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Non-disabled privilege in sports and active recreation: Challenging neoliberal ableist attitudes through human rights informed anti-ableism

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Abstract

Despite inclusionary policies in New Zealand, the existing socio-cultural and political systems continue to reinforce non-disabled privilege in the sports and physical activity environment. Bolstered by neoliberal ableist attitudes, concepts and practices, this non-disabled privilege excludes individuals whose bodily capabilities do not fit hypothetical able-bodied norms and standards. This paper explores neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices that contribute to non-disabled privilege and create barriers to disabled young people participating in sports and active recreation. In addition, the paper examines anti-ableist attitudes, informed by human rights, that challenge this privilege. We used Q methodology with 40 participants – physical education teachers, sports coaches, administrators and managers of sports and recreation clubs, classes and facilities – to uncover dominant viewpoints on sport and disability across the sports and active recreation sectors. The paper draws on data from interviews conducted with the participants. Our findings revealed

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neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices in relation to competition and winning, able-bodied privilege and resource allocation that favour the able-bodied in the sports, physical activity and recreation environment. We also found human rights-informed anti-ableist attitudes that challenge the able-bodied privilege and strive for the inclusion and participation of disabled young people. By illuminating how non-disabled privilege in sports and active recreation can undermine inclusionary policies, our research underscores the urgent need for change through rights-based strategies, policies and practices that can be leveraged to promote the inclusion of disabled youth in sports and physical activity, thereby advancing their human rights.

Keywords
Disability, privilege, neoliberal ableism, anti-ableism, sport

Introduction

Disabled young New Zealanders have lower levels of social participation across several areas of community life, including sports, physical activity and recreation (SPAR) (Carroll et al., 2021). This is despite a succession of policies, initiatives and targeted investments being directed towards improving access and opportunities for disabled people in New Zealand (see McBean et al., 2022). This is reflective of a broader policy position based on the vision of New Zealand as a 'non-disabling society', which is guided by the New Zealand Disability Strategy (NZDS). This position is based on the fundamental principle of integrating disabled people into community life on their own terms and with the full protection of their rights. The NZDS adopts a social model of disability, which arose from the disability rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s, in response to and resistance to the prevailing medical model, and specifies that while individuals have impairments, it is the barriers created by an inaccessible society that produce forms of disablement.

To increase the participation of disabled people in SPAR, it is necessary to examine the factors that facilitate and constrain this. While previous research has indicated associations between the body, environmental barriers and personal factors (e.g. Darcy et al., 2017; Groff et al., 2009; Jeffress and Brown, 2017), not much is known about the societal mechanisms that regulate individual and institutional practices in ways that perpetuate social oppression and undermine the participation of disabled people in SPAR (Patillo, 2008). Similarly, little is known about how boundaries and barriers are created by the group that dominates SPAR, i.e. non-disabled people, leading to the exclusion of potential newcomers, i.e. the disabled. Hence, researchers should focus on the circulation of broader societal discourses underpinning the reproduction of able-bodied privilege and their functioning as regulating forces and mechanisms excluding disabled people from participation in SPAR (Saxton, 2018).

Ableism

There is a growing consensus across sports, exercise and health that ableism can be a useful conceptual framework for investigating the lack of participation of disabled

people in SPAR (Brittain et al., 2020; Giese and Ruin, 2018). Ableism refers to ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume able-bodiedness and construct disabled people as largely invisible 'others', resulting in marginalisation, oppression and exclusion (Chouinard, 2009). Ableism is embedded in structural socio-cultural power relations that create and maintain spaces fit for autonomous people with 'normal' and 'able' bodies and minds (Gahman, 2017), and acts as a form of identity violence, shaping the life chances of disabled people (Goodley and Lawthom, 2019). Therefore, it can be argued that ableism is a regulatory mechanism for both the continuation of non-disabled dominance as well as the social oppression of disabled people.

The subtlety of ableism is such that ableist attitudes and behaviours are not always overt or conscious. Unconscious ableism has been defined as a lack of awareness that a thought, attitude or behaviour is ableist (Scuro, 2017), for example, when the privilege associated with being non-disabled is not acknowledged or questioned (Wolbring, 2013). Furthermore, ableist attitudes are not exclusive to specific settings, practices or behaviours. Instead, they are based on shared and taken-for-granted assumptions that permeate our social worlds. For example, disabled people are assumed to be 'abnormal' and have the desire to be 'normal'. According to this narrative, a quality life is not possible for those who are not normal; hence, the life of disabled people is assumed to be inferior, and society is tasked with the objective of 'fixing' disability (Eisenmenger, 2019). Should disabled people be 'fixed', they could fit into and be included in existing social practices and environments without any need for changing such practices and environments to better accommodate disabled people (Cherney, 2019). Another contributing assumption to ableism is that disability is a 'tragedy' worthy of sympathy or charitable praise. In addition, while disabled bodies are seen as abnormal and 'other', there is often an innate fear of disablement among non-disabled people (Hughes, 2020).

As a result of such assumptions and ideas, several different types of ableism, or ableist attitudes, are prevalent in various social contexts. Some of these primarily manifest at an individual level when non-disabled people interact with disabled people. These ableist attitudes range from conspicuous behaviours (e.g. hostile or aversive ableism) to covert assumptions about disabled people and even unconscious biases that prefer able-bodiedness (e.g. apologetic, benevolent, enlightened ableism). Ableist attitudes are also pervasive in the wider socio-economic contexts (e.g. neoliberal and institutional ableism). These wider types of ableism often manifest through political and economic systems, hence becoming embedded within cultural systems, impacting on and shaping interactions between people, spaces and the environment. These ableist attitudes and practices are systemic, widely spread, deeply rooted in political, cultural and economic systems (Sanmiquel-Molinero and Pujol-Tarrés, 2020), and particularly prevalent in sports (see Table 1 for the definition of various types of ableism).

Neoliberalism and neoliberal ableism

Neoliberal rationality is a governing rationality that sees everything through an economic lens. So, all environments are seen as a market occupied by human beings as market actors, and all entities (even non-wealth-generating ones such as learning, sports or exercising) should be governed using market metrics, techniques and practices. Accordingly,

Table 1. Types of ableism.

Type of ableism	Definition
Hostile ableism	Openly aggressive behaviours or policies, such as bullying, abuse, and violence
Aversive ableism	Holding progressive and egalitarian attitudes, yet discriminatory actions or thoughts
Apologetic ableism	Recognising that ableism exists, and it is regrettable but unfixable
Benevolent ableism	Attitudes that convey sympathy, pity or charitable praise
Enlightened ableism	Attitudes that reflect the rhetoric of inclusion and equality but mask the continuation of practices that marginalise disabled people
Neoliberal ableism	A state of economic, cultural and political life where people can only participate in society if they demonstrate normalcy and the ability to become part of the capitalist marketplace
Institutional ableism	Ableist attitudes underpinning policies and practices of various institutions (educational, health, sports)

people are nothing more than human capital subject to a constant appraisal of their present and future values (Shenk, 2023).

Due to its emphasis on market values such as competition, neoliberal rationality creates an 'ability privilege' where 'ability' is associated with wealth (Wolbring, 2013), hence, marginalised communities such as disabled people (Goodley, 2014; Goodley et al., 2014) are disproportionally impacted and precluded from participation in particular aspects of society (see Puszka et al., 2022). For this reason, it has been claimed that the modern concept of disability is, in fact, a by-product of capitalism and that 'dis/ability, neoliberalism and capitalism feed upon one another's existence' (Goodley, 2014: 52). Goodley (2017) speaks about the concept of neoliberal-ableism as a 'state of economic, cultural and political life' where people can only participate in society if they 'manage to demonstrate normalcy and abilities to become part of the capitalist marketplace, ready and willing to work' (p. 177). The Neoliberal subject must display a range of characteristics, such as capability, constant self-improvement, self-reliance, individual accountability and self-sufficiency. Accordingly, the normativity produced by neoliberal ableism negatively impacts disabled people's opportunities for participation in various life domains. This is particularly problematic for the inclusion of disabled people in SPAR because, through emphasising market values and metrics such as competition and high performance, neoliberal rationality disproportionately impacts and marginalises disabled people who do not display the characteristics of the ideal neoliberal subject.

Able-bodied privilege and ableism

'Privilege' refers to certain social groups receiving unearned benefits based on specific characteristics (Case et al., 2012). Ability privilege refers to certain advantages afforded to individuals who exhibit specific abilities and individuals enjoying these advantages

(and are unwilling to forego their advantages). In addition, ability privilege exists in various social groups and activities formed around having or not having particular skills or abilities. Ability judgments lead to certain assumptions, justifications and behaviours that provide ability-having group members with privileges, with often disabling consequences for those who do not. Ability privilege thus sustains and reinforces ableism, creating species-typical, normative body ability expectations. Privilege is bestowed upon those who meet the standards of 'normal' without them necessarily realising their privilege. On the other hand, those who deviate from 'normal' are usually aware of discrimination and the absence of privilege in their lived experiences.

In the SPAR environment, ability privilege translates to a privilege for the non-disabled – that is, the majority – as the non-disabled majority are considered to have physical, mental and moral excellence as well as an able body and an able mind that the disabled minority do not (Silva and Howe, 2022). Thus, there is a paradox in the discussion of disability and competitive sports, as the institution of sport is inherently based on valuing and showcasing specific abilities in alignment with the neoliberal ableist notion of the capable human subject (Goodley et al., 2014). There are also specific neoliberal ideas pertinent to the SPAR environment, such as competition and performativity. Through a neoliberal ableist lens, an individual with an impairment does not fit the dominant cultural standards of able-bodiedness. Accordingly, less value is assigned to disabled people because they do not embody the expectations of ability within sports, leading to segregation, exclusion and a range of social policies that negatively impact their SPAR participation. This primarily occurs through physically and socially inaccessible SPAR environments (Nourry, 2018) and a relative lack of resources and opportunities for disabled people to participate, train and compete in sports. Therefore, it is not surprising that disability sports receive considerably less funding compared to non-disabled sports. As a pinnacle of competitive sporting achievement, high-performance sport offers an informative comparison. From the total of $131 million invested by High Performance Sport New Zealand for the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games (High Performance Sport New Zealand, 2024), only $11.7 million was allocated to Paralympians, which was less than 10% of the total funding (Geenty, 2024). The cost per medal has been a common discourse and a measure to justify the investment and the disparity for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Such a discourse provides a justification in economic terms for privileging the able-bodied and diminishing opportunities for the disabled in SPAR (Kiuppis, 2021).

Performativity is another aspect of neoliberalism that is particularly relevant to the SPAR environment. As a market-based construct, performativity rewards high performance and associated physical and mental characteristics, creating a demand for constant 'improvements' to enhance performance (Mitchell and Snyder, 2010). The high-performance of the ideal neoliberal subject depends on the 'desirable body' that is good-looking, physically fit, youthful and healthy (Harjunen, 2016). Accordingly, performativity privileges the non-disabled and prevents the disabled from entering SPAR and, at the same time, creates an exclusive opportunity for the members of the dominant group – i.e. the non-disabled – to disproportionately benefit from the available rewards in the field, thereby extending their dominant position (McKnight, 2015). This non-disabled privilege lends itself to so-called 'opportunity hoarding' (Brar, 2016) whereby the non-disabled are

rewarded with opportunity and resources. This privilege is further maintained through the continued exclusion of disabled people in the SPAR environment due to barriers such as inaccessible physical environments (e.g. poor transportation, too narrow gym doorways for wheelchair access and inaccessible bathrooms or changing rooms), unsuitable equipment (e.g. no pool chair or arm cycles), cost, 'over-protective' others, personal concerns about safety, limited social support, apprehension of attracting unwanted attention, lack of accessible knowledge/information about physical activity and negative attitudes about disability from others (e.g. customers and staff of leisure centres) (Martin Ginis et al., 2016; Smith and Sparkes, 2019; Wadey and Day, 2018).

Hence, ableism and more specifically, neoliberal and enlightened ableism, are implicated in the structure and provision of disability sports. In historically marginalising opportunities for disabled people within the field of 'mainstream' sport, disabled people are segregated into disability sport, which exists separately, 'spatially and symbolically, from the "real" world of sport outside' (Hargreaves, 2000: 181). This makes it difficult to recognise and challenge ableist and disableist ideas and practices that pervade virtually all domains of social life, including SPAR.

Closely associated with ableism, the concept of disablism has emerged within critical disability studies. Disablism is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions on the activity of people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing (Thomas, 2017). In this sense, disability emerges as a site of 'otherness' and marginality based on ableist normativity. Accordingly, disabled people are 'others' in the dominant ableist space, and disability is used to label different bodies in different ways, hence reinforcing systems of ableism (Goodley, 2017). Challenging ableism and disablism necessitates a commitment to anti-ableism through actively criticising and acting against supremacist assumptions, actions, models and structures rather than simply trying to remove disablist attitudes and practices. An anti-ableist approach in SPAR would start with acknowledging that ableism is the defining factor in physical activity; hence, we must start with examining and dismantling the underlying assumptions (DePauw, 2023), such as the idea that sport as a tool to cultivate physical excellence is closely linked to the normative view of neoliberal subject who is independent, productive and able-bodied (Silva and Howe, 2022).

We define anti-ableist approaches as those that aim to reduce disability-based inequities through research, policy and practice. Specifically, a form of praxis; 'promoting disability rights and equal access by pursuing anti-ableist work or efforts to dismantle the intentional and unintentional interpersonal, institutional and structural dynamics that discriminate on the basis of disability and give rise to inequities' (McDonald et al., 2023: 398). This requires an intentional and consistent fight against ableism and actively implementing change to progress towards a more equitable SPAR environment for those experiencing disability.

Aims and purpose

This paper explores how neoliberal ableism shapes and constrains disabled young people's participation in SPAR in New Zealand. Two specific attributes of neoliberalism

will be further explored: competition and performativity. The paper will also examine anti-ableist attitudes, informed by human rights, that challenge non-disabled privilege and counteract prevalent neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices. These rights are informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). For instance, Article 30 emphasises the right of disabled people to participate on an equal basis with others in recreational, leisure and sporting activities.

Context

Of New Zealand's five million population, one in six people identify as disabled (Statistics New Zealand, 2025). Despite the growing number of organisations that provide disabled New Zealanders with opportunities to participate in SPAR and several decades of disability inclusion policies and initiatives, disabled people are significantly less active than their able-bodied peers; for instance, disabled adults spend 16% less time participating in SPAR than non-disabled adults (Sport New Zealand, 2023), very few are believed to participate in sports actively and more than a third of disabled adults do not participate in sports (Cockburn and Atkinson, 2018; McBean et al., 2022), which is consistent with international data (Darcy et al., 2017).

New Zealand was among the first countries to ratify the UNCRPD, and there has been a commitment to removing barriers that exclude disabled people from various aspects of social life, including sports and recreational activities, as well as a commitment to upholding disabled people's rights to be treated on an equal basis without discrimination (Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Despite progressive discourses, policies and programmes of inclusion and equity, a lack of coordination of organisations responsible for disability sports provision, as well as a lack of clarity about the distribution of budgets, funding and resources, limits their effectiveness (McBean et al., 2022). In addition, several participation barriers have been identified, including a lack of knowledge and confidence, equipment and competition pathways, affordability and coaches (Townsend and Peacham, 2021).

The failure of disability sports policies to translate to an increase in the participation of disabled people in SPAR can, to some extent, be explained by the way the conceptual foundations, such as 'inclusion' and 'integration', have been defined and pursued. For instance, it has been argued that the concept of inclusion in New Zealand sport policy and practice is 'diluted' (Lyons, 2013), meaning the policy explicitly speaks about inclusion and requires sport organisations to adopt the same language; however, to move beyond a language change and make inclusion reality, these organisations must heavily rely on government intervention and resourcing (McBean et al., 2022). New Zealand's experience is in line with international literature highlighting the challenges of including disabled athletes in sports systems that value and reward ability (e.g. Howe, 2008) and the resistance of coaches and managers to implement policies that seemingly take away resources from the core members or functions (e.g. Hammond, 2022).

Recognising the existing disparities in participation, Sport New Zealand's vision is that 'Every Body [is] Active' and no one is missing out on the benefits of physical activity. Their mission is to ensure that every New Zealander is included in SPAR. Sport New

Zealand's Disability Plan 2019 has reaffirmed disabled people's rights to participate in SPAR as per the UNCRDP, and focused on improving equality and 'system-wide capability' (Sport New Zealand, 2019).

While the rhetoric of New Zealand's sports landscape is progressive and inclusive (Falcous and Scott, 2023), the taken-for-granted and often unconscious prevalence of ableism and its various manifestations have been suggested as a significant factor that prevents disabled people from participating (Carroll et al., 2021). This paper is derived from a broader study that examined the extent to which ableist discourses permeate attitudes, policies and programmes in school and community sports and active recreation, inhibiting the participation of disabled young people. The broader study aimed to develop resources to raise awareness of ableism and its effects and trial their efficacy. Ethics approval was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee (#NOR22/05).

Method

Forty non-disabled individuals were recruited as participants in a study of ableism in the New Zealand sport and recreation sectors. Participant recruitment was based on a sampling framework and purposive snowball sampling (Naderifar et al., 2017) to ensure broad participation by region, mainstream/disability physical education (PE) and sports, sporting codes organisational roles (e.g. teachers, coaches, volunteers, administrators), ethnicity and gender. The participants were mainly involved in school and community sport environments rather than high-performance sports. Eligibility criteria did not include prior knowledge about ableism. Researcher networks across the sports sector provided starting points for recruitment.

The research used a mixed methods design, combining Q methodology with face-to-face interviews.

Q methodology

Q methodology studies subjectivity and, more specifically, identifies how people think about a particular subject. This method allows researchers to systematically collect subjective opinions about a specific topic from participants, followed by factor analysis of the opinions (Q statements) to generate viewpoints representing shared ways of thinking (Herrington and Coogan, 2011).

The first step in Q methodology is a review of the body of knowledge and experiences representing the range of opinions and views about the topic, known as the concourse (Karasu and Peker, 2019). The concourse is the pool of opinions from which a set of statements is drawn. There were 40 statements in this study. The 40 attitudinal statements were developed from a literature review focusing on the participation of disabled people in SPAR, ableism, ableism in sport and human rights; thematic analysis of narratives of disabled young people in previous research (Carroll et al., 2021); the experiences of the research team (disabled and non-disabled); and teaching and coaching materials sourced from collaborating stakeholders (Carroll et al., 2024). The participants sorted the statements into their preferred order, called the 'Q sort', based on their level of

agreement/disagreement with a statement. Factor analysis is used to analyse patterns in participants' placement of statements on a grid.

This paper is based on an analysis of the recorded and transcribed comments made by participants as they completed a Q sort and during a face-to-face interview conducted after completing the Q sort. The interviewees reported on their experiences in the SPAR environment as they sorted and placed statements, and during a follow-on interview during which they were asked about selected statements. The 'sort' and interview were undertaken at a place and time convenient for participants and over a duration of around 60 minutes. The dialogue was audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The current paper draws only on the qualitative data from these interviews. Findings from the factor analysis of Q sorts are reported elsewhere (Carroll et al., 2024).

Table 2 lists the 40 participants and their roles (some had more than one role in their organisation).

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed, and data were coded using inductive, abductive and deductive processes (Watts and Stenner, 2012). A coding framework was utilised to identify various types of ableism. For this paper, the data was analysed to identify instances of neoliberal ableist attitudes and anti-ableist attitudes. In addition to analysing data coded under specific codes, quotes were considered in the context of the complete interview data. A discourse analysis guided by Fairclough's (2017) approach identified dominant and subjugated discourses of neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices, as well as human rights-informed anti-ableist attitudes within the data set. A discourse, in this sense, is the specific way participants' narratives draw on the context surrounding the attitudes and experiences they communicate (Bell et al., 2022).

Researcher's position

As the lead author of this paper, I have lived experience of disability. I was born with a condition resulting in significant mobility impairments. Outside of my home, I use a wheelchair to get around. My disability has significantly impacted my personal experience of participation in SPAR. I have first-hand experience with barriers to participation that are associated with prevalent ableist attitudes and nondisabled privilege in the SPAR environment. For instance, PE teachers never had time to work with me.

While studying at university, I enquired about attending the University's gym. I was told that none of the trainers were trained to work with disabled people. The sports coordinator said they were worried that working out in the gym might cause me injuries, the University did not want to be held responsible, and that I needed to bring a qualified personal trainer if I wanted to use the gym equipment.

I was treated differently and presumed incompetent due to my disability, resulting in further marginalisation and 'othering'. This is despite my right to fully participate in all aspects of social life, including in SPAR. While developing this paper, I reflected on my personal lived experience of participation in SPAR, the barriers I face, and my right to participate. While the interviews were conducted by non-disabled co-authors, during

Table 2. Participants.

No.	Name	SPAR field	Roles	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
1	Peter	PE/football	Teacher/coach	M	55	British
2	Yves	Para sport/cross-fit	Coach/manager/ admin	M	31	French
3	Christine	Dance	Teacher/coach	F	59	Pakeha
4	Jackie	Football	Coach/manager	F	68	Pakeha
5	Eva	PE/hockey	Teacher/coach	F	27	Pakeha
6	Alan	Touch rugby	Coach–manager–admin	M	28	Chinese
7	Rewi	Touch rugby/ cricket	Coach–admin	M	52	Māori
8	Marcia	Netball	Teacher–coach	F	35	Pakeha
9	Anna	Sport/active rec	Admin–strategy	Diverse	28	British
10	Suzanne	Sailing	Coach–admin	F	41	British
11	Niko	PE/rugby league	Teacher–coach	M	33	Māori
12	Carla	Netball	Admin–coach	F	31	Pakeha
13	Sam	Football	Admin–manager	M	49	Pakeha
14	Roger	Outdoor ed/cricket	Teacher–coach	M	50	British
15	Mac	Rugby	Teacher–coach	M	30	Pakeha
16	Nate	Cricket/kapa haka	Teacher–coach	M	35	Pacifica
17	Valerie	Netball/Pilates	Instructor–coach	F	45	Māori
18	Alison	Netball	Umpire–manager	F	16	Pakeha
19	Gail	Rugby/Basketball/Hockey	Coach–manager	F	44	Pakeha
20	Aaron	Biking/Trail Running	Coach–admin	M	50	Pakeha
21	Jeb	Hockey/croquet	Coach–admin	M	31	Pakeha
22	Nell	Netball	Coach	F	43	Pakeha
23	Nicki	Active recreation	Admin–coordinator	F	29	Pakeha
24	Jason	PE/rugby/athletics	Teacher–coach	M	47	Pakeha
25	Kay	Underwater hockey/rugby	Coach–manager	F	42	Pakeha
26	Cane	Cricket	Coach	M	19	Pakeha
27	Len	Mountain biking	Instructor	M	23	Pakeha
28	Delia	Kayaking	Instructor–admin	F	32	Pakeha
29	Harry	Athletics	Coach–admin	M	42	Pakeha
30	Karen	Active rec	Instructor–admin	F	56	Pakeha
31	Jane	Sport/active rec	Trainer for coaches	F	30	British
32	Mitch	Admin/Coach	Teacher–coach	M	50	Pakeha
33	Helen	Swimming	Coach	F	23	Māori
34	Graham	Special Olympics	Administrator	M	38	Pakeha
35	Carol	Gymnastics	Coach–admin	F	68	Pakeha
36	Rick	Active rec/triathlon	Coach–adviser	M	45	Pakeha
37	Sol	Golf	Coach–administrator	M	57	Pakeha
38	Paul	Tennis	Director–coach	M	31	British
39	Charlotte	Cycling	Coach	F	45	Pakeha
40	Eru	Athletics, rugby, Special Olympics	Coach–admin	M	44	Pacifica

data analysis, my lived experience assisted me in identifying the underpinning discourse of non-disabled privilege as well as indicators of inaccessible physical and social environments.

Findings

This section outlines the interplay of three main discourses that capture and reflect neoliberal ableist attitudes: (1) competition and winning, (2) majority privilege and (3) resources. Then, the anti-ableist attitudes discourse based on the human rights of disabled people is presented. Three issues are noteworthy here. First, some discourses identified during the analysis were not explicit in the participants' accounts. Instead, they were identified as researchers who analysed and understood those accounts. Second, the authors' positionality influences the reading, analysis and discussion of participants' accounts; we do not claim absolute knowledge of what participants thought or felt. Third, when participants' narratives are reported in the findings, the sentences in **bold font** are the Q-statement being discussed.

Discourses of neoliberal ableist attitudes

Sports are influenced by notions of competition, winning, performance, etc. While these ideas existed in sports before neoliberalism was established, they reflect neoliberalism's fundamental constructs. References to various constructs of neoliberal ableism were common across participants' narratives. These references focused on three main discourses: (1) competition and winning, (2) majority privilege and (3) resources.

(1) Competition and winning. Participation and competition are two different aspects of SPAR. Both disabled and non-disabled individuals might be interested in participation, competition or both. Neoliberalism, however, directs value and attention towards competition, performance and winning, with other outcomes seemingly less important or valuable. Neoliberal-ableism also sets up a binary dynamic that presumes disabled people have no competitive motivations or aspirations, and thus inclusion is positioned in opposition to competition:

> It's hard to be as inclusive as we'd like to be due to the focus on winning for some parents in our community. (Alan)

Disabled people are seen as 'outsiders' within competitive structures. Upon reading the Q-statement, 'It makes sense to keep disabled and non-disabled separate', this participant said:

> Gail: Yeah. In the participation, no. If you've got a competitive team, then yes, because you don't want them to have a bad experience. So, you know, the 9, 10, 13-year-olds, and they're kind, empathetic, good kids. But if they're out there competing to win, I think they would struggle to accept any kid that wasn't, you know, if they found it difficult to contribute to the team.

Gail's account reflects the neoliberal rationality that the ultimate goal of sport (and perhaps the ultimate goal of life) is competition or winning rather than participation. The same discourse was evident in disability sport:

> Yves: **Participation is more important than winning.** When you get to the gold medal game of the wheelchair rugby in the Paralympic games, we don't care about participation anymore. We need to win that game.

Many participants highlighted the importance of winning. Here Alison speaks to both winning and acceptance of disabled people:

> Alison: **Winning is the best inspiration.** I think that for a lot of people, the reason they play sport is because they like to win. And that's just their goal. And if they don't [win], they'll be really sad about it.
> **Teammates won't accept disabled players if it means they don't win games.** I think, unfortunately, that is kind of the truth … I think a lot of the time that people wouldn't want someone with a disability in their team because they think that they would be let down or they think that they wouldn't play as good as everyone else.

Alison justifies disabled people's lack of participation and inclusion in sports based on an assumed inability to contribute to winning. So, disabled people are excluded if they cannot or do not want to compete in a high-performance environment, in disability sports and mainstream sports. In other words, the most abled of the disabled will be preferred in disability sports because they have a high-performance level and can compete and contribute to winning. Consequently, the majority of disabled people can be excluded from sports environments, both high-performance and non-high-performance.

(2) Majority privilege. Participants drew extensively on another construct of neoliberalism: the privilege of the majority. Under the conditions of neoliberalism, the non-disabled majority, as the dominant group, is valued over the disabled minority. Closely reflecting market terms and metrics, this notion creates inclusion and participation barriers for disabled people. Catering to the non-disabled majority and privileging them over the disabled was frequently observed in participants' narratives. For instance, upon reading the Q-statement 'Teachers and coaches' responsibility is looking after the majority first', many participants agreed. For instance,

> Alan: Yes, I kind of agree. You do need to look after the majority.

The majority privilege discourse was also evident in participants' narratives around organising and running sports, and catering to the majority would inevitably mean catering to the able-bodied.

Sam: **Teachers and coaches' responsibility is looking after the majority first.** I can understand why that's a concept that we would have. But I rather it wasn't. I think they're forced into that situation.

Interviewer: In what way?

Lack of resources; it takes more resources to help children with challenges.

Here, lack of resources is used to justify attending to the able-bodied majority who presumably require fewer resources to participate. Some participants indicated that the majority needs to come first because they are the majority. For instance:

Alison: **Teachers and coaches' responsibility is looking after the majority first.** If majority of people want a change in their team or a change in something to do with the sport, then if it was like five against one, I would pick like the five and what they want because it is more people. So it kind of doesn't matter as much what the one person wants, because more people would be happy with the change.

Privileging the majority has a significant negative impact on disabled people's participation in various social domains and activities, including SPAR. Participants' responses to the statement, 'It's better to meet the wants of many rather than the rights of a few', further indicated that the needs and preferences of the larger number should prevail over the rights of others in a sporting context.

Majority privilege is due to the greater value placed on the needs and wants of the majority, as the majority constitutes a better neoliberal subject. Such neoliberal ableist attitudes can pose significant barriers to the inclusion of disabled people in sports.

(3) Resources. Resources and their utilisation are critical constructions of neoliberalism. According to the neoliberalism rationale, people are economic agents in all domains of society, and resources should be allocated to those economic agents who are utility maximisers (Gammon, 2013). The notion of resource allocation based on utility maximisation negatively impacts the inclusion of disabled people in sports. The reason is that disabled people are viewed as a 'drain' on public resources (Goodley and Runswick Cole, 2015). So, from the neoliberal perspective, the emphasis on market-based values would require resources to be allocated to those who are better neoliberal subjects. Accordingly, in high-performance environments, resources should be allocated to those who outperform others. In non-high-performance environments or when the focus is on participation, resources should be allocated to those who display standards of normalcy, instead of those who might need additional support or resources.

Our participants' narratives included numerous instances of neoliberal ableist attitudes about resources in SPAR. For instance, Carol pointed out that 'lack of resources' was a reason for disabled children not to be included in SPAR because 'it takes more resources to help children with challenges'. In discussing the Q statement, 'Accommodating

everyone requires more resources than the organisation has', most participants agreed. While this position may be factual, it may also reflect an underlying assumption that to include disabled people in SPAR, more resources are required, and in the absence of additional resources, disabled people cannot be included. This discourse is related to decision-making in the context of seemingly scarce resources, where the participation of the non-disabled is prioritised. Our participants' narratives about resources in SPAR can be divided into three main discourses: additional costs and expenses, time and funding.

Additional costs and expenses. Many participants indicated that the required accommodations for including disabled people in SPAR were costly. For instance, Aaron believed disabled people require 'different equipment' and 'additional resourcing', 'so it's a very high cost' to be inclusive. Here, Aaron presents a neoliberal ableist attitude that SPAR resources should not be spent to cover additional costs that may be required for the inclusion of disabled people, indicating the privilege of the majority in the SPAR environment.

Time. Time as a finite resource was frequently referred to in participants' narratives. Many participants indicated that an individual with a disability cannot be accommodated in SPAR because teachers and coaches do not have any additional 'time' to spend with any one individual.

> Eva: **Accommodating everyone requires more resources than the organisation has.** Yes, because then you have to create the resources or spend extra time coming up with those resources or adapting resources. And going back to the 'it's a nice idea', but [we're] time-poor.

In justifying the lack of inclusion and participation of disabled people in SPAR, Eva expresses a neoliberal ableist attitude – largely disguised in pragmatic and justifiable terms – that while inclusion is a nice idea, in reality, there are not enough resources, including 'time', to do that. So, what happens in SPAR environments in practice is that the needs of the majority are privileged over the participation of the disabled minority group. Many participants expressed similar attitudes. For instance,

> Eru: **Teachers and coaches can only spend so much time with any individual.** It's a bit of a tough one. In our club, we can only spend so much time with any individual because for our per-age group, we have about, for example, on a club night, we have 30–40 per age group. So, they're going on different stations. So, if they're all going to different groups, it can be hard for a coach and a teacher to try to cater for one individual.

Here, Eru describes their club's practices, in which coaches and teachers do not spend additional time on any one individual. Many other participants' narratives mentioned lack of time.

Eva: Yeah, when you've got 28 kids in front of you, and you make your way around everybody, I think that's a true statement.

Many participants' narratives considered the lack of time discourse a 'reality' in the SPAR environment.

Gail: I just think that's the reality of the situation. They do only have a certain amount of time and other resources so they can only spend so much time with any individual.

Funding. Closely tied to neoliberalism is the distribution of funding – an issue magnified in the sport context as it intersects with high performance, specifically through the inequitable support afforded to Olympic and Paralympic campaigns. Upon reading the Q statement, 'It is only right that funding and resources follow performance', many participants expressed neoliberal-ableist attitudes. For instance, Alison said,

Alison: Yeah, I think when the kids get older, and like the Olympics, people aren't probably going to be inspired by someone who's not very good, and then they like to go to the Olympics. Obviously, it probably costs a lot of money for advertisement and stuff. So, I would say people that are the best should have more [funding].
Interviewer: And there should be more funding going to help them because they're really good?
Yeah.

Alison's discourse assumes that disabled people are not as good as non-disabled people in the SPAR environment. While they might inspire other disabled people to want to participate or compete, the neoliberal mindset considers this unworthy of support in the form of funding allocation. Other participants also referred to the funding discourse about high performance.

Aaron: I think in terms of funding, performance can be important if it's generating a lot of revenue. I can kind of understand the criteria for the resource allocation [being] around the … ability to get medals.

Reading the Q statement, 'It is logical that Olympic sports get more resources than Paralympic sport', many participants agreed with the statement, echoing Alan's view and finding it to be logical 'because the Olympics create a lot more revenue' (Alan). For instance,

Anna: Yes, I can see the logic in it.
Interviewer: So, what's the logic?

> The logic being our society prioritises viewership, which the Olympics currently has more of; that could change. That's what's currently the status quo, and it prioritises able-bodied athletes.

Although Anna 'disagreed with the logic', she explained the neoliberal ableist logic that prioritises able-bodied sports in sports funding allocation:

> Anna: And so, there is a logic that our ableist society prioritises the Olympic sports over Paralympic sports. I disagree with the logic but the logic is there.

A similar understanding of the neoliberal underpinnings of sports funding was evident in Harry's response to the same statement:

> Harry: As a coach to Paralympic athletes, I get it. There's a reality to that situation. The reality is there's 100 years of history and a whole existing system based around excellence in Olympic sport and winning Olympic medals. And to win a Paralympic medal, at the moment, I don't think it has the same social value that the Olympic medal has, whether or not that's a great event. That's a fact, and that's kind of where the funding comes from.

Harry's account provides a neoliberal description of decision-making in sports and funding. From this perspective, funding should be allocated based on high performance and to those sports and individuals who can win. Like Anna, Harry did not personally agree with this logic – 'On principle, I won't agree with that one' – but believed this neoliberal logic dominated decision-making.

As has previously been shown, ableism can be pervasive in a specific social domain yet so naturalised that it is difficult for people to recognise it in their thoughts and actions (Goodley, 2014). Interestingly, for some participants, completing a Q sort was a consciousness-raising experience; they realised some of their attitudes were ableist and occasionally challenged ableist assumptions, attitudes and practices in SPAR. This, at times, gave rise to anti-ableist narratives centred on disabled people's rights.

Discourses of anti-ableism

Some participants expressed human rights-informed anti-ableist attitudes, emphasising that disabled people had a right to participate and be included. For instance,

> Anna: **It is only right that funding and resources follow performance**. [I] really disagree with this.
> Interviewer: Can you say why?

> I understand that competition is really important to some people and really motivating for some people. But I think that that is a very capitalist way of looking at things that we have to do well and we have to outperform people and we have to constantly grow. I think sustainability and participation should be what we strive for, as opposed to just following high performance.

Here, Anna challenges the neoliberal concepts of competition and performativity that restrict the inclusion of disabled people in SPAR. Similar human rights-informed positions were evident in anti-ableist comments made by other participants. For instance,

> Roger: **It is logical that Olympic sports get more resources than Paralympic sports.** It's a tricky one, I'm kind of sitting on the fence with that. My gut instinct would be to say, absolutely, Olympic sports should get more, but then my moral code is going: 'Well, no, everybody should have the right to some funding'.

Some participants expressed anti-ableist attitudes that were directly and explicitly informed by disabled people's human rights: for example, 'access to sport and recreation is a human right' (Harry); 'all young people have the right to access sports and recreation' (Kate); disabled people 'have the right to be involved [in SPAR]' (Graham); and 'rights should be prioritised' (Anna). Roger elaborates on the quote noted above, juxtaposing wants versus needs.

> Roger: **Making adjustments and exceptions for individuals at the expense of the group is wrong**. It depends on what it is. It comes back to the rights again. If this person's got the rights over the wants, it's the right has to come first.

Prioritising individual rights instead of complying with what the group or the majority wanted was a recurring anti-ableist discourse. Responding to the statement 'It is better to meet the wants of many rather than the rights of a few', Yves says:

> Yves: What tickled me on this one is the word wants and the word rights. To me, the rights are at a higher rank than wants, and I really believe that rights should be respected no matter what.

Discussion

Ableism is a socially constructed concept that values specific abilities and characteristics over others. Promoted by social groups and structures that hold power within a given field, ableism regulates access to opportunities in that field. As indicated in the background and confirmed by the findings, ableism is a guiding framework for how SPAR is organised in many settings, with sports policies and practices that are constraining and limiting.

Ableism makes it difficult for disabled young people to access, operate in and succeed in a field such as SPAR (Macbeth, 2010), where neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices value the able-bodied over disabled people, highlight the importance and benefits of able-bodiedness, and stigmatise those who deviate from the norm. Neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices were expressed in our data in ways likely to create significant barriers to disabled young people's participation and inclusion opportunities, and this has certainly

been my experience as a disabled person in that environment. A key discourse centred around assumptions that disabled people are incapable of contributing to 'winning', which, for many, is the ultimate goal of SPAR.

While competition predates neoliberalism, the shift from 'exchange' to 'competition' (Foucault et al., 2008) has been a significant organising concept in economic theory, and with the extension of the neoliberal market to all domains of human life, competition has become the fundamental principle and dynamic of various life domains (Hearn, 2021). Our findings confirmed the importance of competition in the SPAR environment, where competition and winning were seen as the ultimate goals of sports. SPAR is organised around the idea that people must compete, outperform others and win. This creates barriers to the inclusion of disabled young people.

Performativity (Lyotard, 1984) is another characteristic of the neoliberal imperative in the SPAR environment. As a market-based construct, performativity demands constant 'improvements', thereby subjecting people to increasing pressures for performance enhancement (Mitchell and Snyder, 2010). In an environment characterised by performativity, people are valued, and their contributions are recognised based on the extent to which they are useful as neoliberal subjects (Mladenov, 2020). The 'desirable body' is considered a prerequisite for the ideal neoliberal subject who must be good-looking, physically fit, youthful and healthy (Harjunen, 2016). In line with the literature, our findings confirmed that non-disabled bodies are valued more than disabled bodies, which, in the SPAR environment, translates to the non-disabled being valued more than the disabled, as they are better aligned with characteristics of the ideal neoliberal subjects capable of high performance. In such an environment, due to their bodies, disabled people cannot be the 'ideal neoliberal subject' regardless of their level of performance.

Performativity privileges those who perform better and contribute to the overall performance of a specific environment. In this sense, performativity is simple: demonstrate high performance or disappear (Mladenov, 2020). Our findings indicated this to be the case in the SPAR environment; the non-disabled are privileged and rewarded with opportunities and resources, and the disabled are marginalised and excluded. Our participants' narratives and experiences in the SPAR environment indicated that the majority's desires almost always prevail over the minority.

Furthermore, neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices in SPAR were observed to assist non-disabled people in maintaining their privilege in this field through various means, such as opportunity hoarding, thereby controlling the resources within it, both in high-performance and non-high-performance environments. Many participants reported attitudes and practices that could contribute to maintaining able-bodied control over resources within SPAR. For instance, they believed disabled people already have access to sports or that the realities of sports make it impossible to include everyone. Hence, the findings indicated that non-disabled privilege created further barriers for disabled young people to have access to SPAR.

As indicated by the findings, neoliberal rationality in the SPAR environment extended to the allocation of funding and resources that reinforced non-disabled privilege while marginalising disabled people. This is rooted in the neoliberal rationality of government and ableist discourses. We agree with Silva and Howe (2022) that neoliberal ableism

perpetuates the systemic oppression of disabled people and deprives them of practical opportunities and choices to participate in SPAR.

While emphasising individualism, meritocracy and self-reliance, neoliberalism's economic rationality privileges some groups and marginalises others, reinforcing and aggravating historical inequalities (Gammon, 2013). Neoliberalism is underpinned by individualist assumptions that threaten the human rights of disabled people because the experience of disability is collectively shaped through social inequality, and neoliberalism masks various types of prejudice against disabled people as 'individual choices' (Sherry, 2016). Decision-making rooted in this rationality requires optimal resource allocation in the pursuit of autonomy and self-governance (Dean, 2009), resulting in funding inequities for disabled people.

While neoliberal ableism presupposes an able-bodied citizen, human rights discourses refuse the hierarchy of humanness based on physical ability (Silva and Howe, 2022). Accordingly, the equal rights movements have provided a foundation for criticising neoliberalism for exacerbating social inequalities, preserving established forms of social distinction and diminishing disabled people's human rights. The current policy and practices in New Zealand's SPAR environment are based on the idea that everybody has a right to participate and everybody is included. Anti-ableist attitudes in participants' narratives went beyond everyone's rights and focused on disabled people's human rights as stated in the UNCRPD, whereby disabled people have a right to participate in SPAR, and therefore, their inclusion should be prioritised. Our findings resonate with the literature (e.g. McDonald et al., 2023) in that anti-ableism goes beyond recognising and addressing inequities and aims at providing equal access through dismantling discriminatory barriers and structures. According to our participants, this requires promoting a disability rights discourse in the SPAR environment based on empowerment, participation and accountability. They believed it is equally essential to develop and implement policies and practices to address discrimination, negative attitudes and social and environmental barriers that prevent disabled people from participating in SPAR. Our participants recommended allocating time and other resources as a practical way to realise disabled young people's rights to participate. In addition, some participants believed a change in attitude to prioritise 'everyone's inclusion' would ensure disabled people's participation in SPAR.

While the narratives included examples of participants trying to translate their inclusive attitudes into inclusive practice in SPAR, they tended to be the exception rather than the rule. It should be emphasised that this study's data reflect the experiences and perspectives of a sample of PE teachers, coaches, managers and administrators of sports and recreation clubs and facilities and hence cannot claim to have captured nuances and complexities of ableism and anti-ableism in all SPAR environments. As most participants were from community sports and clubs, the findings are likely to reflect what is going on in these environments rather than high-performance sports. Nevertheless, the paper provides insights into neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices and the tension with anti-ableist attitudes in SPAR. In the next phase of our work, we are creating resources for PE teachers, coaches, managers and administrators of sports and recreation clubs and facilities to raise awareness and highlight the pervasiveness of neoliberal-ableism in SPAR and work towards anti-ableism. These anti-ableist resources

highlight that disabled people are not a homogenous group, and while disability is a shared and positive social identity, there is a continuum of ability, not a dichotomy. Through these resources, we are challenging categorisation based on the normativity of the 'normal' body and the associated dichotomy of ability and disability. This is a necessary step to challenge exclusionary practices, for instance, by incorporating disabled people's rights into inclusionary research, policies and procedures that address barriers and enable meaningful participation and inclusion as indicated by the literature (e.g. Shogren, 2024).

Finally, to properly address ableist attitudes in SPAR, disabled people need to be included in the conversation; further research should examine their perspectives about inclusion and participation in SPAR and barriers created by neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices. Research is also needed to focus on high-performance sports and explore potential differences in how ableism prevails in high-performance versus community sports environments. Of particular interest would be research on the impact of the background, training and education of various actors in SPAR and on how they perceive, identify and address ableism.

Concluding remarks

Despite the implementation of so-called inclusive policies and procedures for several years, neoliberal ableist attitudes still circulate and govern the SPAR environment, reinforcing long-established patterns of social exclusion and discrimination, while at the same time, neoliberal policies and practices continue to privilege the able-bodied in virtually all domains of human life. As a result, neoliberal ableist attitudes and practices continue to create significant participation and inclusion barriers for disabled people in SPAR. As our findings indicate, neoliberal-ableism is so widespread in SPAR that exclusion based on 'rationality', 'reality' and 'pragmatism' is uncritically accepted, distracting us from the fact that to realise the rights of disabled people, we need to create a barrier-free environment and stamp out various aspects of disability prejudice. In such an environment, human rights-informed anti-ableist attitudes could help counteract those barriers and facilitate disabled people's inclusion. Moving beyond attempts to resist collusion with the disability oppression problem, these anti-ableist attitudes demand a commitment to transforming and dismantling the foundations of that oppression and, hence, creating more inclusive environments and practices.

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Data availability

The deidentified data associated with our study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval and informed consent

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