpins our thinking in the work that we do.

The final point is that you spoke about [s/l 00:13:42 connections] there which is that small changes can make a big difference and we know that from talking to autistic young people about the small changes that can make a really significant difference for them. Changes that aren't often costly, don't cost a lot of money, they just need the understanding, the awareness

and the willingness really to be flexible about how we- in as much as we can to be flexible about how we deliver, whether it's our English, Maths and Science curricula or whether it's our PE curriculum, just to have that flexibility. Small changes can make a big difference.

INT: Absolutely. I was discussing this with a few colleagues around inclusion and what have you and, you know, we always seek models of good practice, but actually we also need to recognise that those models may not work for our particular groups of children or our particular individuals. So having that flexibility as you've mentioned and being, just speaking to student voice and letting them be the core creators of your curriculum, we talk about that a lot across everything, and it's quite difficult to get that balance, isn't it? I was thinking that actually educators are having to be almost scientific researchers in that they- to help, as well as seek student voice, they're also trying- a little bit of trial and error to see what works well for those groups or those individuals, but also without creating too much change. If you go- try to change your environment too much, for instance, the facilities or whatever, actually that could have a more detrimental effect on that student's engagement and ability to participate. So it's about almost controlling variables and changing that one thing and seeing if that has supported the youngster or not, would you agree, <Mary>, <Patrick>?

RES2: Yes, so <Patrick>, do you want to go in there?

RES1: Yes, I think again it's recognising- I think teachers are superheroes, honestly, without capes. There are so many demands of being a modern-day educator. No longer are you just instructing, you are now a care provider, you're providing social, emotional support for students and when <Mary> said we're not here to add more work, we're trying to work with the existing skillsets and abilities and opportunities, I think that's the biggest key, especially in an environment where sometimes it's just that little modification that actually might work for an autistic child, but not only that, it might also work for several students without necessarily having a label.

One way that I've worked with some educators is to try and sometimes reframe what we used to call special education teaching to just good teaching practice. If we're in a gym and, for example, it's a habit to use a whistle and to blow that whistle to stop or play but we know that

that might cause an entire meltdown for some of our kids, but that equally can be distressing for other kids. So it's trying to come to terms with small bits of teaching practice that [s/l 00:17:00 we're used to] that we take for granted, you know, if we're teaching physical education, it's probably because we like it, it's probably because we're successful at it and it's keeping that peace in mind, that not everyone has had that formative experience. Again, to include our children when we can, how we can but even to have that mind shift where one small adaptation, we can't do it all, teachers, I would say, are overburdened now more than ever and finding ways to support them along the way, along with the students should be, I think, our top priority from the research end through to the implementation, and to also again give the kids the best possible opportunity, for all kids to thrive in a physical education setting.

INT: Absolutely. Sport England, for instance, funding for secondary schools has looked at, well, has focused upon improving participation for secondary age students, thinking about the barriers to participation and looking at how to improve the perceptions of students about physical education and school sport. So making experiences more enjoyable and fun and appropriate to needs. All of this fits into all of that.

There has been funding for secondary colleagues to look at their own CPD and development to raise awareness across school, not just in their PE department, for instance, or to create projects to seek student voice or to create and what- as we did with education at Durham is we supported schools to build projects for change basically, looking at targeted individuals who were previously disengaged, seeking their voice, looking at ways of promoting physical activity through other ways, being creative often or raising awareness as we should for every child and young adult about the importance of physical activity.

So when we're thinking of autism and- or inclusivity across everything, that actually we know from research that physical activity reduces anxiety, that it supports our health, mental health and well-being and we want our students to engage and understand that and we want to have it valued in our schools as well. We talk about, as you've said, that actually, having inclusive practice, seeking student voice, adapting and supporting, being flexible in approach, being creative often with our curriculum and our extracurricular provision to improve engagement is good practice.

So you're absolutely right that part of initial teacher training, part of funding and support and opportunities for continual professional development is all about raising awareness, is all about giving us the tricks of the trade and the tools to be strong educational practitioners, strong teachers and teaching assistants to actually meet the needs of all children.

[00:20:19]

Going back to your research that you're working on and I've talked there a little bit about, well, quite a bit about student voice, people voice and seeking the opinions, the perceptions, the motivations of our youngsters, how have you both gone about your research in collating that data if you like from our youngsters?

<Mary>, do you want to come in with yours and, <Esther>, perhaps talk about your recent research and how you've engaged with some of the youngsters in our schools?

RES2: Be happy to. So we are in the midst of a project which is a collaboration <County Durham> Sport, and when I say "we", I am talking about myself, I'm talking about <Esther> who I'm sure will be happy to speak in a minute and also <Dora Sadler> who's [s/l 00:21:15 another] Masters student with us in the Department of Psychology, and we've been looking to understand barriers and facilitators to accessing PE at school for autistic young people, aged 12 to 17. So these are secondary school-aged young people.

<County Durham> Sport came to us and said, "Look, we'd really like your help to understand some of these barriers and we think your AAA work might help us to understand this." We started off by looking in the literature as to what was out there, what was out there but we know the literature tells us that participation in physical activity is significantly reduced among the autistic population compared to the general population but when it came to finding evidence about what's going on at school and particularly in a UK context we found actually there was very little evidence out there and so, really then, we decided that the best question to ask was what are the barriers- what is the situation with PE [unclear 00:22:20] young people, and we decided to ask them themselves.

So primarily this work is about asking autistic young people, “How do you feel about PE?”, “Are you an attender?”, “What is it you like about it and what is it you don’t like about it?”, “What kind of activities do you do in PE that you really like?”, “What are the activities that you would really like to do that maybe you don’t get to do?” And so just really probing in a lot of different ways and with a whole range of questions, the perceptions of these young people.

<Esther>, who might talk now, if she’s there, if she’d like to contribute now, has been interviewing autistic young people and she’s spoken to 11 autistic young people so far to get their input and she’s had some really interesting input. These kids, it’s not that they don’t like physical activity, it’s that there’s a whole range of barriers that rear their heads when they come to try and access these things through school. From <Esther>’s work so far, and I must stress that she’s really- she hasn’t finalised this work yet, it will be finalised within the next month or so, but I’m sure she’ll be happy to share a few insights, particularly around uncertainty and on sensory issues and choice as things that are coming up from these young people.

INT: Wonderful. <Esther> would you like to come in there and talk a little bit about your insights thus far with your youngsters?

RES3: Sure. I’m a Masters student at <Durham> University. I’m one of <Mary>’s and <Mary’s> just explained what I’m doing. I did 11 interviews with autistic young people between the ages of 12 and 17 and I am currently going through them and looking at common themes that come up again and again. So <Mary’s> described them, one of the things that’s really come up over and over again, even for kids who love PE, has been uncertainty about activity. So a lot of anxiety, a lot of the students I’ve spoken to have been very anxious before their PE lesson, even if they’re someone who might sometimes enjoy PE, because they don’t know what’s going to happen in their lesson. In other lessons, you often have a good idea of what’s coming up but in PE, you’re affected by the weather and sometimes by what else is going on in sports hall on that day and so the curriculum can be varied and you don’t necessarily know what to expect week to week and that’s something that can be really difficult for some of these students. Just uncertainty in general.

So uncertainty about PE kit which again comes into that depending on the weather. So if you're outside, maybe [s/l 00:25:15 you're supposed to be] wearing your leggings and you're worried that you may have forgotten your leggings. Also, just generally being concerned about whether or not you have your PE kit and whether or not, like, how it will be received if you have forgotten it [laughs]

There's just been a lot of anxiety and uncertainty about- also uncertainty of who you're going to be with. If you're on a team, will you be choosing the team, will the teacher be choosing the team, will you have to wait to find out if someone is going to choose to pick you, these sorts of things are the things that I've had coming up a lot from kids was uncertainty.

INT: Yes. You've touched on, at the very end there, <Esther>, about picking teams and the amount of times that that comes up when we seek student voice across a lot of remits around participation and engagement or health maybe or when we're looking around PSHA models, when we're thinking about what induces anxiety or peer-to-peer induced anxiety relationships, friendship groups, all that sort of thing, and picking things in PE comes top-ranked, number 10, produces the most anxiety every time and yet, we still don't seem to get it right or get that information translated across to coaching providers in particular and often a lot of our schools and settings, that actually we need to think about those small little pedagogical approaches to our teaching and learning about how we actually just pick teams.

There are so many structures and models to do, or staff need to come on some of my CPD events, because there's just far more fun and engaging ways than having your peers pick teams, or doing it in supportive ways, or actually do we need to have there being a picking option, there's other ways of getting children involved in competitive sport, for instance, because that's also a switch off for many of our youngsters, do our schools have too much competition or for some not enough because actually they often thrive in a team-related aspect, as opposed to individual physical activity movements or the other way round, depending on their sensory overloads and all of that. So there's so much more to be discussed with practitioners about what they can do to tweak their own practice that would have a significant impact on reducing that anxiety for many of our youngsters.

Thanks <Esther>. I get passionate about what we talk about and then I start to take over so I will bring you all back in. <Patrick>, you're looking at the voice of autistic adults and, in particular, women, is that correct?

RES1: Yes, since coming to the UK, it's been another project that I've picked up, like <Mary> identified, the UK for [unclear 00:28:17] autistic children's particularly peculiar because in the UK autistic research is really strong across a lot of different areas and so, to me, when I noticed this trend, I was like this is a bit shocking, to be honest, I didn't expect this big gap. But one of the gaps that I did notice was this forgotten generation and forgotten cohort of individuals in autistic women in particular who may have been diagnosed or misdiagnosed with other things, autism, even though it still has a higher diagnosis ratio in men than women, we do that is slightly biased, our criteria might not be necessarily reflective of gender and when it was developed it came during a very gendered approach.

So we have an entire cohort of individuals who have been missed and forgotten and just speaking with autistic women in the north east especially, it's been really just eye-opening to not only learn about the barriers to physical activity but also just wider society, and I think one of the things that keeps coming up doing adult-based research is again we can't keep advocating for people to keep being more active and we can't keep blaming people that are not active enough, and we have this very evaluate and blame approach on people as a society and I think it doesn't help in any case for anyone to say that you're not active enough or it's going to really make you really ill.

We know in public health research that blaming messages don't work and the autistic woman keeps saying, "We keep telling people this but no one's listening," and to really support them it's more than just saying, "Go out there. It's good for you." It's addressing the social barriers. So, for example, caregiving, where they might not have the space and the time to go and be physically active in a day where they have other caregiving responsibilities, especially if they have another child who is autistic, right, that's another value that's in their life and they have to work with what some of those parameters are. But again, our funding models and our social supports don't necessarily always align with what the needs are.

[00:30:21]

So it's been really eye-opening again just to step back and see what are we doing, how do we get to this point and what do we need to do to move forward, and one of the things again that I've [s/l 00:30:33 said] to move forward is to stop blaming people for not being active. We know that to encourage someone we almost need to take them along with the journey not put the journey on them, and that's just again a change in mindset that I think as a generation we're coming to.

The autistic women have also said this really prescriptive notion of physical activity, "Must do this many minutes per day," for some people that might work really well for them. For other autistic people especially, it becomes something of an obsession and actually that might be debilitating where they might get really hard on themselves, like, they didn't meet, let's say, 30 minutes today or they didn't do their 30 sit-ups before bed and that becomes actually very dangerous and debilitating for some people where we know that there can be this intense fixation with certain things like that, right.

So again it's been something to really grapple with and the one of the main pieces that keeps coming up as well is again, just debunking myths about physical activity. People assume right away that you've got to go to the gym four times a week or you have to look like a certain, have a certain body type when we know that body type is not related to health in anyway. We have all these societal norms working together with, <Mary>'s working with the sensory world, working together with biology and [s/l 00:31:49 it's, <Mary>] all of those intersections together to really develop a better understanding of what is really happening and then, how do we move forward, and there's lots of work to be done everywhere across every sector but I think especially in this cohort of autistic women who, like I've said, have been forgotten over the time of just the diagnostic period and how we've gotten to where we are today.

That project is almost done. We've had autistic women also conduct interviews and we've been very lucky to partner with two organisations who have been super helpful with, not only helping us speak to women but also building trust and relationships because especially in the scientific world we know that sometimes the autistic community has a hard time grappling with trust with scientists who may have used science for different purposes, if we think about some of the initial autism research. So I think we have a way forward with some researchers that feel comfortable with the autistic community and vice versa.

I think again the same way to get someone to be physically active, you have to build that connection. I always say you've got to build the connection before correction when you're working with autistic people, period, and I think that's an avenue that we have to start to think about that way rather than just pathologising and blaming people for not meeting guidelines, but rather to work with their skills and what they can do versus what they can't. [unclear 00:33:10] from the women, it's been great to just hear their insights and especially again with another student of mine who also is autistic and hearing her gendered experiences again of not being- you know, it's like, "Oh, you're a woman. You can't do that. You can't be a powerlifter." And she does it and people are, like, "And you're autistic, that doesn't make sense." It's like all these stereotypical assumptions that are just really still pervasive in society and not only is there a lot of work to be done with inclusive PE but then myth-busting and challenging stereotypes and norms and reformulating what we think of what a healthy life looks like through physical activities.

Definitely always something to do on this job. There's never enough research [laughs] and [s/l 00:33:51 efforts] that need to be done at a bigger scale. Working at the individual level's important but I think also then diversifying several [unclear 00:33:58] like <Mary>, said to the social level, to the structure level to really challenge some of our bigger social norms.

INT: I can imagine your piece of research has actually got [laughs] a huge aspect of recommendations much of which is about actually more research is needed within those looking at societal norms, looking at gender inclusivity or lack of equalities, and all of that because your insight from your females has provided a range of data there to use, not just in around the autistic field of research.

RES1: Yes. In my previous experience, especially working with kids, to bring this back to the school setting, in PE, you know, there are a few different things that <Dora> mentioned, especially about being very anxious, provoking and anxiety provoking before a class starts. So one small thing that we can do is literally, and it sounds so simple and it is because [unclear 00:34:58] I read out the schedule for today, right. So today if we have a white board in a gymnasium, it's like, "Okay, warm up," write what that warm up is. Then say, "Main activity. Cool down." Even putting walking in and having that ahead of time might help if, I mean, this is a bit of a stretch sometimes for some teachers, to [unclear 00:35:15] that ahead of time if possible if

you know exactly what you're going to be doing. That small preparation piece is a huge way to alleviate some of that anxiety and that unpredictability that can be really important. The favourite [s/l 00:35:30 I like] always support teachers with is to provide this, what I call, "rule of three," and again, this carries over across different parts of education but physical activity especially where we don't want to be providing too much information all at once. We know it doesn't work. We don't want to say, "Come here. Get dressed. Do a run around," like, you just forget it all and it becomes so overwhelming. So sticking to three pieces of information, three instructions at one time, letting the task be executed and then providing the next sets of instructions, again, it works really well for autistic children and youth and for most kids, to be honest, they probably will benefit from that as well.

INT: Yes. We have to be mindful of language and communication, don't we, especially when you're thinking about that physical forum of instructions and that overload. How we present and instruct how we demonstrate is crucial. Thinking about children who are struggling with their verbal and non-verbal communication of course. <Mary> do you want to come in there with that, around how we support children with that language and communication aspect?

RES2: Yes, I mean, I suppose that rule of three that <Patrick> has shared is a real nugget because it really does give teachers very simple and practical and easy use to use way to approach giving that information out to autistic children and young people and just to also, we heard about what <Patrick> says, that anything that can be done in advance to help with that preparation, reduce that uncertainty is really, really important.

On the issue of language [unclear 00:37:08] obviously there's no sort of one- I don't think there's any sort of one strategy or tip that I could necessarily give because obviously really, it's about adapting the language and communication to the individual children and young people that you're working with and we know there's a whole variety of systems and visual communication approaches and toolkits that you can use to do that.

I'm thinking about, for autistic children and young people who may have few or no words, you're really thinking about using a picture-based communication system, I guess something like [unclear 00:37:54] or something like Makaton. But even for those kids who are- fluent

verbal communication and who appear to be very able in that respect, you still do need to think about the clarity of your communication, i.e. meaning what you say and saying what you mean. Are you being clear or are there several different ways that you could interpret what you say or the instructions that you give because that lack of clarity and that ambiguity is again one of those things that can give rise to a lot of anxiety and to a lot of uncertainty.

So simplicity, clarity of message, anything that you can give in advance to help reduce some of that uncertainty and then adapting your communication style to the child or the young person that you are working with.

I suppose the only other thing [s/l 00:38:54 I could just] throw in the mix in terms of thinking about planning PE lessons, and <Esther> might like to come in here, is the element of choice and flexibility because I don't think we've really spoken about that yet and I think that is something that is coming from the testimonies of the young people that <Esther's> working with, the degree to which there could be choice and flexibility to adapt to some of the activities that these young people may engage with more.

I know from <Dora's> work, for example, <Dora> asked a group of autistic young people what their favourite activities were and what their least favourite activities were and there are some things coming through that, on average, the group of people <Dora> worked with really don't like. Rugby. Really don't like rugby. Trampolining. Really love trampolining.

So it may be that, for this neurodivergent group of children and young people, that there are some activities that they may benefit more from than neurotypical children and young people and we really need to understand that because that could be a really simple choice to offer that could work really well for a lot of autistic children and young people.

[00:40:13]

<Esther> I don't know if you want to say something else about this issue of choice and what you've learned from the young people you've spoken to?

RES3: Yes. I think the key thing that I've found is that most of the young people I spoke to, they all had a different individual sport that they preferred. So I think it really is- there's a lot of individuality and you've got to talk to the students that you've got and work out what works for them.

A thing that a lot of people spoke about was that they liked their- their sort of favourite PE days or, like, their ideal lesson, some of- so each stu- I asked each participant to explain to me about their ideal lesson. A lot of them it would be, "When we get to do choices or options. So there would be several different PE activities set up and we could choose between them and I could work alone if I wanted to or I could work in a small group if I wanted to but I'm not made to be in some big overwhelming contact sport," which many of the young people I spoke to, although not all of them, didn't like. The idea of being able to have a choice in what you're doing.

And then also, choice in what you're wearing. There was a sort of overwhelming hatred for skorts. Really, really, really didn't like skorts and feeling forced into a skort, especially for, I spoke to some young people who didn't necessarily identify as- who were non-binary, who were gender-fluid, and something like a skort, which is very gendered, is something that would make them feel very uncomfortable.

But nonetheless sometimes people can get very stuck on appropriate uniform and that that's how it's supposed to be and that that can be something that, in one of the kids I spoke to, that actually ended up preventing them from carrying on taking part in their PE lessons which is quite sad.

But, yes, so generally choice with just, like, being flexible, just so that you can get someone through the door is something that a lot of the young people I was talking about- talking to talked about.

INT: Thanks <Esther>. Uniform is one- PE kit uniform is one aspect that's been heavily discussed around, in our PE departments across the county and thinking of what our students' perceptions of what they like and don't like and what's appropriate for them, especially when we're thinking about gender and as you've talked about non-binary students as well

and having a voice. What comes across from all of this, isn't it, that actually we need to seek the motivations, opinions, perceptions from children and young adults, that actually they need to be heard, we need to listen? It's a school and settings priority, undoubtedly, that they need the voice of youngsters but action things accordingly.

Often when we talk to students, they feel like there are student voice groups, ambassadorships, there's school councils, all of those set up, and they have their meetings but often they're not necessarily seeing the action happening from whatever they've suggested or whatever they've divulged so they don't feel like actually they've been heard or listened to and it's almost lip service to it. Some of that will possibly, there will have been things happening but it hasn't been shown as much and it's been less obvious perhaps but actually we need to make a big statement about, "Actually, your voice is heard. These are the actions." They need to be listened to from a very early stage in the co-creation of the curriculum changes that may occur.

So when we're thinking about, as <Mary> talked about, trampolining, for instance, if that is going to now look and become part of that curriculum agenda for physical education, then what will it look like? Will the fact that it's mixed genders, for instance, or whatever on the trampoline, is that going to cause issues for some of our students? Do they want it to be an option for some or is it going to be part of a stuck curriculum aspect that everyone will do or will it be certain groups of children so they're actually- often that is the case, when they're in groups for certain activities that doesn't suit their need, they often need to be able to make a choice on that too which can be very difficult and challenging for schools but equally something a small tweak or change may be very beneficial for the majority of students to have their voice heard and action to be taken to support it. It's all about being heard, isn't it?

Thank you so much all of you for your time on this. It's most beneficial and I'm sure that we'll open further discussions with the network of primary practitioners in our secondary schools and also our PE subject leads in our [s/l 00:45:29 primary too] There's a vast amount of opportunity to disseminate a lot of this research with our schools and settings but also for us to create further dialogue and forums and open up discussion further.

When you're thinking about your research and your recommendations, we've talked about student voice there, is there anything else that you feel that practitioners in schools need to know or need to be considerate of in providing an inclusive school sport and physical activity provision?

RES1: I think they're just small adjustments that can go along the way, right. So again, when I think about, <Mary> talked about [s/l 00:46:18 the sensory environment] are we considerably outside. What is some consistency in our routine? What are some of our norms and habits that we can establish early on in the year and that you've talked about, you know, it's not a top-down, "I'm the teacher, you're the student." We know that doesn't work very well. [unclear 00:46:37] try and co-create that with the students and say, "We have the shared understanding of what our values and norms and rules are," and to have them build that diversity and community of learners to actually have that space.

Also, we know the rewards system often works really well. Even though our youth and children might not always have a choice [s/l 00:46:59 for reward but to make it theirs] When I was teaching, we'd always have Freedom Friday. Friday was the day they got to choose what activity they were doing and so you kind of would have to adapt.

Avoiding certain activities, for us, at least, in Canada, dodgeball was still a very common activity that was extremely distressing to a lot of people, especially people who didn't have the coordination or motor skill abilities to catch a ball, throw a ball, get out of the way. Picking certain activities that we know that are going to cause more damage than benefit. Something can be so simple can make a big way into keeping someone active over a long course because we see both in the artistic and non-artistic population, individuals who are less active during childhood and adolescence are less likely to also be active in adulthood.

So those early days and, what I would even call trauma for some people, that doesn't go away. Those scars do not heal and we don't want to be doing that in a physical activity setting. In fact, we want people to be life-long learners of physical activity and people who find meaning in movement, I mean, that's my new tagline is "Finding meaning in movement," how we do that, especially in a school place setting, needs to be kind of done in tandem with teachers, because again, teachers are unsung heroes that have been asked to do a lot, especially the

last two years in the pandemic whether it was teaching PE online which I know some of my friends said it was the most horrible thing in the world, but to again, reframe our general approaches that we might have grown up with, so again, at least, in Canada, we had a very militaristic style of PE with push-ups and fitness testing and again, there might be value to that but that shouldn't be our only way of teaching physical activity. So it's checking our own assumptions, having that ability to reflect on how we do things, why we do them, what value does it add and how can we adapt things as we go forward.

INT: I'm just thinking about curriculum there, trampolining and what have you, as well, and when you're thinking of children with autism and thinking about how they interpret signals from their senses in relation to bodies and movement, so if you've got an under-sensitivity to sensors, you struggle perhaps, you are perceived to be clumsy, for instance, so that, this proprioception and your vestibular system to do with your balance and what have you, or if you're, you can struggle with your vestibular system and what have you. So things like dance and athletics and gymnastic-based movement helps support that. It helps support for every child and youngster and we need to make sure that our curriculum has that breadth and balance.

[00:50:00]

We don't go too heavily down that team, organised sport route or we don't go too heavy on the dance route that may switch off others and cause disengagement and all of that. It's about getting that balance, isn't it, to support every child and in particular sometimes having those intervention movement strategies for, in particular, for our younger children where we're thinking about sensory approaches to support the development of proprioception or the vestibular system et cetera. It's quite crucial really.

So sometimes it's about an empowerment of the teaching staff to understand that an understand what misconceptions are around behaviour, clumsiness and those labelled approaches that we push out there or society does, that actually, as <Mary> touched upon at the start, that everybody's individual and individuality should be celebrated. There isn't really a norm, we've all got our traits, tweaks and characteristics that should be celebrated across all fields.

<Mary>, do you want to come in with anything that you feel is perhaps the recommendation from your studies and <Esther's> research as well that's coming out?

RES2: It's always tricky and I always feel slightly uncomfortable when somebody asks me for recommendations or any of these things for a couple of different reasons one of which is I can't imagine how tough it is to be a teacher as <Patrick> said, like a modern day educator, because the kind of demands that our teachers are under at the minute I think are really hard to understand unless you're in the job. So I always feel a little bit uneasy about recommending things to teachers because I'm always trying to understand. It's all well and good for me to, it's very easy to hand out recommendations, it's much more difficult to actually put them in place in the systems that different people are working in.

The second thing is when we're talking, especially about neurodivergence, children and young people, a phrase that you'll often hear in this line of work is, "Once you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person," and that's really about the fact that we are all different and when it comes to supporting autistic young people, yes, these young people may share certain similarities but just like the rest of us they're going to be so different to each other. It's rarely the case that one recommendations going to work for many different neurodivergent children and young people.

So the one that I'm going to go with is not a recommendation for practice. It's about training on understanding. As a PE practitioner, it's about understanding all of the things that lie beneath the surface. It's about understanding what those sensory experiences can be like. It's about understanding why so many autistic young people experience such high levels of anxiety because it's really, you know, we can give a recommendation that might work for <Mary> but won't work for <Patrick> but if you understand <Mary> and <Patrick>'s sensory differences and the reasons why they might be anxious, then you can tailor your own strategies and your own approaches to the individual, to a whole range of different young people.

I guess that's what I would say is that, do what you can to engage in training around what lies beneath the surface, why autistic and neurodivergent young people can struggle with these particular issues or in these particular areas because it's really armed with that understanding

that you can develop your own practice and your own approaches and tailor those to suit a whole range of different people.

INT: Wonderful. Thank you, <Mary>. I guess that wraps everything up, that actually having conversations like this is about that awareness raising and speaking to each other and sharing what works for us, what hasn't worked and also providing that outlet as well because as you've touched on there, teachers are under so much pressure from left, right, centre, all over, and to support every child and every child's need, we've got to pat ourselves on the back sometimes to recognise what we manage to do amongst the pressures across everything within education and providing that pastoral care for our youngsters in particular too. So yes, it's about sharing dialogue because we've also got to think about our own mental health and well-being and often that is about speaking more, talking more, I'm a good talker, as you know, and there you go.

I'm going to wrap up here. We've talked forever. This is a really long podcast and I'm so happy to have had you engage with our listeners today.

Thank you to <Esther>, who is on the call with us today. Thanks <Dr Patrick> and <Dr Mary>. It's been most valuable to have you with us today.

Do, listeners, look out for our podcasts coming more fluid and to you quickly. We've got lots of new guests on my list to speak to and I'm sure we will also invite <Esther> and <Patrick> and <Mary> to speak to us again.

Many thanks for your time.

Audio ends: [00:55:47]