From Participation to Belonging: Understanding Sports Engagement in Autism through Teachers' Narratives

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ABSTRACT:

This research investigates the involvement of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in sports through the key transition from participation to inclusion in physical education (PE) settings. Although policies aim for inclusive education through participation in sports, being part of a group does not guarantee inclusion and integration. To address this, this study presents a narrative inquiry into more than 50 PE teachers across a range of school environments. Four interrelated factors emerged as crucial to participation. First, teaching strategies such as personalized instruction and adaptations for sensory needs were crucial to facilitating student engagement. Second, relational pedagogy played a crucial role, as teachers prioritized trust, empathy, and ongoing engagement as means to promote

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inclusion. Third, systemic and structural factors, including a lack of training, rigid curricula, and support for inclusion, limited the success of inclusive strategies. Last, student voice was found to play a crucial role, with students with ASD shaping their participation in a supportive and malleable environment. In summary, the evidence shows belonging is not an automatic outcome of engagement but a socially constructed concept affected by the teacher, peers, and other circumstances. These insights suggest a need for pedagogic reform, teacher training, and policies to promote engagement and belonging, beyond participation, for students with ASD.

Keywords: Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Physical education etc.

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder with variations in social interactions, communication, and behaviors (World Health Organization, 2021; American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In the classroom, these features may impact students' engagement in planned and unstructured activities, such as physical education (PE) lessons. An early insight from Simon Baron-Cohen (2008) and Tony Attwood (2007) suggests while students on the autism spectrum might find it challenging to engage in reciprocal social interactions and perceive others' feelings, they also have their own strengths that can be developed in the classroom through responsive teaching. Similarly, Temple Grandin (2013) emphasizes the need for structured tasks to increase confidence and participation in people with ASD. Physical education (PE) is a unique element of education that addresses physical, motor, and psychosocial development. It offers opportunities for communication, cooperation, and success (Sherrill, 2004), which are important aspects of development. PE provides opportunities for children with ASD to practice motor skills and to engage in social interaction. However, PE inclusion has been approached primarily in terms of participation, often measured by observable behaviors in activities (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). While this is a critical component, it may not always be so for students.

So it is necessary to distinguish between participation and belonging. Participation is a physical presence and action, whereas belonging is a personal sense of inclusion, acceptance, and social acceptance. For instance, students with disabilities, such as ASD, can be present in the physical education classroom, but can also experience being ostracised (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). This emphasizes the need to consider feelings of acceptance and inclusion within the learning environment in understanding inclusion. Teachers are key influencers of experience. Teachers influence participation in activities through their teaching styles, attitudes, and interactions, which, in turn, affect social experiences in PE. Teachers are gatekeepers who can open or close opportunities for inclusive experiences through their organization of activities, interactions with peers, and individual engagement with students. So, inclusion is not just about structure but is made real through the practice of teaching. There is a growing emphasis on inclusive education in the literature, but little attention to how teachers conceptualize and practice inclusion in PE. Existing research is either small-scale or quantitative and does not explore experiences in depth. There is a dearth of large-scale qualitative research that gives voice to teachers' viewpoints and stories, particularly regarding participation and belonging.

Our research uses a narrative inquiry methodology to examine teachers' experiences of engaging

children with ASD in physical education (PE) and sports. The study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of physical education (PE) teachers engaged in sports with students with ASD?
2. What do teachers do to facilitate engagement and inclusion?
3. What factors facilitate and hinder inclusive practices in PE?
4. What do teachers believe about and foster in relation to student agency in sports?

Through teachers' stories, the study seeks to gain insight into their inclusive practices and how to promote engagement beyond participation in sports.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Autism and Physical Education

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have motor coordination issues (balance, sequencing, and timing) that affect their participation in physical education (PE) activities (Pan, 2010). Recent literature shows that these motor delays continue to affect participation, particularly during rapid and group activities that require quick adjustments (Bremer et al., 2021; Colombo-Dougovito et al., 2022). These challenges are not stable and therefore suggest a need for individualized teaching approaches. Sensory differences are also important. PE typically involves a noisy, unpredictable, and ever-changing environment, which can be overwhelming for children with ASD (Healy et al., 2013). Recent research has demonstrated that a sensory-friendly environment (with predictability and minimal stimuli) leads to increased participation and comfort (Ashburner et al., 2022; Pfeiffer et al., 2023). Social engagement is another key aspect. Participation in PE can involve implicit social rules, cooperation, and communication, which may be difficult for some students with ASD (Lang et al., 2010). However, recent evidence suggests that peer-mediated programs lead to greater social engagement and inclusion (Bambara et al., 2021). However, there are plenty of positives about PE. Exercise has been found to improve social and physical well-being, as well as behavior (Srinivasan et al., 2014). Recent research also indicates that regular adapted physical activity programs increase self- esteem and reduce anxiety for students with ASD (Garcia et al., 2023).

2.2 Participation vs Belonging

Belonging and participation are fundamental to inclusive education. Participation is about external engagement, and belonging is about internal acceptance. Theoretical foundations emphasize the importance of belonging. Abraham Maslow (1943) proposed that belongingness was an aspect of mental health, and Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that it was a motivating factor. These ideas remain salient in education. More recent research builds on this to highlight the complexity of belonging across relationships, environment, and identity (Allen et al., 2021). Moreover, recent research (within the past four years) confirms that belonging predicts student engagement, well-being, and retention in schools (Korpershoek et al., 2022; Bouchard & Berg, 2023). Goodenow (1993) was the first to demonstrate that belonging is associated with motivation and achievement. Recent work has shown that for students with disabilities (including ASD), belonging is related to inclusive practices and acceptance by peers (Furrer et al., 2022). So, participation offers access, and belonging offers quality. This has implications for PE, given that it is a social context.

2.3 Teacher-Mediated Inclusion

Inclusion in PE is implemented through the teacher's practices. Their teaching strategies, beliefs, and classroom environment impact students. Inclusive strategies, such as differentiated instruction and task design, increase engagement among students with ASD (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015). Recent research highlights the importance of teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy for their ability to apply inclusive practices (Qi & Ha, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023). Teachers also support peer interactions. Group tasks and peer support approaches can foster inclusion (Tant & Watelain,

2016). Recent studies show that peer mediation strategies not only enhance social interactions but also promote engagement and a sense of belonging among students with ASD (de Leeuw et al., 2022). However, barriers persist. Educators often cite a lack of resources, training, and support from their school systems as barriers (Sharma et al., 2018). There is recent evidence that these barriers persist, especially in less well-resourced schools (Nguyen et al., 2023). Involving families and experts also adds to inclusive endeavors (Lindsay et al., 2014). Recent studies point to the need for a multidisciplinary approach to meet the unique needs of students with ASD (Odom et al., 2021).

2.4 Narrative Inquiry in Education

Narrative inquiry offers an important lens on experiences in education. Jerome Bruner (1991) describes narrative as a key method of how people make meaning, an idea that has shaped qualitative studies. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) built on narrative inquiry as a methodology focusing on narrative and experience. This method enables studies of teachers' understandings and negotiations of educational contexts. Riessman (2008) notes that narrative analysis focuses on both the content and form of narrative, which allows a richer exploration of meaning-making. Polkinghorne (1995) also argues that narratives are shaped by time and context, making them well-suited to examining practices such as inclusion that are in development. Current research supports the use of narrative inquiry in education. It has been extensively employed to study teacher identities, inclusion, and learning (Squire et al., 2021; Barkhuizen, 2022). Narrative methods have also been found to capture the complexities of inclusion, especially in contexts where statistical data may not capture the nuances of experience (Clarke & Braun, 2021). In this research, narrative analysis allows a rich exploration of teachers' experiences of sports participation in ASD. The use of stories allows researchers to understand how participation is perceived and negotiated, and how it translates into feelings of inclusion in practice-based PE settings.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on a conceptual framework that describes how teacher-mediated practices shape the journey from participation to belonging in physical education (PE) for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Teachers play a critical role in inclusion processes as providers of the classroom environment, interactions, and engagement. Drawing on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, student engagement is seen as taking place within a system of complex interactions, including the classroom environment, peer relations, and institutional factors. Teacher practices are immediate and influential factors of students' participation in the system. But participation doesn't always lead to inclusion. Non-participatory factors can affect the transition from participation to inclusion. Social interactions with peers play a critical role in social acceptance and collaboration with others, while the physical environment (including auditory access) and task demands contribute to their comfort and participation in the learning environment. These impact the journey from participation to inclusion. In addition, the framework is informed by social cognitive theory (Albert Bandura, 1986), which emphasizes the triadic relationship between person, behavior, and environment. Children with ASD have agency and self-efficacy and are responsive to feedback. Overall, the framework considers belonging to be a function of interactions between teacher, peer and environmental factors. It recognizes that inclusion does not follow a linear path but is an interaction of factors that impact student experiences in PE.

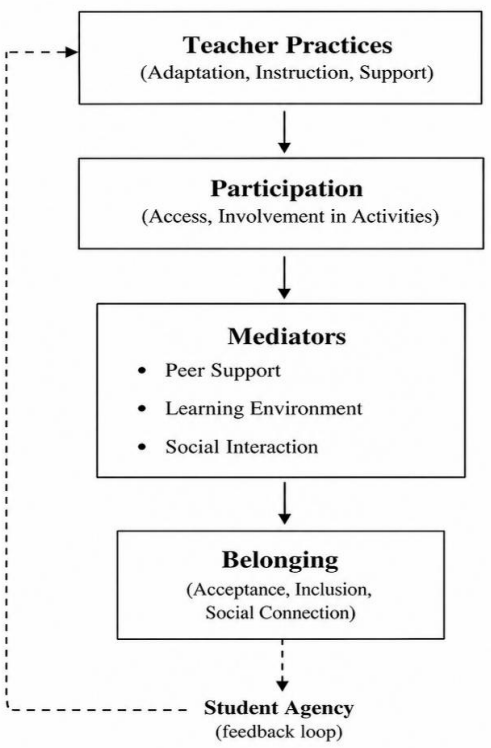

Figure 1 — Conceptual Model: From Participation to Belonging

4. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to use a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to understand how physical education (PE) teachers conceptualize and support students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to participate in sport. Narrative inquiry was chosen for this study because it allows the exploration of experiences and provides a way for teachers to share practices, challenges, and reflections (John W. Creswell, 2013). By using stories rather than variables, the study acknowledges the complexities of inclusive practices in real-world teaching.

Research Design

This study used a narrative inquiry design to understand how teachers make meaning of participation and belonging in PE. This design focuses on temporality, context, and meaning-making, which are relevant to understanding the development of inclusion practices. The approach allows for in-depth descriptions that highlight individual and collective experiences.

Participants and Sampling

The research participants were 54 PE teachers, purposefully selected to have experience teaching students with ASD. Participants were chosen from diverse school settings, including public and private schools, and urban and semi-urban areas. This ensured a range of contexts were represented in the study of inclusive practices. Teachers had different years of experience, from novice to those with more than 20 years of teaching. We recruited both men and women. Teachers had taught at least one student with ASD in their PE lessons in the last two years, ensuring recent, relevant experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and reflective narratives. The interviews were either in person or virtual and lasted 45-60 minutes. They were open-ended, inviting teachers to describe their experiences, strategies, challenges, and examples of when students have demonstrated participation and/or belonging. Teachers also provided short written critical incidents of their teaching experiences. This helped to provide further

insight and elaborate on experiences that were not fully discussed in the interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. We also made field notes of contextual data and preliminary interpretation.

Data Analysis

Thematic narrative analysis, a combination of thematic and narrative analysis, was employed. This involved following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) recommendations to familiarise with the data, code and generate initial themes, then review them. The data were read to gain an understanding of the whole, before reading line by line to generate codes. We then grouped codes to create themes that reflected aspects of sports engagement. We attended to the content and form of teachers' stories, as is common to narrative inquiry. To enhance rigor, we compared parts of the narratives across cases to see what was similar and different. This resulted in four themes: adaptation strategies, relational pedagogy, institutional barriers and student agency. Additional rigour in the analysis was ensured by adhering to the principles of qualitative inquiry as outlined by Guest et al. (2006), Saldaña (2016) and Patton (2002), in particular in terms of consistency of coding and interpretive rigour.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

The quality and rigour of the research was enhanced through criteria proposed by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985). Prolonged engagement with the data and member checking, where a group of participants checked summaries of participants' stories, contributed to Credibility. Dependability was improved by keeping an audit trail of the data collection and analysis. Reflexive notes were written to acknowledge researcher biases and enhance Confirmability. Contextual and participant descriptions ensured Transferability. Research ethics were taken into account. Participants gave their consent and anonymity to maintain confidentiality. Teachers had the right to withdraw from the study. And the study followed the ethical principles proposed by Tracy (2010) to establish validity, credibility and authenticity in the research. Overall, the methodology provides a valid and reliable way of examining teachers' roles in transitioning participation to belonging in PE.

Table 1 — Participant Demographics

Category	Description
Total Participants	54 PE Teachers
Gender	30 Male, 24 Female
Experience Range	2–25 Years
School Type	Public (60%), Private (40%)
Location	Urban (65%), Semi-Urban (35%)
ASD Experience	All taught ≥1 ASD student (last 2 yrs)

5. Results

Four interconnected themes emerged from the narrative data of 54 physical education (PE) teachers, describing the development of students' sporting engagement with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from participation to belonging. These themes - adaptation strategies, relational pedagogy, institutional barriers, and student agency - were developed through initial and focused coding, comparison of stories, and theme refinement (Guest et al., 2006; Saldaña, 2016; Patton, 2002). Crucially, the research suggests that participation is not an endpoint but an intermediary state, influenced by pedagogic and relational factors and institutional contexts. Belonging occurs only in the right circumstances.

Theme 1: Adaptation Strategies

Adaptation was frequently emphasized by teachers as key to inclusion. Adaptation strategies included changing rules, simplifying instructions, providing visual cues, and slowing down activities. Many teachers recommended breaking down activities

into smaller steps to help students learn new skills. One teacher commented, "I simplify the activity down to its core movements and then extend it in complexity." The breakdown facilitated student participation without being too much. The teachers also made sensory-sensitive adjustments. Teachers modified noise, transitions, and routines. As one teacher explained, "If it is too noisy or crazy, they move out. I make it quieter for them." While these modifications enhanced access and engagement, teachers said that adaptation was not the key to inclusion. It facilitated engagement, but was a starting point, rather than an end goal.

Theme 2: Relational Pedagogy

Relational pedagogy was seen as a key element in turning participation into engagement. Trust, routine, and rapport were seen as important by teachers. Many participants spoke of the time required to get to know their students. One teacher described, "The student feels safe with you; they participate." This relationship-building was considered important to engagement. Peer interactions were fostered through group work and buddy systems. Students were paired to encourage peer interaction. One participant told us, "If you have a buddy, it can make a big difference. It changes the student's experience of the activity." These practices had a profound impact on students' sense of inclusion and belonging. Teachers noted that once they had built relationships with students, students were more likely to join the activity and stay engaged over the long term.

Theme 3: Institutional Barriers

Teachers reported numerous institutional barriers to inclusive practice, despite their efforts. These barriers often interfered with the inclusion process (from participation to belonging). Class size was frequently mentioned. A teacher commented, "There are too many students to focus on inclusion." Short time frames and an inflexible curriculum also limited creativity with activities. Lack of teacher training was a significant concern. Teachers reported a lack of knowledge about how to support students with ASD. For example, one participant said, "We are supposed to include everyone, but we are not sufficiently trained." Lack of resources, such as support personnel and equipment, also posed challenges. These institutional factors often led to "partial inclusion," in which students were included but could not fully belong.

Theme 4: Student Agency

One major theme from the stories was the role of students' choices. Teachers acknowledged the role of students with ASD in their engagement. Students had the flexibility to participate. A teacher said, "He liked to watch and then join in when he was ready to." This gradual engagement enabled students to gain confidence. Support for autonomy led to enhanced engagement. Offering options and flexibility led to student initiative. One participant commented, "When they have control, they participate more genuinely." Student agency, then, served as a feedback loop to promote participation and inclusion. It emphasized that it is co-constructed rather than teacher-imposed.

Table 2 — Thematic Summary

Theme	Description	Example Quote
Adaptation Strategies	Modifying tasks, environment, and instruction	"I break activities into smaller steps so they can succeed."
Relational Pedagogy	Building trust and facilitating peer relationships	"Once trust is built, participation improves."
Institutional Barriers	Constraints related to training, resources, and structure	"We want to include, but we lack support."
Student Agency	Students influencing their own engagement and participation	"They join when they feel ready."

Table 3 — Cross-Theme Analytical Matrix: From Participation to Belonging

Theme	**Teacher Practices Observed**	**Mediating Factors**	**Impact on Participation**	**Impact on Belonging**
Adaptation Strategies	Task modification, visual supports, flexible rules	Sensory comfort, task clarity	Increased access and engagement	Reduced anxiety, initial inclusion
Relational Pedagogy	Trust-building, encouragement, peer pairing	Emotional safety, peer acceptance	Sustained involvement in activities	Strong sense of connection and acceptance
Institutional Barriers	Limited training, large classes, rigid curriculum	Structural constraints	Inconsistent or reduced participation	Feelings of exclusion or marginalization
Student Agency	Choice-making, self-paced involvement	Autonomy, self-efficacy	Voluntary and meaningful participation	Internalized sense of belonging

Table 4 — Frequency of Thematic Occurrence Across Narratives (n = 54)

Theme	**Teachers Referencing Theme**	**Interpretation**
Adaptation Strategies	52	Universally recognized as essential for enabling access
Relational Pedagogy	48	Strong influence on sustaining engagement and interaction
Institutional Barriers	44	A common constraint affecting the consistency of inclusion
Student Agency	39	Emerging but critical factor influencing belonging

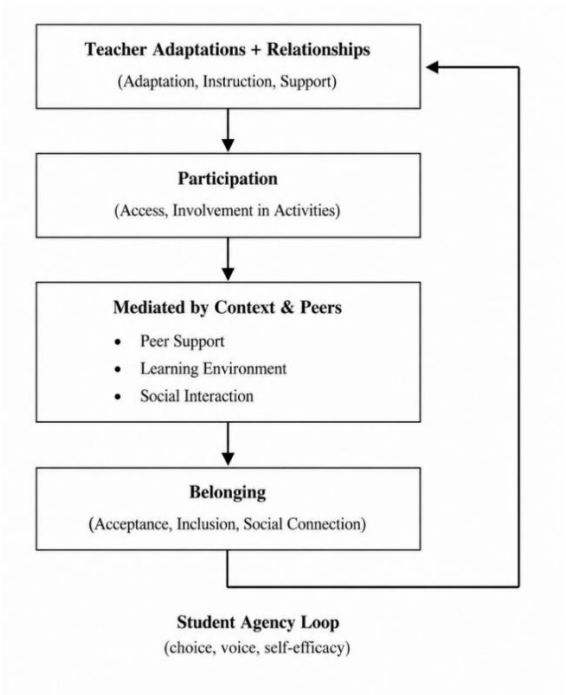

Figure 2 — Participation in the Belonging Pathway

Synthesis of Findings

The combination of themes and analytical tables illustrates a journey from participation to belonging. Learning strategies facilitate initial participation, but without relational pedagogy and supportive environments, this participation remains shallow. Relational pedagogy enhances participation, but institutional factors can hinder it. Importantly, student agency reinforces and strengthens engagement. By providing choice and agency, a meaningful engagement is created, and belonging may emerge. In summary, the research suggests that belonging is not a direct result of inclusion policy but rather an ever-evolving, negotiated process shaped by teachers' actions, the broader context, and student participation.

6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify how participation in sports for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) progresses to a sense of belonging, from the perspective of teachers. This study shows that whereas participation can be supported through pedagogical strategies, belonging can be supported through a more complicated interaction between relational, contextual and agentic factors. This highlights the importance of considering inclusion in physical education (PE) as access and participation. This study adds to this body of knowledge by demonstrating a teachers' role in this transition. Similar to previous research, the influence of teachers and their adaptation of teaching was important for facilitating participation (Goodwin et al., 2006; Hutzler, 2003). But this study adds to this knowledge base by demonstrating that this adaptation is not enough. Engaging in the task is not a guarantee for social and emotional inclusion. This is in line with other studies that stress the importance of inclusion moving from task engagement to engagement (Block et al., 2013). Relational pedagogies were found to be important for inclusion. The efforts that instructors made to build rapport, understand students' needs and facilitate interactions between students were critical for students' experiences. This aligns with the views on inclusive education that emphasise the social (UNESCO, 2017). Inclusion occurs through interactions here. This study thus supports the view that inclusion is about relationships and not just location.

By contrast, the presence of institutional constraints suggests that efforts by teachers are limited. Class size, professional development and resources often impeded inclusive teaching. Such findings resonate with critical perspectives on inclusion that acknowledge that institutional factors can perpetuate exclusion within a context of inclusion (Slee, 2011). We found participants frequently expressed a tension between their ambitions and their environments, implying the need for institutional support for inclusion. Second, student agency is also important. Our results demonstrate that rather than students as passive learners, students with ASD have agency. Students were more engaged when offered agency by their teacher, and this contributed to them feeling more included. This finding builds on earlier research by stressing the reciprocal nature of inclusion - with both teachers and students involved. The integration of findings from the various themes supports the notion of belonging not as an unambiguous process, but a complex negotiated state of being. Access is enabled through adaptation, engagement through relational practices, involvement through agency and institutional practices that enable and limit these. This complex picture contributes to theoretical discussions on inclusion in terms of both participation and experience. Finally, this research adds to the body of knowledge on how participation contributes to belonging.While the need for both has been recognized, little work has been done to investigate their relationship. The inclusion of teachers' experiences in this study offers a deeper understanding of how inclusion is implemented and perceived in practice in the PE environment.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights that PE inclusion is more than about participation. It requires a focus on relationships, environment, and student voice. Teachers are critical, but their strategies need to be supported by institutional arrangements that enable responsive practices. In the end, inclusion occurs when participation takes

place in a supportive, relational, and empowering context.

7. Practical Implications

Our research has key implications for improving inclusive physical education (PE) for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The shift from participation to belonging can be achieved in changes to the classroom, teacher, and policy environments. First, to enhance teachers' knowledge of inclusive teaching strategies. Pre- and in-service teacher preparation should include flexible teaching methods, sensory-sensitive approaches, and strategies to promote student interaction. As we know from inclusive education research, teaching is not about interventions, but rather extending teaching approaches to accommodate the needs of all learners (Florian, 2014). All teachers in this study felt under-prepared, so teachers need ongoing, contextualized, and experiential skill development. Second, there should be relational and flexible approaches to inclusive PE. Teachers should be supported in building rapport, providing peer support, and offering options for participation. Providing options, using visuals, and rule modifications are examples. Importantly, inclusion should not be about being in the classroom but being welcomed into it.

Third, barriers to inclusion must be removed by schools and policymakers. This can be done through smaller class sizes (where possible), specialist equipment, and staff. Policies should not be compliance-based, but rather enhance quality learning experiences. As recently discussed in inclusive policy and practice, inclusion is supported by a link among policy, culture, and the classroom (Ainscow, 2020). Finally, promoting student choice should be encouraged. Teachers should give students with ASD opportunities to express preferences, make decisions, and progress at their own pace. Promoting independence enhances engagement and belonging. Moreover, finally, we should work together. Working in partnership with teachers, parents, therapists, and administrators to create positive contexts is vital. This means the inclusive practices being implemented can be supported not just in the classroom. In summary, the implications suggest that success in achieving a sense of belonging in PE needs to be supported at multiple levels of practice and support.

8. Conclusion

This research explores the journey from participation to belonging in sports activities for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), through the stories of 54 physical education (PE) teachers. This research shows that while participation may be achieved through teaching adjustments, such adjustments do not necessarily lead to inclusion. Instead, belonging is enabled by a mix of relational practices, enabling environments, and student agency. An important contribution of this study was a reconceptualization of inclusion from access to participation as an experience and a social construction. Teachers were identified as central to this, both in modifying the activities and in developing relationships and helping students engage with the classroom environment. But the study also suggests the role of institutional forces in limiting good intentions. Importantly, the study finds student agency for students with ASD. Students' agency led to participation and belonging. This is a contribution to the literature as it emphasizes a bi-directional nature of inclusion. The study contributes to the literature but is limited. The perspective is from teachers and may not reflect students' perspectives. The study also has limited applicability in that it may not apply to all schools. More research needs to be done with the students, longitudinal and international studies of belonging. Overall, the study adds to the literature by revealing that inclusion in PE is more than just physical presence. It requires relational, contextual, and conscious pedagogies to be inclusive, valued, and accepted (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

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