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Gendered bodies and physical education (PE) participation: exploring the experiences of adolescent students and PE teachers in Nova Scotia

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ABSTRACT

Participation in physical education is often shaped by the gendered experiences of students. This study explored how the experiences of gendered bodies shaped participation in physical education (PE) among students in Nova Scotia, Canada. The study consisted of two phases: 1) focus groups with a total of 18 Grade 8 students (7 girls and 11 boys) attending public school in Nova Scotia, and 2) in-depth semi-structured interviews with six teachers (4 women and 2 men) responsible for teaching the Nova Scotia Grade 8 PE curriculum. Data were analysed through an interpretive phenomenological analysis. The analysis resulted in three main themes: 1) binary bodies, 2) competitive bodies, and 3) fluid bodies. Themes revealed the connections between gender, bodies, and participation in PE for students. Physical education in Nova Scotia (re)creates and (re)produces binary and heteronormative constructs of gender despite changes in the curriculum focused on inclusivity. The results of this study suggest that reviewing PE pedagogical methods and activities in relation to the influence it has on (re)producing gendered bodies would be critical in creating PE spaces that are inclusive to diverse genders and bodies. Such inclusive spaces can help increase student participation in PE.

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Introduction

Gender in physical education

Physical education (PE) and the curriculum used within it has been noted to be a critical way gender, bodies and identities are constructed for children (Kirk, 1997, 1998). PE is used as a site for ‘schooling’ the body (Lynch & Soukup, 2016, p. 3), where the body has been, and in some cases continues to be, viewed as an objectified instrument used for performing manual labour, physical activity for the purpose of health maintenance, and elite sport (Kirk, 1998; Whitehead, 2001). There has been much research on the construction of gender within PE as the importance of bodies and health increase in modern Western cultures with implications for those who teach PE (Kirk, 1997, 1998). For example, Parker (1996) suggested that PE is a critical site in the construction of masculinities. Other researchers have theorized that bodies, and even the body movements of students undertaking PE, are constituted through Butler’s heterosexual matrix as an integral part of performativity (Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2003; Joy & Larsson, 2019; Solmon, 2014). Kirk (2002) suggested that physical

educators who recognize the body as a social construction can design PE to help students to deconstruct some of the gendered norms about bodies and identities.

Gender norms are (re)produced through PE and it has been noted that PE systems often privilege certain forms of gender (Gard, 2006), particularly hegemonic masculinities. Hegemonic masculinities are idealized forms of masculinities that are rooted in binary and heteronormative constructs of gender and often privilege physical and emotional strength (Connell, 1995). This can marginalize other genders and create hierarchies of gender (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) that influence the experiences and learning of students. Hierarchies of gender often produce divisions of students within PE.

Many PE systems within Western countries have historically segregated boys and girls during activities, with certain activities more prevalent for boys, such as ball games, while other activities like dance and gymnastics are taught to girls (Larsson, Fagrell, & Redelius, 2009). This was often based on gender notions that positioned boys as highly competitive and excelling in such areas that required strength, speed, and aggression (Hickey, 2008). Girls, on the other hand, were positioned to be less competitive and to excel in activities that required flexibility, agility, and teamwork (Hickey, 2008). In the 1980's, as a result of feminist movements that challenged patriarchal systems, curriculum changes took place in many countries. Larsson et al. (2009) highlighted such an example in Sweden and noted that many girls were taught the activities that were previously only taught to boys. The reverse, however, often did not happen. The authors reported that dance and gymnastics were effectively removed from the curriculum, resulting in a reinforcement of heterosexuality, gender stereotypes, and dominant notions of masculinity (Larsson et al., 2009). Within this system, if boys wanted to perform dance, their masculinity and sexuality would often be questioned. In a similar vein, Vertinsky (1992) noted that girls who enjoyed participating in competitive games and sport would often be viewed by their male peers as 'unattractive, man-hating, and possibly lesbian' (p. 382). Rather than reinforcing these restrictive gender-stereotyped attitudes and practices, school PE programmes should be used as a platform to address such androcentric views, and homophobic practices.

The structure of PE is gendered and so is the way PE is often taught. In his autoethnography, Landi (2017) described how his teaching methods were often based on the assumption that boys would perform better in activities that built strength, whereas girls would excel in activities that promoted flexibility. He suggested that such assumptions (re)produced dominant gendered views within PE. These gendered views shape the ways bodies are known. For example, bodies that embody the standards of muscularity and strength are known as masculine, whereas bodies that embody the standards of thinness and slenderness are often known as feminine. Landi (2017) suggested that through his teaching practices, he was shaping his students towards heterosexuality, gendered bodies, and limiting their experiences and identities.

Physical education in Canada

The nature of PE in Canada is complex, as the country does not have a national PE curriculum or set standards for programming (Kilborn, Lorusso, & Francis, 2016). Nationally, the aim of PE is focused on healthy and active living, but because the PE curriculum is provincially based there is diversity in PE instruction throughout the country (Kilborn et al., 2016). In some Canadian provinces, including Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and British Columbia, health and PE are organized and taught as a single curricular area in the general public-school curriculum. This holistic approach to teaching health (inclusive of physical, social, emotional, cognitive and mental) aims to provide students with a coordinated programme to develop the knowledge, skills, competence and confidence to pursue healthy lifestyle decisions.

In other provinces, such as Nova Scotia, the two subjects exist as separate curricula, which are packaged and delivered independently from each other. This compartmentalized approach to teaching health has been criticized for perpetuating a separation between physical activity and

health (Lynch & Soukup, 2016). In Nova Scotia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is responsible for providing teachers with professional development opportunities and training regarding new curriculum implementation. The current Nova Scotia PE curriculum for Grades 7–9 claims to teach students about the importance of fair play, compassion, sensitivity towards others, and respectful language that values diversity including race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation (Government of Nova Scotia, 2014). However, little is known about how the curriculum is being implemented by teachers, received by students, or the extent to which gender constructs play in the delivery of PE.

Theoretical perspectives of gender

Gendered bodies are complex. Phenomenological theories can provide ways for researchers to explore the complexities of gendered bodies. Kim (2001) reminds us that ‘the primary task of phenomenology is not to denude human beings, but to reawaken ourselves to the idea that we are beings who live with and through bodies’ (p. 69). The body is within the world, it is phenomenal (Kim, 2001). Phenomenologists attempt to find meanings, in the context of lived experiences, to understand gendered bodies (Butler, 1990). Scott (1991) viewed experiences as socially constructed. In this way, it can be theorized that gendered bodies are also socially constructed. The gendered body is a historical body (Butler, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). It is continually being (re)created and (re)constituted through social and cultural processes throughout time and across cultures (Butler, 1990). As Benner (1994) noted, ‘we are not objective, theoretical spectators of our lives and of the world, but involved participants’ (p. IX). From a phenomenological sense, a person is not an essential self (Leder, 1984), nor an essential gender, but is known through social and cultural contexts in which they live (Benner, 1994). In other words, a person does not simply have a body, a machine with a particular gender, but is embodied in the world in which their gendered body is continually being reimagined (Leder, 1984). The meanings people give to gender and their bodies are thus shaped through societal institutions and cultural norms which are constantly being (re)defined. Gender is not an innate quality nor is gender something that is passively inscribed on a body; rather, it is a social process. Gender, as Butler (1988) states:

... can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable. In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all (p. 528).

People live within societies that shape their experiences of gender. If one ‘performs’ the social acts one becomes known as a particular gender, and this can have profound implications. Gender becomes a way people experience the world and come to know themselves.

Butler (1990) theorized that the performances of gender, and thus, the way people experience gender and their gendered bodies, are done within a heterosexual matrix. This matrix can be conceptualized as a perceptual grid that shapes all aspects of life through a lens of heterosexuality. Consequently, bodies become gendered through heteronormative and binary ideals. Genders that are aligned with such heteronormative constructs are privileged, while genders that do not reflect these constructs are deemed to be disruptive or outside of society (Butler, 1990). The heterosexual matrix therefore maintains and regulates the gendered body and its performances within the whole of society.

This study is part of a larger research project exploring PE participation in Nova Scotia, Canada (Zahavich, 2020). The overall study aimed to explore ways PE experiences of students shaped their participation within PE classes. This paper provides a gender analysis to the overall research with the

purpose of exploring how meanings of gendered bodies by students and teachers shaped the experiences and participation of students in PE in this location.

Methodology

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to guide this research and analysis. IPA aims to examine how people make sense of the personal and social world through the meanings they give to experiences (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). IPA is a dynamic process. Researchers that use this methodology seek to get close to the worlds of the participants to understand the meanings that experiences have for them (Smith et al., 1999). IPA can be thought of as double hermeneutic as the researcher is trying to understand how the participant is trying to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 1999). In the context of this research, we sought to understand how students make sense of their gendered bodies and their participation in PE.

Perspectives of the researchers

Within qualitative research, the identities of the researchers are not separate nor removed from the analysis process. As Larkin, Eatough, and Osborn (2011) noted, a part of the process of IPA is researcher reflexivity, an ongoing process of engaging with one's own assumptions and experiences. In this section, we, therefore, provide a brief summary of our perspectives and identities, to acknowledge them and not eradicate them from the research. The first author identifies as a gay man whose research often explores gender as it relates to nutrition, body image, and the construction of bodies. As a youth, he often felt uncomfortable in PE classes due to his otherness from hegemonic masculinity ideals embodied by the other boys in his PE classes. The second author identifies as a man, considers himself a friend and ally to the LGBTQ+ community, and has experience teaching and researching middle school health and PE in Nova Scotia. The third author identifies as a woman, considers herself a friend and ally to the LGBTQ+ community, and her research aims to strengthen the school environment through healthy school policy.

Recruitment, participants, and data collection

Data collection for the original study occurred in two sequential phases during the Spring of 2019. The first phase involved semi-structured student focus group discussions, and the second phase involved in-depth individual interviews with PE teachers. The study used purposive sampling to recruit student and teacher participants primarily through social media and word-of-mouth. Purposive sampling is a type of sampling where participants are selected based on their ability to meet specific criteria relevant to the research question (Hastie & Hay, 2012). In the context of the larger research project of this analysis, recruitment for student participants was directed at a specific urban and rural school district (one each) for the purpose of obtaining a diverse range of PE perspectives and experiences. In contrast, there were no geographic-based recruitment parameters set for teacher participants, due to the limited number of potential teacher participants. In both cases, participants were selected on the basis they could provide personal accounts of their PE experiences either as a student or as a PE teacher responsible for delivering the Grade 8 PE curriculum in Nova Scotia.

Participants consisted of 18 Grade 8 students (7 girls and 11 boys) from 11 unique public schools¹ and six PE teachers (4 women and 2 men) responsible for teaching Grade 8 PE in six unique public schools. In total, the teacher participants had approximately 70 years of combined teaching experience, with an average of 12 years per teacher. None of the teachers recruited for this study were responsible for teaching any of the student participants. All aspects of this study occurred outside of the school system, including recruitment and data collection.

All participants, including parents/guardians of students, completed an informed consent process prior to participating in the original study. Participants were informed that any confidential

information shared would remain private and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without reason or repercussion. Focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded with consent from participants and transcribed verbatim by a trained transcriptionist who signed a confidentiality agreement. Students were asked questions regarding their Grade 8 PE experiences in relation to factors that influenced their participation, such as the format of their PE classes, associated likes/dislikes and perceived purpose of PE. Focus groups were defined by students' self-identified gender (girl or boy) and geographic location (urban or rural) according to the location of the school they attended. We acknowledge that we were unable to recruit trans, non-binary or intersex students to this study. Each focus group was approximately 1-hour in duration and occurred in one of two sites, both of which were central to the urban and rural communities where students attended school. As an honorarium for their participation, students received a 25 USD gift card to a local sporting goods store.

Teachers were asked questions surrounding their experiences teaching the Grade 8 curriculum, but also about their perception of students' experiences. This included questions specific to gender differences amongst students' PE preferences, perceptions and participation. Five of the interviews were conducted via telephone and one in-person. Teachers did not receive an honorarium for their participation.

Data analysis

Data were analysed according to guidelines set forth by Smith et al. (1999) using NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2018). The IPA process is aimed at understanding the content and complexity of the beliefs and experiences of participants through their talk and stories. Therefore, multiple readings of transcripts are done in the attempt to understand more deeply such complexities (Smith et al., 1999). The initial reading of the transcripts was broad and open. During this reading, comments were noted in the transcripts. These comments included summarizing or paraphrasing experiences and meanings, as well as connections, contradictions, similarities, differences, and preliminary interpretations (Smith et al., 1999). With subsequent readings, these initial notes and comments were further developed to clarify and capture the participants' experiences. The intent was to identify more specific themes and patterns within the broad comments and to make theoretical links back to the words of the participants (Smith et al., 1999). This process was done independently by two team members (JBLZ and PJ) with oversight from the third (SFLK). Then, the team collaboratively discussed their notes, comments, and themes. All of the themes were listed together, and the team began the final process of connecting and clustering the themes. This was an iterative process in which researchers drew on their interpretation of the participants' experiences and meanings while checking to ensure the interpretations were connected to the words within the transcripts (Smith et al., 1999). Through this process, themes were merged and finalized.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was received from the Dalhousie University Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board. There are several ethical considerations unique to working with children during research. For example, researchers must have the co-operation and approval from several different 'gatekeepers' of the children, including school administration and parents. This may vary in complexity depending on the situation and research (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010). Informed consent to participant in research should be freely given by the child and/or parent or guardian (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). For this research, all participants teachers, students, and the parents/guardians of students, completed an informed consent session prior to participating in the study. In addition, all participants were provided an electronic copy of the informed consent form containing the contact information for the research team in case they had questions about the process.

In relation to focus groups, ethical considerations are for the most part similar to other methods of research. However, one particular point of ethical concern with focus groups is the handling of sensitive information and confidentiality. Since focus groups contain more than one person it may not always be possible to ensure strict confidentiality (Gibbs, 1997). To manage this concern, researchers must clearly state this in the informed consent process (Gibbs, 1997). In addition to informed consent mechanisms, the students within the focus groups were continually reminded that information should not be shared nor be repeated to others outside the focus group. In the interest of student safety, the focus group discussions were facilitated by a two-person research team consisting of the principal investigator (JBLZ) and a research assistant. With participants' permission, student focus groups and teacher interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a trained transcriptionist who signed a confidentiality agreement. In order to protect participant confidentiality, all data was deidentified.

Results

Three themes were constructed from the focus groups and interviews that explored the experiences of students with their gendered bodies and how their experiences influenced their participation in PE, and are outlined below:

Binary bodies

The theme of binary bodies examined the experiences of participation through binary concepts of gender. Interviews with teachers revealed the historical role of binary bodies in PE. This is particularly emphasized by one teacher as she described her experience of teaching in her school which has recently moved away from gender-segregated PE classes.

Up until this year, we divided male/female ... I would be in charge of all the female students in the class ... my colleague who's a male phys ed teacher did all the male students, and as students identified differently, we would flip them on our class lists and they would become his student or my student.

This excerpt is suggestive of a contemporary flexibility in respect of the gender identity of individual students. The historical separation by gender within this school shaped the experiences of both the teachers and the students. The teacher described her experiences within the gender divided system as positive. She explained that she experienced a sense of rapport with the students who were girls within her classes and that this rapport fostered strong relationships between herself and her students. She noted her colleagues seemed to experience the same rapport within gender-segregated classes. The teacher described the nature of her relationships to her girl students as familial. 'The motherly nature within me, it's just to watch out for my girls and make sure that they know they have a safe space'. A safe space was one that was away from boys, which she considered to be necessary for girls to feel comfortable to discuss issues such as menstruation.

The teacher further described the impact on her teaching experiences as the PE system was changed to be inclusive to all genders within the same class.

That (system of boys in one PE class and girls in another) changed this September against our wishes because we both felt strongly that the rapport we were able to build with our student groups specifically was valuable ... with our cultural shift I do understand and value that the administration was kind of trying to meet and take away any stigma, stereotype for our questioning students so I get why the shift had to happen, but you go with what you're told to do and so now we do class by class which means I have a mixture of male and female students.

The change she described was unwelcome although she acknowledged the value of the change. She recognized that cultural shifts, particularly in the way gender is viewed, were occurring and that the administration was responding to these. Despite the expression of value, the teacher experienced a loss through this change. She mourned the gendered-segregated system and saw the change as precipitating a loss of mentorship, rapport, and valuable connections to her girl students. When

conducting IPA, one must carefully consider the participant's personal background and experiences as important clues as to why they might think, feel or demonstrate emotion towards a particular idea or topic (Smith et al., 1999). In this instance, the experiences of the teacher were positive when students were separated based on binary bodies. She experienced a loss when this system was changed despite her recognition that more inclusive ways of teaching PE were needed.

In another teacher interview, binary bodies of students were once again discussed by him in terms of shifting gender norms.

When I first started teaching, there seemed to be an allowance for girls to be sitting out more than boys. I have no time for that, I have the same expectations as far as curriculum and what I'm delivering and what I want students to be able to work towards. So lately it seems to be fairly even but the class yesterday there were three girls sitting over to the side, and each of them had their own excuse as to why they weren't doing anything. There were boys that probably weren't doing it as much, but they weren't just sitting out to the side but they (the girls) weren't actually in my class.

The teacher described changes in how students' lack of participation during PE is addressed. At the start of his career, he described how it was accepted by some teachers for girls to sit out. This has slowly been changing due to cultural changes in the way gender is viewed within PE. Now that his personal teaching philosophy and current teaching practices did not allow for such gendered behaviours, all students in his class, regardless of gender, were expected to participate in PE. Yet it seemed that his teaching practices are not indicative of the wider PE system in Nova Scotia. He described experiencing incidents in which girls were still provided permission not to participate in PE by other teachers. It is interesting to note that although his teaching philosophy does not make allowances for girls not participating it is still being (re)constituted through historical views of binary gendered bodies. He noted that even when boys were not 'doing as much' with their bodies they were still participating and were not sitting off to the side like the girls. Such experiences (re)create binary divisions of bodies, bodies for boys that must be engaged, active, and wanting to participate in PE. This becomes the dominant way many boys experience their bodies within PE, as revealed in the student interviews.

The interviews with the students noted that heteronormative and binary gender constructs still exist in their PE and schools, despite administrative changes taking place in some schools within Nova Scotia. For example, binary gender divides were noted to influence the types of activities and the extent to which students participated. One boy student discussed how binary gender roles played out in his school.

everyone walks around and talks, that's why in the gym every lunch we have something set up like we do in our half-hour classes. Volleyball, badminton, basketball . . . Every day except Monday because they set up a day just for girls.

The student revealed that the division of physical activities by gender was still a common occurrence. When asked to discuss these girls-only days, the boys in the focus group indicated that even 'the girls say they don't like girls' day'. As suggested in the boys' focus group, binary divisions of students were viewed as unsatisfactory and unpopular experiences. PE practices seem to perpetuate divisions and (re)create binary bodies. This may be limiting who gets to participate in PE (Murphy, Dionigi, & Litchfield, 2014). In the work by Campbell, Gray, Kelly, and MacIsaac (2018), adolescent boys rated rugby and soccer as more masculine and 'manly' than activities such as dancing and gymnastics. Students defined the masculine activities as those that require physical strength to be used against other people. The research of Campbell et al. (2018) suggested that knowledge about which activities are masculine may further divide and limit participation in PE activities by binary gender constructs.

Constructs of binary genders can also influence and shape the relationships of students. This was described in our focus groups with the girls:

the boys automatically sit on one side and the girls automatically sit together on the opposite side even though all the girls are not friends. I have friends on the guy side but it's like no, people will stop you, no you are not allowed over there. That's the guy side.

The self-selected division of students is performative of gender constructs and (re)creates binary bodies. This shapes the way students of all genders interact with each other and whom they can

associate with. It is better to sit with people of the same gender but who are not friends than to transgress the boundaries of the binary body. The students' experiences, their participation in PE and their relationships with others, seem to be defined by the binary body.

Binary bodies were often reinforced by the teachers. One girl student within the focus groups noted that her PE teacher often divided the class between girls and boys when certain games were played. In describing the situation, she stated that

when we're playing certain games he (the teacher) always puts the girls against the girls, and the boys against boys, cause sometimes the boys get a little rough and I'm like can I go with the boys cause I want to actually play the game.

Although this student said that boys and girls were treated equally in her class, her experience suggests that differences are (re)created through gender norms and stereotypes within the class. Boys are grouped together during certain activities because of their tendency to be a little rough, characteristics that are typically associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). The student also felt that such gender divisions were limiting her participation in certain physical activities as indicated in her desire to play the game.

Competitive bodies

Gender constructs did not only constitute binary bodies but also competitive bodies. Gendered bodies and binary notions of gender in PE has been previously studied and there is literature that reveal connections between gender and certain characteristics within PE. For example, sports and PE are often known to produced masculinities that are characterized as aggressive, violent, homophobic, and competitive (Campbell et al., 2018; Kirk, 2010).

Our research also suggests binary bodies are intimately connected to competitive bodies. These themes are, therefore, connected in our results. Competitiveness is an attribute associated with boys as performances of hegemonic masculinity within sports and PE. This was illustrated through the teachers' interviews. As one teacher noted,

some of our Grade 9 girls are withdrawing from sport ... the girls are a bit more intimidated and say, 'well I don't want to go and embarrass myself at the track'. It's a bit of attitude, I don't know, maybe confidence.

The teacher expressed the idea that girls withdraw from PE participation because girls often feel intimidated by boys in PE and concern about embarrassing themselves during physical activities. Such knowledge (re)creates binary bodies; binary bodies that are competitive bodies for boys and non-competitive bodies for girls.

In the student focus groups, students described experiences of competitive bodies. They talked about how boys were predominantly seen by other students, as well as teachers, as being inherently more competitive. To be a boy in PE was to be competitive. One girl student noted this, saying 'the guys are very competitive with each other, but the girls are more, they just do it for fun'. Through these experiences, students viewed girls as less competitively focused and only participating in PE activities for fun. It is through the gendered body that the competitive body is known. As a result, the experiences of all students within sports, physical activity, and PE are shaped. This was highlighted by one boy student who noted that in his class he does not:

think there's any girls that play in sports and there's a lot of guys that play basketball at recess ... they're a lot better athletes, so when the girls tend to participate in stuff even if they try their hardest, they end up just getting sort of over shown.

Thus, even when girls try their hardest, they were viewed as being outcompeted by the boys. Hegemonic masculinity positions the attributes of competitiveness, dominance, and aggressiveness as the way boys should act and experience their bodies. Boys become known as masculine by being competitive, demonstrating physical strength, and out-shining girls. Thus, the performing gendered body becomes a competitive body one as well. Boys' competitive bodies are (re)created through PE

experiences and PE curriculum. Other researchers (Campbell et al., 2018; Roberts, Gray, & Miñano, 2020) also suggested that binary constructs of boy/girl, as well as binary notions of physical strength/physical weakness, and competitiveness/non-competitiveness are ways students and their bodies are known, policed, and sorted in PE.

In the results of our study, boys were not always seen as more competitive than girls. Some girls in the student focus groups discussed how they were very competitive and resisted the gendered attributes for the bodies of girls. One girl student noted that when her teacher divided the class into boys and girls to participate in activities separately it was justified by the teacher because 'sometimes the boys get a little rough'. She furthered that she often asked the teacher if she could 'go with the boys because (she) wants to actually play the game'. The comments of this student highlighted how the student experienced gender roles in PE that positioned girls as not as rough as boys and how the student resisted such roles. In other words, the girl student experienced, yet challenged, the gender-based limitations within PE that shaped her ability to participate.

It was noted by one girl student that in her class, which was mostly comprised of girls, many of them were competitive. Another girl student said that she was the 'only sportsy girl' in her class. The focus group discussions suggested that in classes comprised of mostly girls the experience of competitive bodies was different for them. In classes of mixed genders, 'sportsy' girls were often singled out.

Fluid bodies

The theme of fluid bodies explores how teachers experienced the changing landscape of PE in relation to diverse gendered bodies, particularly bodies that lie outside the binary boy/girl constructs. It was noted by one teacher that within Nova Scotian schools, 'students are feeling much more comfortable coming out and disclosing' issues of gender and sexual diversity. This has created the need for schools in Nova Scotia to expand their ideas about gender within their policies. It was noted by one teacher that they were 'fearful of unintentionally causing harm' to trans students, especially in relation to disclosure of information to families and the use of pronouns.

Due to the shifting landscape of gendered bodies, curriculum developers and teachers for PE within Nova Scotia are becoming more aware and inclusive of the experiences of trans students. Some schools have started to train PE teachers in trans issues. For example, as noted by one teacher, we 'had a presenter come in to present to our staff who was transgender and talked all about their experience in the education system and their experience with the whole process and allowed for open dialogue'. The training facilitated an 'authentic conversation' on the experiences of someone with lived experience of trans bodies. This was seen as helpful by the teacher and 'allowed for a better understanding of the kind of experiences transgendered students have'. Previous research (Foley, Pineiro, Miller, & Foley, 2016) indicates that trans students often have difficult experiences within PE and that curriculum that involves first-hand experiences is recommended to create personal connections with trans experiences.

This work also suggested that even for PE teachers with trans-specific training, their trans students may still choose to not participate during PE. As observed by one teacher in this study, trans students did not appear to participate in PE class as much as other students.

We have a student who is gender fluid, we've had transgendered students that typically don't participate as much in physical education as other students ... I can't understand fully but I can understand why.

The teacher discussed how they recognized the importance of trying to understand their experiences. Another teacher also related how 'a lot of people just don't understand and don't get why they feel like they could be both genders, they just don't understand that. I think that we need to do a better job'. This teacher also noted that they believed PE curriculum in Nova Scotia to be inclusive despite the lack of understanding most teachers appeared to have about gender diversity. The teacher expressed their belief that 'we all have bodies, we all move those bodies so it's hard to kind of be exclusive in that sense I think'. But bodies are (re)constructed through social and cultural

meanings of gender that are heteronormative, meaning that bodies are experienced through binary notions of being known as either a boy or a girl. Inclusive curriculum would recognize and acknowledge the way bodies are socially constructed. As evidenced in the binary bodies and competitive bodies themes this does not seem to be taking place within the PE experiences of students in Nova Scotia.

Discussion

The first formal experiences of physical activity for many people are within educational systems but for some students these experiences can be detrimental to them and their mental well-being (Sykes, 2011). The experiences of PE are rooted in gendered constructs that (re)create gendered bodies as either binary and competitive, or fluid bodies. Binary bodies are constructed through the heteronormative matrix and are embodied with dominant gender practices of hegemonic masculinity (for boys) or femininity (for girls). The embodied genders, in turn, (re)produce other meanings for bodies, such as the competitive body. Recognizing that competition during PE, particularly at the middle school level can be used as a motivation technique, as well as a healthy tool to teach students about fair-play and integrity in sport, it can also be negatively used to create a performance gap between students who are stronger and more skilled, and those who are not, which is often the case between adolescent boys and girls (Van Daalen, 2005). Competitive bodies position boys not only to be interested in PE but also to excel and be dominant within PE while simultaneously positioning girls to be less interested or capable. Competitive sports and PE often divide students along gendered (and binary) bodies and shape the experiences of the players by influencing who should participate in what activities; in other words what activities are appropriate for which gender (Gard, 2006; Pringle, 2007). Previous research has examined how embodied knowledge and embodied movements within PE constitute masculinities (Joy & Larsson, 2019). It has also been reported that gender constructs often create barriers to PE participation for many students, particularly for girls. For example, it has been noted that the competitiveness associated with and embodied through the bodies of boys is a barrier to participation of girls in PE classes (Azzarito & Solomon, 2009). In a study by Fisette (2013), girls (aged 14 to 15 years) self-identified the need to prove themselves to boys as a barrier to their participation within PE. Our research suggests that binary and competitive bodies shape the experiences of PE for all students but can, in particular, limit the experiences of participation in various PE activities for some students.

Our findings also suggest that knowledge of gendered bodies is changing, as described in the theme of fluid bodies. Fluid bodies can be conceptualized as resistance to binary and competitive bodies. It is the recognition of the fluidity and instability of gender, that students may embody fluid bodies and resist dominant and binary constructs of gender that can often limit their experiences. However, previous research has shown that PE classes, for many students who identify outside heteronormative and binary norms of gender, are hostile, homophobic places of emotional and physical abuse (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2006; Landi, 2017; Larsson et al., 2009; Sykes, 2011). It is common for these students to hear words like 'fag' and 'homo' within the PE settings in schools. These words emotionally scar youth, produce feelings of anxiety, depression, fear, and have long term consequences (Morrow & Gill, 2003). Additionally, such abuse also impacts the participation of these students within PE classes and how they experience and embody their gendered bodies. It has been reported that gender and sexually diverse students often sit out of PE activities, miss PE class altogether, or isolate themselves from other students to avoid physical, verbal, and emotional abuse as well as to protect their sense of self (Sykes, 2011).

Through interviews, it was increasingly being recognized by teachers in Nova Scotia that not all students identify within strict binary constructs of boys and girls. More students are experiencing their gender as fluid and less fixed than previously. Teachers reported changes in their schools to be more inclusive and to prevent stigma based on heteronormative concepts of gender. Although teachers noted these changes, the students themselves revealed their PE experiences as still rooted in the heterosexual matrix. The performances of binary and competitive bodies still are the dominant ways students come to

experience PE. It seems that the PE system in Nova Scotia is a still system of heteronormativity that (re) produces binary gender norms, maintains gender stereotypes, and reaffirms heterosexuality as the 'normal' sexuality. Previous research highlights that some PE teachers may not always be willing nor prepared to address and challenge the heteronormativity that is intricately intertwined in the institutions of PE, nor willing to address the abusive incidents in PE classes that are produced from social norms of gender and heterosexism (Landi, 2017; Larsson et al., 2009; Sykes, 2011). For example, Morrow and Gill (2003) indicated that over 50% of PE teachers never confront abuses they have witnessed in schools. Sykes (2011) suggested that gender categories outside the binary boy and girl categories are the source of unease for PE teachers. Sykes (2011) further argued that when binary categories of gender are challenged or disrupted the 'normal' ways of doing gender, of being a boy or a girl, are endangered and people became confused and apprehensive.

Conclusion and implications for PE practice

There have long been calls within PE literature for the reconceptualization of PE and teaching practices that acknowledges the influence of gender on participation and the experiences of students (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005). Some calls have also specified the need for an LGBTQ activist approach for PE pedagogy that not only acknowledges the diversity of genders but one that also resists binary gender constructs to transform heteronormative and homophobic PE environments (Dillon, Flory, Safron, & Marttinen, 2020). The development of PE curriculum and teaching methods that (re)define gender may provide teachers the opportunities to explore how the underlying heteronormative assumptions of PE influences their teaching and, in turn, the experiences of their students (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2010; Landi, 2017). The creation of PE pedagogical methods that challenge gender and explore the way gender influences student bodies, experiences, and identities may give students a space to participate in PE free from physical threats, verbal and emotional abuse (Gill et al., 2010; Landi, 2017; Larsson, Quennerstedt, & Öhman, 2014; Larsson, Redelius, & Fagrell, 2011). This study provides a snapshot of the experiences among some Nova Scotian students relating to their participation in PE. The study was limited in the gender diversity of the students and teachers recruited. The experiences of students who identify outside the binary are, therefore, not addressed in this study. Future studies could address some of the gaps in the literature about the experiences of sexually and gender diverse students, as well as pedagogical practices that would be, as Dillon et al. (2020) described, integral to an LGBTQ activist approach.

Physical education within Canada is varied in both content and pedagogy. Recently educators and school systems have recognized the need for PE curricula that is more inclusive to sexually and gender diverse students. The findings from this study reinforce this need and provide evidence that some progress is being made. However, the experiences of PE for students within Nova Scotia continue to reflect heteronormative and binary constructs of gender, based on this sample of Grade 8 students. An exploration of the way gender shapes the experiences and participation within PE classes can help bring attention to how such experiences can be challenged. Such knowledge may provide PE curricula designers insight into ways to undo gender binaries. Larsson, Nyberg, and Barker (2020) suggest that undoing gender through pedagogical practice may allow all students, regardless of gender, to experience PE in a truly inclusive way.

Note

1. In Canada the term 'public school' means a state school which any child may attend and in which tuition is free.

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