

# "SCHOOL IS ALREADY DIFFICULT ENOUGH...": EXAMINING TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender is one of the most investigated areas in sport and physical education (PE). Yet, little research exists specifically on transgender students, especially in the UK. For transgender youth, exploring one's gender identity occurs alongside other sources of potential anxiety for any child/adolescent, e.g. school experiences, the process of puberty, and relationships with peers, teachers and parents. Traditional PE caters to the binaries of male and female, with the genders often being separated and taught different activities, effectively limiting some youth (Dowling, Fitzgerald & Flintoff, 2012). Children have normally identified with gender by five years old, although this can be an ongoing process (Zucker, 2005). As such, it is possible to appreciate that as transgender youth travel through the school system, the traditional practices of PE as a foundation subject within the curriculum might also be sources of significant distress.

PE has been described as a discipline through which society's patterns are played out (Evans, 1993) and, as transgender people often face much discrimination in wider social life, it is possible that restrictive practices also feature in this context. However, very little research has asked PE teachers about their experiences with or knowledge of transgender pupils. Some studies explore the experiences of transgender individuals themselves, but they are not numerous and often focus on the broader school environment (e.g. Morrow & Gill, 2003; McGuire *et al.*, 2010). The research outlined here was undertaken as part of

an undergraduate dissertation project and sought to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of transgender people in PE and those who teach PE in England. Further, it explored PE teachers' knowledge about and experiences of transgender issues and highlighted potential implications for future practice and ongoing research.

## TRANSGENDER AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Prior to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was little evidence of the 'transsexual consciousness' or the awareness of transgender individuals in Western society (Whittle, 2002). Connotations of 'transgender' are thus constantly under construction, although a succinct definition is provided by Stryker (2009) who argues that trans individuals are "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" (p.12). Increased awareness of transgender is often accompanied by increased oppression, particularly in education. Transgender youth frequently report verbal and physical abuse and harassment by their peers related to their identity (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Debaun, 2012) with over 90 per cent of students who experience physical abuse having suicidal thoughts (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Alarmingly, investigations into homophobic bullying often find one of the most common settings to be in PE, with the term 'gay'

frequently being used as an insult (e.g. Roberts, 2008). Further, research has highlighted that staff are not always effective in tackling homophobia in PE classes (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). Despite this, however, it is argued that physical educators may in the best position to challenge oppression, due to their potential to restructure heterosexist frameworks surrounding PE, which can provide a lifeline for transgender students (Block, 2014).

Significant challenges can be identified for transgender youth within the context of PE. Firstly, the body is seen as central to practice, which can be distressing for those who inhabit physical bodies they may not align with (McGuire, 2016). Secondly, the tradition of gender-segregation within PE breeds the idea that the sexes are exclusively different (Larsson *et al.*, 2009). For transgender pupils this can be problematic, especially if they identify as 'gender fluid' – moving between identifying as male or female (Foley *et al.*, 2016) – as this can lead to them feel isolated. Finally, a lack of teacher education and knowledge around the challenges transgender pupils face has also been noted as an area for improvement, with research suggesting that when transgender youth are taught about transgender issues in a positive way, they are happier at school (Sauntson & Simpson, 2011). It is argued therefore that PE classes require a 'critically gender-sensitive' approach from educators, along with enhanced awareness of social and cultural conditions which may impact on PE practice (Lundvall, 2016).



## METHODOLOGY

This small-scale study used a mixed-method approach, employing two online questionnaires (comprising both closed and open-ended questions) as the core data collection tool. The first questionnaire targeted people over the age of 18 who identified as transgender (referred to as trans participants (TP), n=14) and asked questions around their experiences of PE, the structure of PE classes, the attitudes of physical educators/pupils, and issues around school policy and practice. The second targeted PE teachers within England (referred to as practitioner participants (PP), n=4) and asked questions about their knowledge around transgender issues, the structure of their PE classes, scenario questions (i.e. how they might act in different situations) and current school policy and practice. See tables 1 and 2 for participant demographics. The surveys were informed by research both on transgender issues and PE practice. A variety of question types were used within each questionnaire (including multiple choice, scale/rank and free text) which generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, taking the form of frequencies. Qualitative data were analysed via thematic analysis, by generating codes which were grouped and refined. The analysis generated three key themes: Barriers to Participation, Safety Concerns and Teachers' Role. Together, these were seen to articulate an overarching perception of PE as a negative or challenging environment/experience.

**Table 1:** Demographics of Transgender Participants

Age bracket	No.	%	Total No.
18-20	6	42.9	
20-30	7	50	
40-50	1	7.1	14

**Table 2:** Demographics of Practitioner Participants

Practitioner	Area of Country	Sector
1	North West	Primary
2	North West	Secondary
3	North West	Primary
4	North West	Secondary

## FINDINGS

Throughout the data, there was general agreement among trans participants that PE fostered negative experiences, as well as feelings of awkwardness and confusion. The most commonly identified feelings during PE were those of being 'segregated' and 'isolated', with only 4 per cent of respondents conveying they felt 'included' or 'accomplished' within their PE lessons. The findings from this study in this respect can be succinctly described through the following quote:

*“School is already difficult enough without the added difficulty of figuring out your gender identity and feeling awkward and confused and filled with dread when it came to PE. (TP2)”*

Data highlight that, for transgender participants, PE conflicted with their gender identity, filled them with fear and was generally experienced in harmful and rejecting ways. Similarly, for practitioner participants, the data highlight transgender issues as being a source of potential tension or confusion. Such issues are explored further in the presentation of data related to each of the core themes.

### 1. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

A consistent finding within the data was the categorisation of PE as a 'gendered space', with many trans participants identifying this as the greatest perceived barrier to participation. Indeed, 92.9 per cent of trans participants and 75% per cent of practitioner participants indicated that their classes had been split by gender, with each gender having participated in different activities. Further, 64 per cent of transgender participants agreed that they had been denied access to some activities because of their gender identity, with some noting the negative impact of this. For example:

*“There were certain activities and sports that I was denied because of the gender I was born to. (TP1)”*

*“Uncomfortable (for people) to be segregated into groups they don't identify with. (TP3)”*

The data suggest that separating youth into groups based on their sex is not always constructive to their identity formation, especially for transgender youth who do not identify with their biological sex and,

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thus, the group to which they are generally assigned. The segregation of genders and the associated enjoyment levels of PE for transgender pupils can be further explored through the following statement:

*I enjoyed all kinds of sports as a child... However, in secondary school, the difference in sporting opportunities for males and females meant I didn't end up joining any sports clubs, as girls couldn't play contact rugby. (TP10)*

This response hints at a positive primary school experience – one in which it was likely that both genders were taught the same activities, together, with a regular member of staff. The change of structure within secondary school, with classes segregated by gender and activity choice restricted, was then perceived to inhibit levels of enjoyment and lead to disengagement. Future practice should therefore consider whether splitting youth by gender is beneficial to all pupils, especially if equality and 'sport for all' is something to be aimed for in PE. As Sykes (2011) positions it, the gender structure of PE is at the heart of the creation of a transphobic environment. If change does not occur, then transgender youth will continue to be limited.

When asked to rank statements relating to school policy and practice in order of importance, trans and practitioner participants varied somewhat in their views (see Table 1).

Whereas trans participants viewed it most important for classes to be divided differently (i.e. not by gender) and for pupils to choose activities, practitioner participants viewed these statements as less important (ranking them 4 and 6, respectively). The disparity in the value placed on these statements, albeit with acknowledgement of the low number of practitioner participants, opens important avenues for discussion. If PE really is aspiring to meet the needs of all pupils, then understanding the needs and desires of those who are being taught is arguably critical. As noted within the youth voice literature, PE practitioners must move away from simply making space to listen to youth, to actively encouraging pupil involvement in opportunities for decision-making (Sandford *et al.*, 2010). This is increasingly important for those who are classed as vulnerable, such as transgender pupils.

## 2. SAFETY CONCERNS

Another key theme emerging from the data was related to the issue of safety. The majority of trans participants talked about feeling 'unsafe' in the PE environment, with many suggesting that they witnessed or were subjected to bullying and/or had general feelings of fear during PE classes. For example:

*(I was) almost attacked while playing field hockey for being 'too aggressive' by the girls in my PE class. (TP10)*

Here, the expression of gender-variant behaviour (displaying traits that are not stereotypically feminine) nearly resulted in a physical attack. It is noted that transgender students are more likely to challenge hegemonic femininity/masculinity as they challenge sex-gender binaries (Perez-Samaniego *et al.*, 2016). This seemingly opens them up to a greater risk of harassment and physical threat, which should be a cause for concern for all physical educators given Jones' (2016) recent report that over 90 per cent of LGBTQ pupils who were physically attacked had contemplated suicide.

The deeply embedded norms of what it is to be male and female are strongly evident in the PE environment. However, the research outlined here suggests that if PE continues to endorse and reinforce these norms, it may well cease to be relevant to some individuals, including those who are transgender, as it fails to connect to their lives and identities. When asked if they felt being openly transgender in PE would have been safe for them, 86 per cent of trans participants said no. Several reasons for this were provided, including prejudice, homophobia and the reprisal that it was felt would result from them contradicting the 'norm'. For example:

*My public school was very sexist and discriminating against anyone who didn't fit the 'norm'. (TP1)*

*Small town with biased views. It would have made life hell. (TP2)*

*The sheer amount of homophobia and sexism that existed made it very clear it would not be okay to be trans. (TP5)*

Many trans participants also referred to the fact that, even if they were openly transgender, the structure of PE (at that time) would not have been altered to allow them to participate in activities they felt comfortable doing:

*I don't think any accommodations would have been made for my trans\* status, especially with regards to what activities I could take part in. (TP10)*

If we look back to Table 1 and the practitioner participants' perception that pupils' freedom to choose their activities is of lesser importance, then the statement above (from TP10) is perhaps reinforced.

**Table 1:** Importance statements, where 1 is the most important and 6 is the least important:

STATEMENT	AVERAGE PERCEIVED LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE:	
	Practitioner Participants	Transgender Participants
PE classes should be divided in other ways (i.e. not by gender)	4	1
Teachers should take appropriate actions against bullying and discrimination	1	2
Pupils should be free to choose what activities they would like to do	6	3
Changing room facilities should be gender neutral	3	4
Teachers should support all pupils	2	5
Pupils should be free to wear their own kit	5	6



The lack of willingness or capacity to allow student choice in activities within PE may contribute to disengagement, as some students may feel forced into playing sports they don't identify with. It could be argued, then, that not only is the tradition of splitting classes by gender within PE leading to transgender youth disliking the subject, but their lack of agency in activity choice is effectively silencing them too. However, on a positive note, all teachers in this study agreed that no restrictions should exist for transgender students in PE. If current physical educators hold this view, it may be possible for steps to be taken to ensure a more inclusive environment for transgender students and a more positive experience of PE moving forward.

While most transgender participants stated they felt unsafe in PE, it is important to note that two respondents argued the opposite. Interestingly, one of these was the only participant to fall between the 40-50 age bracket, offering insight into a PE environment that may well have been different (specifically, more disciplined and with less awareness of transgender issues) than that experienced by younger participants. Reflecting on their response here, the participant reasoned that they felt safe because:

*"In my day, nobody knew what being non-binary or transgender was so there would have been no safety issue." (TP11)*

In this case, the lack of awareness among PE teachers and pupils possibly acted as a form of protection. Awareness of transgender issues is growing and, although in some instances this is increasing acceptance, some research also correlates increased awareness with increased oppression (Whittle, 2002). This may help to account for why the majority of the trans participant sample (those aged 18-30) felt they had experienced discrimination, or believed they would have done so, by being openly transgender in PE. These individuals are more likely to have experienced education at a time of greater transsexual consciousness, therefore were at a greater risk of oppression.

### 3. THE TEACHERS' ROLE

The sentiment that teachers are not often seen as positive role models for transgender youth (Bochenek & Brown, 2001) was supported by data from this study. When asked if they felt teachers had challenged pupils abuse, 75 per cent of trans participants answered no. Moreover, when they were asked if they felt teachers would have addressed transphobic comments in PE class, 92.3 per cent responded negatively. However, it would

be limiting to view educators as the only role models in young people's lives. Other influential adults, such as parents, play a vital role in the transmission of values to their children. Therefore, the responsibility to challenge discrimination cannot rest solely on physical educators but includes other significant adults in children's and adolescents' lives.

More positively, 100 per cent of practitioner participants agreed that they would feel confident in addressing any hateful language used by a pupil and this was reflected in their answers to the scenario questions. For example, when presented with a scenario where derogatory comments were made to a transgender pupil, responses included:

*"(I would) publicly tackle inappropriate comments." (PP1)*

*"I'd follow the bullying policy." (PP4)*

Data from the practitioner participants also indicated *intentions* to challenge any oppressive behaviour. Despite this, transgender participant data suggested that, in their experiences, actions are not always taken against abuse and, therefore, they lacked confidence in their teachers to support them.

When asked whose rights were more important out of two students (one being transgender) all practitioner participants indicated that both students' rights were equally important. Intentions to treat everyone as equal were therefore clear, but again, despite these intentions, incidents of bullying are frequent in this study's data. The disparity in data suggests the need to consider how much these intentions can easily be transferred into practice, especially considering transgender is still a relatively new concept in education and research suggests teachers themselves may not feel educated enough to address transphobic bullying (O'Donoghue & Guérin, 2017).

Indeed, the data from this study confirm that many PE teachers have a limited amount of knowledge on transgender students and the challenges they face. To allow for the effective identification of discrimination and transphobia, much work needs to be done to upskill teachers in this area. In the results of this study, one trans participant also highlighted this:

*"Teachers don't have to knowledge to challenge it [transphobia] very well." (TP8)*

One practitioner participant certainly reinforced this notion, indicating they did not feel confident in either identifying or addressing transphobia. When transgender participants were asked what changes need to be made to PE practice to accommodate transgender students, responses revolved around the need for greater teacher education:

*"PE should not be used to highlight the differences between the genders and should include teaching about athletes from all walks of life including LGBT+ athletes (including intersex people)." (TP10)*

Increased knowledge around the needs of transgender students and discussion around, for example, transgender athletes, should arguably start during PE teacher training. Indeed, 75 per cent of teachers in the study stated they had no information regarding transgender students in their training. One went on to state:

*"Having qualified in 1992, this was not a topic covered in teacher training. It poses a lot of questions and staff need training to ensure that the needs of all pupils are met." (PP4)*

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the ideal situation of full reform to include transgender students is challenging to achieve in practice:

*"The ideal scenario where all pupils are catered for is difficult in reality with costs of altering changing facilities, changing PE programmes and staff training. It's definitely an area that needs planning for." (PP4)*

The data show a genuine endeavour towards the inclusion of transgender students, but this should not start and stop with PE teachers. As all participants noted, real transformation requires a full school effort to educate, challenge and ultimately change school policy and practice.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The increased visibility of transgender people in society and growing 'transsexual consciousness' of recent times (Whittle, 2002) has led to a growth in research that has focused on the experiences of a traditionally marginalised group (McGuire et al., 2010). As has been noted, there has been a lack of research in the PE field



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that focuses on transgender issues, particularly within the UK. The small-scale study outlined here sought to address this gap in knowledge and set out to examine both the perceptions of current PE teachers and the reflective views of transgender adults regarding their PE experiences.

As has been discussed, the research identified several challenges for trans participants, specifically with regard to the structure of PE classes, the choice of activities and the narrow-minded views and perceptions of peers. Ultimately, for the majority of these participants, PE had been a challenging and uncomfortable environment, endorsing findings from both previous and current research. Indeed, the findings outlined here resonate with those of a new study by Devís-Devís *et al.*, (2018) which also finds that heteronormativity in PE can cause trans youth to be excluded. Importantly, however, this research also identified a promising change in perspective within the practitioner participant voices. It was noted that practitioner participants endorsed the view that every student should be treated equally and had firm intentions to tackle hateful language by pupils. However, whilst all practitioner participants felt comfortable with the prospect of teaching transgender students, not all felt confident in their knowledge of transphobia in practice. This identifies important implications for practice, including the need for introductory and ongoing training for staff regarding transgender pupils and the challenges they face.

This study collected valuable data from an under-researched area. However, the sample was small and, thus, future research would benefit from having a larger sample (of both practitioners and pupils). The views of policy makers would also be an interesting avenue to explore as this is a key means of shaping change. If PE reflects the values and norms of society (Evans, 1993) then why shouldn't it be the subject which pioneers change in schools? For, if the most gendered subject on the school curriculum (Kirk, 2002) can integrate and accept transgender students, then the rest the education system has little excuse not to follow its example. ■

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