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# **‘It’s actually very normal that I’m different’. How physically disabled youth discursively construct and position their body/self**

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In this paper, we explore how physically disabled youth who participate in mainstream education discursively construct and position themselves in relation to dominant discourses about sport and physicality that mark their bodies as ‘abnormal’ and ‘deviant’. We employ a feminist poststructuralist perspective to analyze the narratives about sport, physical education (PE), the body and self of four physically disabled Dutch youngsters. Our results indicate that although dominant societal discourses about sport and physicality construct disabled bodies as deviant, vulnerable and lacking and the disabled as ‘abnormal’, these youth constructed the self as ‘normal’. However, they did so in different ways. One of the interviewees used the alternative discourse ‘everyone is different, everyone is normal’ to position her disabled self as different and normal simultaneously. Hereby she resisted dominant notions about the abled body embedded in discourses about sport and physicality. This act of resistance enabled her to accept her disability as part of her self. Others normalized their disabled bodies by attempting to pass as able-bodied. They tried to minimize and/or hide their disability and in this manner reproduced ableist discourses about sport and physicality. Our interviewees also engaged in various performative acts of resistance. They challenged these dominant discourses by strategically using the possibilities a different/disabled self provided them. Overall the data indicate the important role that visible signifiers of disability played in the exclusionary practices that these disabled youth encountered and the subject positions they could claim. Since alternative constructions and positionings regarding the abled/normal body suggest ways in which the dominance of ableism may be disrupted, we conclude with an emphasis on the need for future research that explores such alternatives.

**Keywords:** *Youth; Disability; Body; Identity; Sport; Education; Feminist poststructuralism*

*Tuesday morning 10 am, a class of 13-year-olds enters the gym. Among them is one physically disabled child. Everyone sits on the floor against a wall. A man stands in front and introduces himself as Preston, a child physical therapist. He explains that the next hour he will be teaching a ‘handicapped experience class’. He asks, ‘How does it sound when you say someone is handicapped?’ One student replies ‘Not very nice’. Another student says, ‘It*

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sounds like someone is a real outsider'. The discussion continues and Preston explains to the class that there is a difference between an impairment, a disability and a handicap. 'An impairment has to do with your organs [sic]. At the level of the organs something has not developed properly or something has grown wrong. It could be your heart that hasn't developed properly or it could be your muscles that don't grow well. It could also mean that your brain is damaged'. Preston continues to explain: 'a disability refers to an ability or skill that someone can't manage very well'. A handicap 'has to do with society'. According to Preston, the word handicap refers to barriers in the social environment that restrict someone from participating, such as the abundance of stairs that limit the participation of people in wheelchairs. He states that disability is a better word to use than handicap, because it communicates that 'there are still a lot of things a person can do'.

Next, Preston asks the students whether they 'have something' that makes their bodies different (like short sightedness, coordination problems, asthma or anything else) or if they know people who do. Some students raise their hands and share their experiences. The aim of this handicapped experience class, Preston explains, is to experience what it is like to participate in physical activities when you 'have something' that makes you 'different'. Preston tells the students that he brought several attributes to mimic different disabilities, such as spasms, muscle diseases, asthma, ADHD and obesity. Preston asks the students to equip themselves with sponges under their feet; splints on their legs; adjusted binoculars; ankle and wrist weights; heavy backpacks or big gloves. With these 'disabled bodies' the students go on to perform a variety of physical activities such as throwing a ball, walking a balance beam and jumping off a horse. Finally, Preston leads a discussion where the students share their experiences of the past hour. In closing, Preston emphasizes the need for understanding and inclusion of people with disabilities: 'Basically everyone has something. Everyone is different and in the end we are also all a bit normal. Everyone is therefore just a variation of normal. So if we look at it like this and show some understanding for people with different motor skills, then we should be able to get along with each other a bit better'.

These field notes written during an observation sketch the context of this paper that focuses on physically disabled youth<sup>1</sup> who attend mainstream secondary school in the Netherlands. Government policy in the Netherlands reflects a global tendency in its goal to include disabled children in mainstream education as much as possible (de Klerk, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2012). The situation described above, where one disabled child participates in a class filled with able-bodied peers, is a realistic and common result of this policy. Several critical disability scholars who argue for inclusive education (e.g. Ware, 2001; Grenier, 2007; Allen, 2010) distinguish between mainstreaming and inclusion of disabled students. According to Fitzgerald (2012), mainstreaming means that disabled students are placed into the existing school system alongside able-bodied peers and receive some adjustments and extra support. Thus, the school system itself remains unchanged. Inclusion, on the other hand, involves broad curriculum reform and recontextualization and requires the removal of exclusionary practices so that all children can participate (p. 445). In the Netherlands, disabled youth are primarily subjected to mainstreaming but under the heading of 'inclusive education'.

As Goodwin (2009) and Fitzgerald and Kirk (2009) show, the mainstreaming of disabled youth into mainstream sport and school enhances the visibility and participation of physically disabled students. However, mainstreaming also highlights the marginal position these students frequently occupy in their educational environment because they are few in number and often have difficulty participating in physical activities offered in schools (such as physical education and sport played during recess) that are constructed as normal and important for youth in general. The field notes exemplify a small scale attempt at creating awareness around disability in mainstream education. The objective of the handicap experience class is for able-bodied students to experience what it is like to be disabled and become aware of (their own role in) exclusionary practices to which disabled people are subjected.<sup>2</sup>

The field notes furthermore provide information about the discourses related to physicality that circulate in Dutch mainstream education. For example, they contain elements of discourses about disability, sport, health and normalcy/difference. The description illustrates how dominant societal discourses related to physicality, such as the biomedical view of disability and the dominant discourse about sport, produce the abled body as the norm and construct the disabled body as ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’ by default (Garland-Thomson, 2002, 2005; Wickman, 2007). The example also shows how professionals in the field of disability can reproduce *and* challenge dominant notions about the body as they attempt to introduce alternative notions of normality.

The handicapped experience class primarily raises the question as to what it is like to participate in mainstream (physical) education as a disabled individual. In this paper, we explore this issue further by asking how disabled students in this ableist context discursively construct and position themselves in relation to dominant discourses that mark their bodies as abnormal and deviant. In what ways do these youth reproduce dominant notions about physicality and sport? And how do they challenge or resist these? Our research aims to explore these issues by analyzing the narratives about sport, physical education (PE), the body and self of four physically disabled Dutch youngsters.

### **Ableism in sport and school**

Ableism is an important theoretical concept in disability research. It refers to the attitudes and views of able-bodied people toward disabled people and is based on the (often implicit) assumption that the world should be tailored to those without disabilities (Wendell, 1996; Duncan, 2001). Many critical disability scholars interrogate dominant ableist discourses that assume able-bodiedness as a taken for granted norm (e.g. Zola, 1993; Wendell, 1996; Garland-Thomson, 2002, 2005; Corrigan *et al.*, 2010; Grue, 2011). Often, this research is theoretical in nature. Garland-Thomson (2002, p. 7), for example, argues that dominant ableist discourses refer to the hidden norm of the White, able-bodied male from which the disabled are imagined to depart. These discourses thus function as a way of disciplining bodily differences. The exclusionary effect of dominant ableist discourses is mentioned by

many scholars (e.g. Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Edwards & Imrie, 2003). With the increasing emphasis placed in current Western societies on being physically active, sport and physical education have become central discursive fields that shape popular perceptions of 'normal' and 'abnormal' bodies. The meanings and value of bodies that are constructed within these fields form an important source of knowledge on which in- and exclusionary practices in general are based. As DePauw (1997) argues:

In a society where individuals are judged by their appearance and valued for their youth, virility, activity, and physical beauty, individuals with disabilities are often shunned by society and treated as inferiors. (p. 423)

Several scholars have suggested that ableist notions about embodiment can filter from the sports context into society in general through (popular) imagery (e.g. Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Buysse & Borchering, 2010). Hardin and Hardin (2004) argue that the lack of images of disabled bodies in PE textbooks indicates the dominance of ableism in the mainstream school context and could explain exclusionary practices based on dis/ability. Research by McMaugh (2011), Pitt and Curtin (2004) and Curtin and Clarke (2005) confirms that exclusion based on dis/ability is embedded in mainstream education. They found that children with a physical disability who participated in mainstream classes were often bullied by peers, undervalued by teachers and excluded from physical activities. Similarly, Fitzgerald (2005) focused on exclusionary practices in mainstream PE. She found that PE practices included disabled students measuring themselves and others against idealized notions of normality. One of these notions, according to Fitzgerald, assumes a high level of motor competence. As a result, not only were disabled students excluded from playing 'rough' sports like rugby but also their performance in other sports like boccia was not recognized as valuable. Fitzgerald's research shows how the educational context is shaped by both adults and children who reproduce ableist discourses and practices that oppress physically disabled youth. Thus, the ideal of inclusive education when operationalized through mainstreaming often falls short in practice. As ableist assumptions mostly remain unchallenged in mainstream school settings, inclusivity may have become merely a fashionable phrase without much content (Grenier, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2012). This raises the question as to how disabled youth manage the oppressing power structures in mainstream (so-called inclusive) education that are based on ableist normative notions of physicality.

Doubt and McCall (2003) interviewed physically disabled students about their experiences in mainstream secondary school in Canada. They found that negative peer reactions and the inaccessibility of activities such as PE and athletics limited the inclusion of these teenagers. Doubt and McCall also described disabled students' strategies to facilitate inclusion, such as finding a specific niche in PE and making fun of their own disability to put others at ease. This research shows that students are not just victims of ableist discourses that mark them as abnormal and facilitate their exclusion from participating in (physical) activities with peers. As Doubt and McCall (2003) and McMaugh (2011) argue, disabled students also resist these oppressive

structures, produce alternative discourses and perform strategies to manage and/or minimize their marginalization.

In this paper we employ a feminist poststructuralist perspective to critically explore how Dutch physically disabled students engage in these processes. Hereby, we aim to unravel how dominant knowledge/power structures shape the discursive constructions about the body/self that these youth use. In addition, we search for possibilities to disrupt the dominance of ableist discourses about sport and physicality by paying attention to the complexity and dynamics of identity positions that these youth occupy in relation to these discourses.

### **Feminist poststructuralism**

A feminist poststructuralist perspective challenges the dominant assumption that the body is a biologically essential and unitary category and instead considers the body to be socially constructed. While poststructuralism acknowledges the material component of individual bodies, it contends that the biophysical is inextricably linked to sociopolitical dynamics. Critical attention to discourses that produce marginalized bodies is therefore warranted (Grue, 2011). Feminist poststructural scholars thus frame the body as a site of conflicting social, political and economic forces (Weedon, 1997; Wright, 2004). The body is seen as dynamic and fluid, constantly influenced by and of influence on discourses (Azzarito & Solmon, 2005). Feminist poststructuralism provides a good framework from which to examine disability since it shows that ‘[...] disability – similar to race and gender – is a system of representation that marks bodies as subordinate, rather than an essential property of bodies that supposedly have something wrong with them’ (Garland-Thomson 2005, pp. 1557–1558). Feminist poststructuralists such as Weedon (1997) and Wright (2004) argue that discourses are systems of language, thought and practice that produce historically and culturally specific meanings about which bodies are considered normal and which—by default—are considered abnormal or pathological. Moreover, dominant discourses about physicality and sport produce abled bodies as normal and disabled ones as abnormal (Garland-Thomson 2005).

A poststructuralist perspective assumes that meanings produced by discourses are not fixed and stable but fluid and constantly changing because they are inextricably connected to power relations. Yet, at a specific time and place certain discourses are privileged over others, whereby the meanings they produce come to be considered ‘absolute truths’. As these absolute truths become institutionalized, they discipline bodies through everyday practices (Foucault, 1979). Surveillance, categorization and normalization are disciplinary practices and as such they function as systems of control over individuals’ bodies. Disabled bodies are often subjected to disciplinary practices because of their marginal position in relation to the norm. McMaugh (2011, p. 859) describes practices of surveillance in mainstream education. She found that able-bodied students managed perceived differences by constantly monitoring disabled peers. Similarly, Cadwallader (2007), in her exploration of

normalization practices that disabled people are subject to such as 'corrective' surgery, shows how bodies can be physically shaped by discourses too.

Thus, discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They also shape the materiality of the body, the embodied experiences of individuals, and their sense of self. Discourses can oppress marginalized groups such as women, racial minorities and the disabled through the production of specific knowledge/power. This does not mean that individuals are social dupes. Feminist poststructuralists argue that there is also room to challenge these oppressing structures. Azzarito & Solmon (2005) posit that 'Agency is [...] produced by people's negotiation of power relations embedded and produced by discourses'. (p. 224). Similarly, McMaugh (2011) contends that young disabled people are not simply victims of dominant discourses about sport and physicality. They are active agents who can resist, negotiate and challenge dominant abled discourses in their everyday lives. This agency requires scholarly attention because its dynamics can illuminate possible ways ableist discourses can be disrupted. Insight is therefore needed in how disabled youth exercise agency within these constraining power structures and how they position their body/self in relation to ableist discourses.

Similar to their conceptions of the body, feminist poststructuralists conceptualize the self as fragmented, multiple, contradictory and fluid. The self (also referred to as subjectivity, identity and subject position) is thus not seen as fixed and stable but as a process that entails a continuous negotiation of various sets of socially established meanings and practices. Following Butler (1990), Rail *et al.* (2010) argue that 'identity involves a notion of performativity, a re-experiencing of meanings [...] related to dis/ability, gender, sexuality, race etc. (p. 264). This performative element may be crucial to how disabled youth position themselves at a certain time and place along the range of subject positions made available to them by circulating discourses about sport and physicality.

## **Methodology**

Our focus was on youth with physical disabilities between the ages of 12 and 18. An exhaustive search via online forums, rehabilitation centers and schools resulted in finding four youngsters who agreed to participate in the study: Anna, a 13-year-old girl with Erb's palsy, a nerve injury that affects the movement of the shoulder, arm and hand; Katy, a 12-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who experiences spasms; and Dexter and Nadia, a 14-year-old boy and a 14-year-old girl with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Dexter and Nadia were not visibly disabled, but did experience motor impairments due to severe pain and fatigue and were therefore categorized as physically disabled by their school supervisor. This small group reflects a variance of disabilities that speaks of the heterogeneity of the disability experience. Yet in their mainstream educational setting, the youth were all reduced to the single category of 'disabled'. The authors, in contrast, can be categorized as able-bodied.<sup>3</sup> The fact that we neither share the disabled experience nor are part of the disability community

might have contributed to our difficulties in finding participants for this project. In the Results section, we elaborate on other possible reasons for the lack of (interest in) participation from many youngsters who were contacted.

After gaining consent for participation from the school, the children and their parents, the primary researcher organized the interviews. Katy, Dexter and Nadia took part in a group interview led by the primary researcher. The primary researcher conducted an individual interview with Anna. We used this variation in methodology to allow for both the in-depth insights on sensitive topics that are usually gained more effectively in individual interviews and the peer interaction in the focus group setting that spurs youth to talk more extensively about their experiences and build on each other's ideas (Peek & Fothergill, 2009).

In the interviews, the primary researcher asked the youth to talk about their ideas and experiences with regard to physical education, sport, their bodies and their identity/self. The participants were additionally asked to bring a picture of someone whose body they considered to be athletic and a picture of someone whose body they considered non-athletic. This method was used to enhance the participants' reflexivity about bodies, physicality and sport (Azzarito, 2010; van Amsterdam *et al.*, 2012).

Our poststructuralist perspective kept the interviews focused on meaning making and on the contextualization of our participants' narratives within the discursive field of sport and physicality. The interviews were audio taped. All the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The analysis of the transcripts was twofold. First, the data were thematically analyzed. Qualitative data analysis software Nud\*ist Vivo was used to help organize the data into codes and themes. Second, a critical discourse analysis was used, informed by our feminist poststructuralist approach (Wendell, 1996; Wright, 2004; Azzarito & Solmon, 2006; Wickman, 2007; Rail *et al.*, 2010). This analysis allowed us to identify discursive constructions that our participants used in their narratives regarding sport and physicality. It also allowed us to interrogate how our participants positioned themselves in relation to dominant abled discourses about sport and physicality. We paid attention both to how our participants reproduced dominant ideologies in their narratives and to how they used their agency to resist and challenge these. We have thus tried to explore some of the commonalities and differences in experiences of the disabled youth that participated in this study, but we acknowledge that the data presented in this paper are by no means exhaustive or generalizable.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Constructing and positioning the self as normal*

The primary theme that emerged from the interviews and observations revolved around the desire of disabled youth to be (seen and treated as) normal. For them this normalcy was not effortless or taken-for-granted but required work. Although dominant societal discourses about sport and physicality construct the disabled body as deviant, vulnerable and lacking and the disabled as abnormal, youth in this study



offered insights into the different ways in which they *did* construct the self as normal. In this section, we describe the various discursive constructions and performative strategies they employed to accomplish a normal self.

*'It's actually very normal that I'm different'—an alternative discourse.* In the interview, Anna showed awareness of the dominant discourse about physicality and how this shaped others' reactions to her. She talked, for example, about the stares she gets on the street when she wears an arm brace, which can be considered surveillance of her disabled body/self. Yet, Anna herself used an alternative discourse to challenge dominant notions about disability. She mentioned that her visible disability often triggered negative reactions from people around her, but that she had gotten used to being seen as different. She stated that she had had trouble with this at first, but eventually accepted her disability as part of her self.

At first I was really bothered by it and I felt very upset. But later on I just started to accept it. Now, I'm just like, it's actually very normal that I'm different.

The construction of her self as normal seems essential to Anna's acceptance of her disability. The alternative discourse Anna used produces the knowledge that everyone is different and therefore being different is normal. This discourse allowed Anna to construct herself as different and normal simultaneously.

The alternative discourse of 'everyone is different, everyone is normal' resonates with the words of Preston in the case described in the introduction. It is often offered in Disability Studies research as a solution to exclusionary practices based on disability. Shakespeare and Watson (2002), for example, argue that impairment is the universal fate of all humans and therefore there 'is no qualitative difference between disabled people and non-disabled people, because we are all impaired' (p. 27). Shakespeare and Watson point out that there is no such thing as a body that works perfectly, consistently or eternally. However, Hughes (2009) considers alternative discourses that evoke the universality of impairment to be problematic because they normalize disability instead of celebrating bodily differences. The alternative discourse that Anna used is slightly different from the discourse that critical disability scholars such as Shakespeare and Watson suggest, because it explicitly emphasizes normalcy as desirable. Possibly, this is reinforced by the Dutch context in which normalcy is celebrated and 'being different' is often approached with apprehension and/or (mild) disdain.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the use of this alternative discourse enabled Anna to actively engage with oppressing dominant structures and construct a disabled self as normal and different simultaneously. Her narrative was filled with instances where she said that people soon got used to her disability and she got used to being seen and treated as different. The following interview excerpt seems exemplary of Anna's experiences of becoming normal within the ableist school setting that excluded her from participating in PE:

Interviewer: What is it like to have to do something different from the other students in PE?

Anna: Well, it took some getting used to, but after a while it became normal

Interviewer: What exactly did you have to get used to?

Anna: It is strange when you can't participate in the group, when you have to do something else all by yourself

Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?

Anna: Not too bad, because I'm used to doing something different from the others. And later on they understood as well.

Thus, in Anna's experience, her disability makes a difference in social interactions at first, but it is only a matter of time before being different becomes normal to herself and others. Ironically, the alternative discourse Anna used to gain more acceptance of her difference also led her to accept the structural exclusionary practices based on ableist discourses about sport and physicality. A poststructural perspective suggests that the ableist discourses that underpin inclusionary PE produce Anna as a subject unable to participate in certain physical activities.

By using the 'everyone is different, everyone is normal' discourse, Anna expressed her agency within the constraining power structures of her educational setting as she tried to redefine ableist norms. She also alluded to the fact that disabled people are often invisible in the sport context and advocated more visibility of disabled people in sport and PE to diminish their marginalization.

There is a fellow student in school who uses a wheelchair and he also participates in PE. But that's not something you see very often. It's similar to the Olympic Games. Not everyone knows this, but there are also Paralympic Games for disabled people only these rarely get aired on TV. That's one of the problems.

In Anna's experience, the more people see disabled bodies and interact with them, the more people get used to disabled bodies and consequently they become normal. Anna viewed this normalizing of disabled bodies as desirable.

Anna's initiative to immediately tell all her classmates about her disability at the beginning of the new school year is another example of her attempts at normalizing her disabled body. The use of a feminist poststructuralist framework suggests that this should not be read as politicizing her disabled self, but as a performative technique used by Anna to become normal as soon as possible. Her shifting subject position in relation to disability sports reflects the tension between being different and being normal that the alternative discourse she uses generates. Although she would rather watch the Paralympics than the Olympics, she denied that this is related to the possibilities such broadcasts give for identification. Instead, she steered the conversation toward her participation in abled sports (ice skating), which she said she enjoys because she can participate like everyone else, without extra help.

*'I just want to be as normal as possible'—passing as able-bodied.* Nadia, Dexter and Katy used a strategy different from Anna's to construct their self as normal. The (mostly) invisible nature of Dexter's and Nadia's disability offered them the opportunity to keep their disability a secret and pass as normal. Goffman (1978) described passing as a common strategy used by those who are stigmatized to

circumvent stigma by minimizing, hiding and/or disguising differences. Similar to others with invisible disabilities (see for example Lingsom, 2008; Valeras, 2010), Nadia felt that hiding her disability was the best way to avoid negative differentiating practices that are produced by the dominant ableist discourse about physicality and construct a normal self. Not wanting to be seen as different was central in Nadia's construction of her self as normal:

Nadia: My biggest thing is that I do not want to be an exception. I just don't tell anyone. When people ask about it, I just tell them something else [...] if I'm in a wheelchair for example and people ask why, I just tell them I have a sports injury [...] They don't need to know.

Interviewer: Why? What are you afraid of?

Nadia: That they'll think I'm different. And I don't want that. I am still the same.

This quote exemplifies Nadia's fear of being seen and treated differently because of her disability and reflects exclusionary practices that are produced by the dominant ableist discourse about physicality. Dexter and Katy seemed to share this fear. Dexter argued that 'I don't think anybody wants to be seen as different'. The desire to be seen as normal/abled was also illustrated by Nadia's participation in ballroom dance, which she did against the advice of her doctors. Her gendered and abled subjectivity seemed to intersect when she prided herself with dancing on high heels for two hours straight in competitions like the other dancers in spite of the pain and fatigue she experienced.

Katy and Nadia explicitly resisted identifying as disabled, which they saw as abnormal, in favor of constructing the self as normal. Because of the more visible nature of her disability, Katy's performative strategy focused on constructing her self as 'as normal as possible'. Katy's description of her impairment illustrates this.

I have spasms. That has nothing to do with pain, I just walk differently. You can see it too. At school everything goes ok. I just get tired quickly and that's why I have a wheelchair. I use it if I go shopping for instance [...] I can do almost everything. The only thing that's difficult for me is the stuff that requires balance. I can walk up the stairs without using my hands but not down. That's when I get afraid of falling over forwards, so I just don't do that. I always hold on to the railing. I also can't walk on a balance beam. Those sorts of small things I cannot do.

In this narrative, Katy tried to minimize the limitations she has to deal with by reassuring everyone present at the group interview that her schoolwork is not suffering; by stating that she can do 'almost everything' and by emphasizing that her difficulties 'only' concern her balance and there are just small things she cannot do. A poststructuralist lens suggests that this is a performative act by which Katy positions herself as close as possible to the abled norm defined by dominant ableist discourse. Katy's narrative suggests she constructed the abled/normal body as one that moves smoothly and without technical support from a wheelchair, walks up and down the stairs without problems and has good balance.

In the following excerpt, Katy described her dislike of participating in disability sports and her desire to be normal:

Katy: [Disability sports] is just not for me. [...]

Nadia: Yeah, you see the worst disabilities, really extreme

Katy: I really thought, what am I doing here? There were many kids with Down syndrome participating. I just don't like being in the middle of all that.

Interviewer: Why not?

Katy: I just don't like it, I just want to be as normal as possible.

Nadia: You just want to be yourself, the same as everyone else.

Similar to the negative attitude of wheelchair athletes toward other (more severely) disabled athletes that Wickman (2007) describes, Nadia and Katy constructed a hierarchy of disabilities by distancing themselves from those with 'extreme' disabilities. This exemplifies how Katy and Nadia engaged in disciplinary processes of categorization and normalization that reproduce dominant ableist discourses. Furthermore, their rejection of disability sports can be read as another attempt to discursively construct their self as normal. Yet, Nadia's positioning in relation to discourses about dis/ability is not straightforward but complex. Nadia brought a picture of male wheelchair basketball players to the interview. She interpreted their bodies as athletic. This suggests she used multiple positionings in relation to (disability) sports. It also shows that her dis/abled gendered subjectivity is dynamic, and thus supports the poststructuralist notion of fluid selves.

Nadia's last addition to Katy's viewpoint suggests she did not want disability to be part of her social identity. In fact, the statement 'you just want to be yourself' implies that her disabled body somehow makes it more difficult for Nadia to be seen for who she really is. This alludes to the idea that disability often functions as a master category by which others define a person with a disability (Mulderij, 2000). Nadia's strategy of resistance to this construction of difference resonates with Michalko's (2009, p. 69) argument that a common strategy to remove the excess of disability is to privilege personhood over disability: 'This view holds that disability is not who we are, but something we have'.

In contrast to Anna, who pointed out the social nature of disability, Nadia's narrative showed how she simultaneously reproduced and resisted the dominant discourse about disability by constructing it as an individual problem. She explained why she does not want others to see and treat her as different.

My friends do know. But I said to everyone who I told about my disability: I don't want to be seen as different. Otherwise I will get very angry. I'm not different, I'm like everyone else. I just have a disability, well, that's my problem and not yours.

Here, Nadia constructed a different, disabled self as something negative. The subtext of her construction is that difference is synonymous with deviance, which she tries to normalize. Nadia's resistance to identify as disabled in this narrative can be read as resistance to dominant notions that to be disabled is to be a problem. Congruent with Michalko's (2009) observation, Nadia stressed that she *has* a disability. Thus, she suggests she *has* a problem, rather than *being* a problem. Possibly, Nadia was trying to avoid surveillance of others by constructing her disability as personal characteristic. However, her ideas reinforce ableist notions that disability is an

individual problem rather than a social category that functions as a basis for exclusionary practices.

*Resisting differential treatment and feeling the difference*

Structural exclusionary practices that ensued from ableist discourses about sport and physicality obviously affected the youth in this study. They gave examples of moments where they were subjected to surveillance, normalization and other disciplinary practices based on being categorized as disabled. Anna described how, when she applied to mainstream secondary school, the teachers expected her to be placed in the lowest level when they learned of her disability. Nadia, Dexter and Katy talked about the negative responses they received from others when they used a wheelchair. In the previous section, we described how our participants discursively resisted these ableist discourses and related practices. This section deals with the performed resistance of our participants in their everyday life. Nadia and Dexter, for example, explained their strategy of dealing with people who stare or laugh at them as follows:

Nadia: People look at you when you are in a wheelchair. I always just look back. Then they start staring and I just shout “Hi” [cheerful voice]

Dexter: Laughing very cheerfully. I do that too. I have a scoot mobile and very often people laugh at me

Katy: Really?

Dexter: Yes and most times I just laugh along “HAHAHA”. And then they think “what’s he doing?” and they stop laughing. I kind of enjoy doing that.

Here, Nadia and Dexter seemed to resist not only the gaze of others upon their disabled bodies but also the association of normalcy with happiness and disability with suffering that is produced by the dominant discourse about physicality (Cadwallader, 2007).

These youth had mixed feelings regarding this resistance, however. On the one hand, Dexter said he enjoys baffling people who make fun of him by laughing along. But when he was asked if he deliberately tried to challenge people who ridicule him to change their ableist ideas, Dexter denied and reformulated his resistance as a way of coping. He stated that he really did not like being treated this way but ‘crying doesn’t help either’. This resonates with the findings of Doubt and McCall (2003), who found that in order to enable their inclusion among peers, disabled students in mainstream school laughed along when they were ridiculed by able-bodied peers.

The development of strategies for coping with negative feelings due to an ableist environment seemed important to the youth we interviewed. Similar to the views of disabled youth in mainstream education that Goodwin (2009) reports, Dexter and Nadia described feeling extremely sad about not being able to participate in PE. Seeing peers participate in sports and PE class made them feel like an outsider. Therefore, both Nadia and Dexter said they avoided watching sports and PE classes.

Another strategy of resistance emerged when we as researchers tried to find participants for the study. In spite of the many ways in which we tried to contact

disabled youth, few seemed interested in participating in this research, even when their supervisors or teachers stressed its importance. Declining to participate in this project may be a form of resistance to differential treatment. One youth literally stated ‘just let me be, I’m not that special’, others expressed similar sentiments. We now realize that contacting disabled youth for the purpose of academic research constructs them as different. Youth that we contacted may have objected to and resisted this construction by refusing to participate. Couser (2005), who argues for an ethnographic investigation of disabled people as a (sub)culture, identified the same problem. He stated that ‘[...] although disability communities are ripe for ethnographic investigation, disabled people, long subjected both to marginalization and objectifying examination, may resent and resist such attention’. (p. 123). Possibly, the disabled youth we contacted not only resisted us (able-bodied researchers) marking them as different by searching them out as research participants, but they also may have felt objectified by it.

*Playing with the possibilities of being (in)visibly different*

Whereas there were clearly moments of resistance to being seen and treated as different, the participants also described moments when they strategically used their difference to their advantage. Katy, Nadia and Dexter explained how they also played with the possibilities their disabilities provided them, for example when they visited amusement parks.

Katy: Sometimes having a disability is fun too. For example when you visit an amusement park

Nadia: Yes!

Katy: You can skip the line. In these instances I always walk extra ugly [sic] on purpose so that people see [my disability].

Nadia: I always choose to go in a wheelchair. Then you can use the wheelchair entrance

Dexter: Me too

Katy’s mention of walking ‘extra ugly’ denotes the taken-for-granted negative self-evaluation of her limp. The statement that she did this ‘on purpose’ can be read as performative. Whereas Katy, Dexter and Nadia usually wanted to be seen as normal as possible, in this particular context they purposefully emphasize their difference to be able to get into an attraction without having to wait in line. Nadia said she once used her disability as an excuse to go to the bathroom with a girlfriend instead of alone, which she called ‘girl code’. This exemplifies the performativity and intersection of her disabled and gendered self. Teachers normally object to this, but Nadia and the friend were able to get their way because the friend stressed that Nadia needed help undoing the button on her jeans (a lie according to Nadia: ‘I was wearing a skirt!’). Dexter mentioned that he sometimes used his disability as an excuse for being late for class. He also occasionally prevented classmates from being fined for tardiness by telling the teachers that the classmate in question was helping

him manage the elevator. These moments exemplify the agency of these disabled youth and show how they negotiate dominant oppressing power structures.

In contrast to Dexter, and contrary to her disabled performance, Nadia chose to walk the school stairs even though these were difficult for her to manage and resulted in pain and fatigue. Her refusal to use the elevator illustrates the power of surveillance Nadia feels subjected to. It also exemplifies the performativity of her (dis/abled) self:

Nadia: I don't use the elevator

Dexter: Why not? Nobody can see you, you know.

Nadia: Not true, it's a glass elevator!

Nadia's comment about her visibility in the elevator shows how she—again—tried to avoid the gaze. Nadia's refusal to use the elevator sometimes resulted in her being late for class. A painful consequence of her success in constructing and performing a normal, visibly non-disabled self was that teachers did not take her disability into consideration when assessing her tardiness. Nadia said they often fined her for being late. Then, she had to go up and down the stairs again to report her tardiness at the administration office downstairs and get back to class.

Having an invisible disability thus provided Nadia as well as Dexter with both opportunities and disadvantages to position and perform their self in interaction with others. In the following excerpt, Nadia described the tension that arises from being invisibly disabled:

With me and Dexter, [the disability] doesn't show from the outside. With Katy you can see it. That's also very unpleasant. But if you *can't* see it that's problematic too because people will very quickly say "stop exaggerating" [...] Then again, it's also nice that you can't see it because you won't...It's not that I see Katy as an exception, but there will always be people who do.

Both Nadia and Dexter expressed their grief and anger at being called a fraud by doctors, family and others in the course leading up to their diagnoses. Similar to the findings of Lingsom (2008) and Valeras (2010) who investigated the experiences of people with invisible disabilities, the invisible character of Dexter and Nadia's disability had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it provided them with the possibility to circumvent discrimination and pass as normal. On the other hand, their success in performing normalcy proved problematic because it (sometimes) highlighted the disciplinary practices a disabled person is subjected to in ableist contexts.

### **Concluding remarks**

This research illustrates the overwhelming power of ableism and how it works through discourses of sport and physicality to disable those that do not fit the narrowly defined norm of appearance and physical prowess. This was exemplified by the multiple and complex ways in which youth in our study constructed and positioned themselves as normal and the way they accepted disabling aspects of their

environment as natural. As Cadwallader (2007) argues, all people are produced in relation to normalcy. She contends that ‘The “aspiration” to normalcy [...] is not optional. It is a key part of the way that we become subjects’ (p. 389). This may be given extra weight in the Netherlands where dominant social values construct normalcy as desirable. In contrast, standing out (or being outstanding) is seen as something that should not be celebrated publicly (de Rooi, 2007). In addition, youth arguably have an even greater investment than adults in positioning themselves as normal because, as McMaugh (2011) argues, peer acceptance plays an important part in youths’ construction of a positive identity. Our results support the idea that discourses in education whose purpose is to foster inclusiveness may instead reinforce stigmatization and marginalization of disabled youth, since the ableist underpinnings of educational practices tend not to be interrogated critically (Ware, 2001; Evans, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2012). As our study shows, students with disabilities were often measured against ableist notions of normality and thus cast as different. In their efforts to be accepted as normal and facilitate belonging and acceptance, these students mostly reproduced and reinforced the ableist normal/different binary.

Participating in sports and performing a desirable (athletic) appearance are two important behaviors that can facilitate belonging of youth among peers (Frost, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2005; Anderson, 2009). These are also ways in which youth can cultivate their bodies and express their identity (Azzarito & Solmon, 2006). Although our participants were not invested in constructing an (elite) athletic identity, they were nevertheless constrained in their feelings of belonging and in their constructions of a positive disabled identity by dominant ableist discourses about sport and physicality. This was especially the case when their disability was visible. As Garland-Thomson (2005, p. 1579) argues ‘Although variations and limitations in functioning are often the core experience of disability, appearance tends to be the most socially excluding aspect of disability’. Physical conformity seems to be particularly challenging to disabled students in mainstream education (Doubt & McCall, 2003). This could in part explain the abundance of normalization practices our participants used and indicates the importance of research that examines the role of discourses about sport and physicality beyond the sport context.

The reproduction of dominant ableist discourses has been emphasized in previous research with disabled athletes and youth (e.g. Pitt & Curtin, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2005; Wickman, 2007; Anderson, 2009). The current study, however, illustrated the performative and discursive resistance to these discourses as well. Anna, for example, used the alternative discourse ‘everyone is different, everyone is normal’ to construct and position herself as normal and different simultaneously and accepted her physical disability as a ‘normal’ part of who she is. An exploration of such alternative constructions and positionings should therefore play a central role in research that focuses on disability. Although these positionings are not necessarily unproblematic, they do embody possibilities to disrupt the dominance of ableism (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002).

The objective of much disability research and the handicapped experience class described in the beginning of this paper suggests it is enough to *know* the experiences



of physically disabled people. We argue that more than knowing or experiencing is needed to change practices that include and exclude based on dis/ability. The emphasis placed on physical competence and appearance in current Western societies requires an understanding of how these discourses exert power (DePauw, 1997; Garland-Thomson, 2005; Azzarito, 2010). Researchers need to explore how inclusionary and exclusionary practices are maintained by discourses that construct a narrowly defined abled norm. Such research should not only focus on disabled bodies/people but also critically question what the abled norm exactly entails. What is considered a normal/abled body and in which context? What are the boundaries that mark such a body? What subject positions are made available by this norm and how do abled as well as disabled people position themselves in relation to this norm? Although feminist poststructuralist scholars have addressed some of these issues from a theoretical viewpoint (e.g. Garland-Thomson, 2002, 2005; Samuels, 2002; Roher, 2005), empirical research is needed that critically investigates the abled body and ableist ideologies from the perspective of both disabled and abled people. This paper offers a modest attempt to begin to fill this gap. Our results indicate that our participants considered a normal/abled body as one that is able to walk up and down stairs without difficulties; participate in PE, sport and play without extra help or adjustments; and not display indicators of abnormality such as a limp or supportive technology such as a wheelchair or scoot mobile.

As our research furthermore illustrates, the category 'disabled' is not homogeneous. There are many different disabilities and—even among the four youth we interviewed—there were many different experiences and ideas regarding dis/ability, sport and the embodied self and multiple ways in which youth positioned themselves in relation to dominant ableist discourses about sport and physicality. For example, the in/visible nature of their disability was crucial in how our participants could construct and position themselves as normal and/or different (see also Lingsom, 2008; Valeras, 2010). In addition, ableist discourses about sport and physicality not only affect those with disabilities, but their scope also includes those seen as abled. Future empirical research should not only focus on disabilities and acknowledge the multiple and layered experiences of those marked as disabled, but also explicitly deconstruct the narrowly defined norm of ability, how constructions of dis/ability may intersect with other social categories, and search for alternative constructions and subjectivities that challenge dominant ableist ideas. Research on those that do not fit the current norm can, for example, include a wider selection of people, such as those marked as elderly or overweight/obese. Subsequent findings may create the critical mass needed to disrupt discourses related to dis/ability that marginalize those marked as 'different'. Ultimately the results of such studies should be used to re-imagine inclusive and empowering structures and practices.

## Notes

1. Semantics are an important theme in disability studies and topic of much debate (see for example Zola, 1993). Different terms such as 'disabled', 'person with a disability',

‘handicapped’, ‘impaired’ and ‘crip’ all reflect different political and theoretical positions in relation to how disability is understood and how people with disabilities should be treated in everyday life (Roher, 2005). We use the term ‘disabled youth’ or ‘disabled person’ in order to convey the idea that the person in question is actively disabled by society, as opposed to simply having a medical or biological ‘problem’.

2. Although Preston’s initiative is well meant and he should be credited for trying to address unexamined assumptions about being disabled, the approach is also problematic. First of all, this one-hour class cannot sufficiently help able-bodied students to form a thorough understanding of the disadvantages and discrimination disabled students experience in PE and beyond. Second, it seems impossible to replicate a disabled experience with simple attributes such as the ones Preston uses, if at all. Third, Preston reproduces dominant ableist discourses of disability by framing disability in medical terminology and using words such as ‘damaged’, ‘not working properly’ and ‘grown wrong’. As Erevelles (2005) argues, radical transformation is required in both curriculum theory and practice for mainstream education to become inclusive.
3. We contend that categorizations based on dis/ability are socially constructed and constitute a binary that represents and reproduces skewed relations of power between people who are assigned to either side of the binary. We acknowledge our current privileged position in relation to those categorized as disabled. Our position as abled researchers undoubtedly shaped the research process and its outcomes. As with any type of research, the results reflect only part of the lived reality of our participants. For an extensive discussion on how to do emancipatory disability research, see Mercer (2002).
4. This is reflected, for example, in the popular Dutch saying ‘Doe maar normaal dan doe je al gek genoeg’ (Just act normal, that’s crazy enough). The emphasis on normalcy and the rejection of public celebrations of difference in the Netherlands is also described by de Rooi (2007) in his popular publication on customs and unwritten social rules of conduct in the Netherlands.

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