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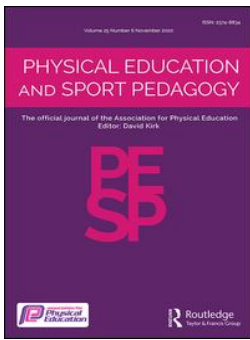
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# Heteronormativity meets queering in physical education: the views of PE teachers and LGBTIQ+ students

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## ABSTRACT

*Background and purpose:* In school physical education (PE) lessons, gender is often produced heteronormatively. Lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, intersexual, and queer (LGBTIQ+) students have reported experiences of discrimination and obstacles to participation. This study analyzed Finnish PE teachers and LGBTIQ+ students' talk about discrimination and problematic practices in PE and how equality in PE might be improved.

*Theoretical background:* We draw on the concepts of heteronormativity and habitus. Habitus provides insight on how gendered norms and inequalities become embodied and contested in different social fields. In the PE context, we define social on the one hand as the heteronormative 'feel for the game' and on the other as the queering of practices. We then demonstrate both the habitual elements of gender and sexuality and how expectations and categorizations are socially attached to bodies.

*Methods:* Thematic interviews were conducted with ten heterosexual and cisgender PE teachers and with ten LGBTIQ+ students aged 13–17. First, thematic analysis was conducted to identify each group's perceptions on discrimination in PE lessons, on PE practices in relation to LGBTIQ+ students, and on ways of promoting equality in PE. Second, applying the concepts of heteronormativity and habitus, we studied the identified themes to ascertain whether discrimination, practices, and equality were reproduced or challenged in the PE teachers' and LGBTIQ+ students' perceptions.

*Findings:* The PE teachers' perceptions, informed by the ethos of individuality, reduced LGBTIQ+ students to 'minorities' whose practices diverged from the heteronorm. Hence, the non-heterosexuality and gender diversity of LGBTIQ+ were constructed predominantly as 'tolerated' and even invisible in PE lessons. However, some teachers reported paying attention to diversity in gender and sexuality in their thinking, speaking, and practices, thereby challenging heteronormativity. While the teachers aimed to protect LGBTIQ+ students from discrimination, the majority also defended existing practices. Queering the status quo was considered challenging. In turn, the LGBTIQ+ students focused more on lived power relations and structural discrimination and challenged existing practices by queering the status quo. For them, the best ways to promote equality in PE would be teacher familiarity with diversity in gender and sexuality, reduced gender stereotyping and the use of more inclusive language. The students also supported coeducational PE

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groups and unisex locker rooms or changing facilities for LGBTIQ+ students.

*Conclusions:* PE teachers' tendency to defend heteronormative practices creates a paradox of 'tolerance' which works to marginalize non-heterosexuality. The interviews with both groups indicate challenges in implementing the objectives of gender-awareness in school PE in Finland.

## Introduction

Schools in general, and physical education (PE) in particular, are sites where heteronormative gender is reproduced by reifying heterosexuality and marginalizing, and often disparaging, homosexuality (Clarke 2012, 90). Recent studies have pointed to the discrimination and obstacles to participation experienced by LGBTIQ+ (i.e. lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, intersexual, queer) students in PE. More specifically, LGBTIQ+ students encounter homophobic name-calling (Ayvazo and Sutherland 2009; Gill et al. 2010), isolation, loneliness, and harassment (Devis-Devis et al. 2018b). They find PE problematic, distressing, and frightening (Alanko 2014; Kokkonen 2014; Lehtonen 2018; Taavetti 2015), often due to locker-room and other gender binary-based practices (Devis-Devis et al. 2018b; Lehtonen 2003; Taavetti 2015), and avoid using showers and locker rooms, or skip PE classes (Gato et al. 2020; GLSEN 2013; Kokkonen 2014; Kosciw et al. 2018). However, those who have felt comfortable talking to their PE teachers about LGBTIQ+ issues have been less likely both to avoid PE facilities in school and to experience harassment and assaults in PE (GLSEN 2013). Unfortunately, PE teachers have not always acted to decrease discrimination (Jachyra 2016; Morrow and Gill 2003; Piedra et al. 2016; Warwick, Aggleton, and Douglas 2001), despite their awareness of homophobic and heterosexist language (cf. Sykes 2004).

In recent years, gender and equality legislation and guidelines have been updated in many countries. In Finland, the Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986, amended 2016) extends the prohibition on gender discrimination from gender alone to gender identity and gender expression. The Non-discrimination Act (2014) prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCBI 2014) mandates reducing inequality and promoting equality and gender-awareness – including awareness of gender diversity – in teaching. However, no empirical studies appear to exist on what actions PE teachers and LGBTIQ+ students consider would promote the inclusion of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender students in school PE lessons.

In Finnish schools, despite the option of organizing PE in either coeducational or single-gender groups (Yli-Piipari 2014), and the preference of some specialist PE teachers for coeducational PE groups (Quay, Kokkonen, and Kokkonen 2016), single-gender PE classes remain typical from grade 3 onwards. Secondary school students are usually taught in gender-segregated PE groups, girls with female and boys with male teachers (Berg and Lahelma 2010). The most recent Finnish follow-up evaluation of PE learning outcomes reported that only 15 percent of secondary education students were taught in a coeducational setting (Palomäki and Heikinaro-Johansson 2010, 81). We assume that this arrangement contributes to previously reported gendered variation in PE content (Berg 2010; Palomäki and Heikinaro-Johansson 2010). Broadly, girls are taught more gymnastics, fitness training, dance, and ice skating and boys' more ball games and ice hockey.

In Finland, gender-segregated PE teaching has been justified by reference to students' individual developmental stage, skills, safety, and gender (Kokkonen 2015). Thus, gender differences are understood as informing children's interests and preferences and their physical attributes and strength, differences which are considered to put girls' safety at risk (Johansson, Heikinaro-Johansson, and Palomäki 2011; Palomäki and Heikinaro-Johansson 2010). This logic may reproduce gender stereotypical assumptions of competences and preferences, and hence gendered practices

and heteronormativity in PE lessons (Berg and Lahelma 2010; cf. Larsson, Redelius, and Fagrell 2011). Moreover, heteronormative practices in PE, based on a binary understanding of gender, may be especially problematic for transgender and non-heterosexual students (Devis-Devis et al. 2018b; Lehtonen 2018). In Finland, Lehtonen (2012) found that while teachers' attitudes and experiences regarding LGBTIQ+ students were generally rather positive, one-third had negative and prejudiced attitudes. Most teachers also saw no need to discuss issues relating to sexual orientation in their classes. However, teachers' attitudes, especially those of PE teachers, have not been studied in Finland. According to studies elsewhere, PE teachers' perceptions of LGBTIQ+ students impact strongly on the discriminative practices found to exist significantly in PE (Sykes 2004; Pérez-Samaniego et al. 2016).

Landi (2019, 32) argues that the streams of LGBTQ research in PE have mostly dealt with (a) attitudes, perceptions, and climate, (b) (mostly lesbian) teachers' experiences, (c) PE teacher education programs, and (d) the reflective experiences of adults. In turn, research on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth in school-based athletic settings, such as PE, is scarce (Greenspan, Griffith, and Murtagh 2017) and much of it has been retrospective (Landi et al. 2020, 268). Our study contributes to filling the knowledge gap on issues relating to the current experiences of LGBTIQ+ students in PE, teachers' perceptions of PE, and the views of both groups on how to promote the participation and equality of LGBTIQ+ students in PE. We focused on Finnish PE teachers and LGBTIQ+ students talk about discriminatory practices in PE, with special interest in how they think equality in school PE could be improved.

## Theoretical framework

Theoretically, we drew on the concepts of heteronormativity and habitus. Heteronormativity refers to heterosexuality positioned as the norm, thereby marginalizing sexual minorities (Warner 1991). Heteronormativity assumes that everyone is heterosexual, in turn legitimizing homophobia and heterosexism and discriminating against sexual minorities in social relations and structures (Robinson 2016). Heteronormativity is thus 'everywhere' and becomes internalized.

However, sexuality and gender can be seen something that we 'do' (Butler 1990) through the body. This manifests partly unconsciously in the ways the body works and how it appears. The incorporation of the social in the body can be captured by the concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990; McNay 1999). Bourdieu's concept of habitus is relational and usually applied together with the concepts of social field and capitals. For Bourdieu, 'fields denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation and exchange of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate, exchange, and monopolize different kinds of power resources (capitals)' (Swartz 2016; e.g. Bourdieu 1990). The forms of capital are economic (income, wealth, inheritances, monetary benefits), cultural (embodied, objectified, and/or institutionalized), social (networks, relations) and symbolic (capitals that gain their value from legitimation) (Bourdieu 1986). Fields are structured spaces organized around specific types or combinations of capital. While fields can overlap, Bourdieu sees them as relatively autonomous, each with its own rules, knowledge, practices, and struggles for positions of power.

As the present social field is school PE, we focus on cultural capital in its physically embodied form or habitus. Bourdieu developed the notion of habitus to describe not only the ways in which the body exists in the social world but also the ways in which the social is active in the body. It is manifested in ways of standing and speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu has often described habitus as a 'feel for the game' – knowing how to perform successfully without consciously thinking about it. When bodily styles and the social field match, action is automatic, and navigation in social situations is smooth (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127).

Habitus is central to how gendered norms and inequalities become embodied (Skeggs 1997). In the context of gender and sexuality this relates to the predominance of heteronormative assumptions, as these are constantly reproduced through practice. Thus, the feel for the game is culturally developed, not naturally disposed. As heteronormativity normalizes heterosexuality, all non-heterosexual bodies become marginalized.

Habitus as a Bourdieusian concept has been criticized for an emphasis on reproduction. Nevertheless, as some feminist researchers argue (Berg and Lahelma 2010; McNay 1999; Reay 2004) Bourdieu's work has been found useful in integrating social structures and embodied subjectivity in a way that highlights the impact of power relations on experiences – also in PE (Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2016). As noted by Butler (1990), the meanings of non-heterosexuality are produced socially in relation to heteronormativity. Thus, these meanings and marginality positions are not straightforwardly inscribed in bodies – they are also reshaped and resisted, producing alternative ways of being. Although people are widely exposed to heteronormativity, this does not mean that no other alternatives to heterosexuality exist.

Here, we focus on PE practices as agents of socialization. We examine how the social in the form of heteronormativity is both corporeally inscribed and contested in PE practices. We define the social in PE as both the heteronormative feel for the game and as the queering of these practices. According to Iisalo (2019, 2–3), queering entails unsettling existing assumptions, challenging the work and outcomes of normativity and revealing the oppressions associated with assigning people into categories. Larsson, Fagrell, and Redelius (2009) noted that queer designates the potential of different levels of social action or phenomena to be interpreted differently, particularly in a way that sheds light on heteronormativity. They scrutinized the possibility of queering PE in their analysis on how the concepts used by PE teachers included or excluded the possibility to challenge the gender order. We also aimed to queer mundane practices and critically reflect on the situations in which LGBTIQ+ students are considered 'strange'. As stated by Devís-Devís et al. (2018a), efforts to enhance social justice via queer pedagogy should consider not only trans persons' experiences and feelings but also cisgender beliefs and attitudes toward trans persons (see also Pérez-Samaniego et al. 2016). Moreover, as Coll, Ollis, and O'Keeffe (2020) have argued, re-positioning young people as agents in problematizing hetero and cisgender normativity may facilitate the transformation of school spaces. Thus, questioning heteronormativity and combating inequalities is not only a matter for adult professionals (Coll, Ollis, and O'Keeffe 2020, 54–55).

## Material, methods, and ethical considerations

The data comprise ten interviews with PE teachers and ten interviews with self-identified LGBTIQ+ students. The interviews were conducted as part of project *Promoting equal access and tackling discrimination against gender and sexual minorities in sport and physical education (PRACT)* implemented in the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä. The project's main scientific objectives were to examine the different types of discrimination in sport and school PE, especially those experienced by gender and/or sexual minorities, investigate attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity, and to explore practices and experiences related to same-sex versus co-educational school PE and sports club training. The overarching goal was to inform policymakers and sports practitioners on how to facilitate safer sport environments for all. The project was approved by the ethical committee of the University of Jyväskylä and a data protection impact assessment delivered to the university's data protection officer.

The interviewed PE teachers were from different regions in Finland. All self-identified as heterosexual and cisgender,<sup>1</sup> five as women and five as men. Their age ranged from 29 to 56 years (mean 42, 8) and teaching experience from 4 to 29 years (mean 15, 5). Eight teachers taught in lower and/or upper secondary schools and two in secondary and primary schools. All assumed that they had taught LGBTIQ+ students. Two teachers were recruited by the 2nd author, who is a PE teacher educator, seven by the snowball method and one contacted the researchers after learning about the

research project via a press release. The thematic, audio-recorded interviews lasted between 55 min and 1 h 58 min. The interviewees were asked for background information on their age, gender and sexual orientation, family and work situation, graduation time, degree, and possible coaching experiences. The interview themes were teaching experience, mixed and gender-segregated teaching, attitudes towards diversity in gender and sexuality, legislation and guidance in education relating to equality, and ways of promoting equality in PE. Interviews were conducted in the teacher's homes, workplace, or a public library meeting room.

The interviewed LGBTIQ+ students were also drawn from several localities in Finland. All self-identified as non-heterosexual: eight were transgender<sup>2</sup> or non-binary and two cisgender. Their age ranged from 13 to 17 years (mean 15, 7 years). Six were in upper secondary and four in comprehensive school. All had participated in their school's PE lessons. Most also engaged in leisure physical activities. We are aware that LGBTIQ+ youth generally do less physical activity than heterosexual youth (Calzo et al. 2014). However, since one aim of the project was to examine experiences of discrimination in PE and sport, we considered it important to interview individuals experienced in these domains. Moreover, as noted by Landi (2019), LGBTQ students can only change the field if they participate in PE. Non-participation may also lead to stasis in PE, further harming LGBTQ students (Landi 2019, 135). The students were reached through mailing lists and non-governmental organizations working with LGBTIQ+ issues, such as Seta (LGBTI Rights in Finland), Trasek (Finnish Association for Transgender and Intersex Rights) and Sateenkaariperheet (Rainbow Families Finland). Potential participants contacted us based on these queries and in a few cases, with the child's permission, guardians supplied their child's contact information. Written consent forms were signed by all the interviewed students and their guardians. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about how the interview would be conducted, the study goals, and how their anonymity would be protected. Interviews were conducted individually in the young person's home, a public library meeting room or a university office. The audio-recorded interviews lasted between 25 min and 1 h 16 min. Interviewees were offered a post-interview possibility to talk with the interviewer (the 2nd author is also a licensed clinical psychologist), their right not to answer questions they found uncomfortable was emphasized and they had a possibility to read the transcribed interview. We also reminded them that they would not be identifiable in study-related publications. We then asked them for background information on their age, grade, hobbies, family members, gender, and sexual orientation. The interview themes were experiences in PE lessons and physical activities/sport, experienced and observed discrimination in PE lessons and sport hobbies, and ideas on how to promote equality in PE.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, just as the field helps shape the habitus of agents within the field, the agents in the field shape the habitus of the field (Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2016). Due to our gendered embodiment, we (authors) can be labeled cisgender middle-aged women. As a social scientist and youth researcher (Berg), and as a certified sport psychologist working with athletes and as a PE teacher educator (Kokkonen) we share an interest in gender and other intersecting 'categories' in the context of PE and sports. We are empirically and ethically experienced researchers of children and young people. We aim to think about gender and sexuality in fluid and contested ways. For both of us, equality and equity are important, and this inevitably motivates the topics of our teaching and research and how we interpret our data.

In this article, to avoid reproducing cisgender and heterosexuality as the normalized form of existence, we use the term LGBTIQ+ student. We also consulted the interviewees on how to refer to them in our publications. We are aware that non-heterosexual and transgender persons are not a homogeneous group. Due to the small sample size and anonymity requirements, we present the data without reporting speakers' specific sexual/gender identities, ages or other personal information. The requirement of guardian consents means that the students had discussed matters relating to their minority gender and/or sexual identity with at least one of their guardians – many



of them with other people as well. This also means that we excluded LGBTQI+ students who had not come out to their guardians.

First, we conducted thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to locate all mentions in each interview of (1) discrimination in PE, (2) PE practices in relation to LGBTQI+ students, and (3) ways of promoting equality in PE. We then read the PE teachers' and LGBTQI+ students' views on these three themes side by side. Finally, each theme was examined through the concepts of heteronormativity and habitus to ascertain whether the PE teachers' or students' perceptions reproduced or challenged heteronormativity.

We focus both on how the field of PE shapes the habitus of agents in this field, and how the agents in the field shape the habitus of the field. Our overall present focus is on how LGBTQI+ students have been considered in Finnish schools' PE practices following the reformulation of inclusiveness in the Act on Equality between Women and Men 1986/2016, Non-discrimination Act 2014, and guidelines on education (NCBI 2014). Below, we first examine PE teachers' and LGBTQI+ students' perceptions on discrimination and detail the actions these interviewed groups experienced as helpful in promoting equality in PE and reducing discrimination. We then examine teachers' and students' perceptions on PE practices and, finally, the practices they proposed for furthering equality in PE.

### Tolerance versus equality

All the PE teachers stated that LGBTQI+ students are 'students/children in the same way as others and it doesn't influence my attitude towards them', or words to that effect. Moreover, all students should be 'treated as individuals' (e.g. PE teachers 1 and 9, both women), meaning that one modifies one's actions 'in situation-specific ways' with both LGBTQI+ students and other students.

I think there's not much need for special gimmicks. If the teacher, or any adult, is sincerely tolerant and fair it will come out naturally in the situation. I think that an adult can act [...] as an example and intervene in such situations and discuss them. (PE teacher 10, man)

Like the PE teacher cited above, half of the PE teachers generally described their attitudes towards LGBTQI+ students as 'tolerant' (PE teachers 2, 4, and 10 (men), PE teachers 8 and 9 (women)). They also considered young people today as 'tolerant' and students' attitudes towards LGBTQI+ students 'permissive'. Thus, the PE teachers' perceptions revolved largely around the concept of tolerance, not equality. In Finnish, as in English, tolerance (*suvaitsevaisuus*) can also refer to a liberal attitude; however, it also connotes enduring something. Tolerance is thus a problematic word, as it can be understood as othering. As Walters (2014, 2, 10–11) puts it, it is: 'apolitical and individual, that mode a society falls back on to avoid deeper challenges to the social order'. Tolerance contains an assumption that there exist those who differ from the norm – that something 'different' exists that is tolerated. This has to do with power: those who are defined as belonging to the 'majority' define what/who should be tolerated and what criteria for tolerance 'minority groups' should fulfill (Suurpää 2005, 48). Consequently, the PE teachers' choice of tolerance can be seen as intertwined with heteronormativity, relegating non-heterosexuals and non-binary genders to a marginal minority position (Lehtonen 2003, 2012; Warner 1991).

Despite articulating their aspirations to be inclusive and the assumption of 'tolerance' among young people, four PE teachers (teachers 3, 5, and 6, men, teacher 7, woman) mentioned specific discriminatory practices, such as exclusion, name calling and laughing, directed at LGBTQI+ students by heterosexual peers. For example, getting other students to perform pair-dances with a LGBTQI+ student in PE was described as a 'challenge':

[...] it was quite visible there: some of the girls put their hand inside their sleeve and didn't willingly touch them [the LGBTQI+ student] and so on. When teaching traditional pair-dances, there was this kind of behavior and maybe a little bit of sniggering and whispering. (PE teacher 6, man)



Another PE teacher described how ‘the difference is noticed [by students] and some people are just so narrow-minded that they get stuck with that’ (PE teacher 7, woman). In this case, a LGBTQI+ student with disabilities had endured multiple discrimination by other students, although the school personnel aimed to organize equal teaching for this student. In other words, the PE teachers perceived that despite their aim of promoting equality, problems arose from other students’ reactions towards the LGBTQI+ students’ somehow ‘different’ way of being, or habitus.

The PE teachers stated that they do not necessarily know their students’ sexual orientation and that it does not influence their teaching or how they treat students. However, many also stated that they had been ‘on tiptoe’ when a LGBTQI+ student joined an already existing PE group. The teachers monitored the actions of other students ‘ready to intervene’ (quotes from PE teachers 2 and 3, both male). Occasionally, the teachers’ views revealed the assumption that all students are heterosexual. Earlier studies (Devis-Devis et al. 2018b; Larsson, Redelius, and Fagrell 2011; Piedra et al. 2016) have also found heteronormativity to be dominant in PE lessons. Heterosexuality appears as self-evident and hence more visible in practice. Unlike non-heterosexuality, it is not seen as ‘a private matter’ (Lehtonen 2012, 31).

As shown above, the PE teachers talked about discrimination against LGBTQI+ students as deriving from the actions of other students, and not from themselves. Nevertheless, ‘tolerance’ in the PE teachers’ data seems to mean something other than complete equality. The next example illuminates the difference between these two notions.

It maybe depends a lot on the personality of the student, how they carry themselves and how they in a way display their [sexual/gender] orientation. Like, if a student is more timid, then one has to adopt a slightly more protective role. [...] sometimes [...] it might go a little bit over the top. They are so aware and have such a sense of justice that one has to consider the other students [...] we had this kind of lesson about sexual orientation to 8th graders and one teacher said that now all the students are like: ‘How do you know I’m a boy or how do you know I’m a girl’. [...] Of course, that’s fine as it goes but on the other hand, if you know yourself, maybe you don’t have to bring it up [...], in a way also fostering the idea among students that if it is a big thing to someone, of course it has to be visible and one has to accept it but if it’s not a big deal one shouldn’t make a fuss about it, in my opinion. [...] like presumably boys are anyway boys and girls are girls. So, in my opinion it would be foolish to talk about it in a way like we should completely get rid of that division. (PE teacher 3, man)

Here, the demand for complete equality is seen as both excessive and unnecessary: these teachers saw no need to call attention to (minority) sexuality or abandon the traditional binary gender distinction. Similarly, Landi (2019, 180) notes that ‘LGBTQ persons are often accused of flaunting their gayness and have been asked to tone it down for being too gay (whatever that means)’. This notion of crossing a line is also used to justify the treatment of minorities in PE teaching. At the individual level, this also relates to students’ habitus: ‘timid’ students are protected but those demanding their rights are going too far. At the same time, some of the PE teachers saw that sporty, ‘strong’ and ‘visible’ LGBTQI+ students, with valued physical and social capital in PE, seemed to be in a better position in the school’s hierarchies, than counterparts who are ‘timid’ or show ‘mental symptoms’. Interestingly, the latter were believed to hide their ‘orientation’. We understand ‘timid’ LGBTQI+ students as those who do not challenge teachers’ authority, whereas remarks made by ‘visible’ LGBTQI+ students’ may arouse feelings of uncertainty in some PE teachers, thereby threatening the customary student-teacher power relation.

To summarize, the PE teachers typically perceived LGBTQI+ students as individuals whose habitus somehow queers heteronormative and/or gender-binary assumptions. The difference between the heterosexual majority and LGBTQI+ minority was constructed as something to ‘tolerate’. Thus, teachers’ notions of tolerance do not promote the cause of equality. This resonates with findings on teachers’ claims to be ‘color blind’ in critical race studies (e.g. Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison 2017; Castro-Atwater 2016; Lewis 2001).

## Inscription of the social in the bodies of LGBTIQ+ students

As Fitzpatrick and McGlashan (2016) have noted, certain gendered habitus fits better in the field of PE than other habitus. Thus, the experiences of students in same PE lesson may differ owing to their identity positions or to the intersection between habitus and field. The LGBTIQ+ students' narratives of discrimination experiences in PE varied from no experience of discrimination to experiences of social exclusion and being kicked, hit, and spat on by other students. Some accounts described long-term bullying in primary and/or secondary school. Half of the interviewed students had witnessed discrimination in the field of PE, manifested especially in homophobic name calling. However, in general all 'minorities' were seen as discriminated against, according to their habitus: 'all but those who fit the binary sex/gender system and are heterosexual and white' (Student 2). Unpleasant locker room experiences were also reported:

[...] when one is anyway 'out of the closet' they [other students] know it, and there might be shunning glances [...] maybe fear of difference, or perhaps they have that kind of attitude that if you're homosexual you're interested in their bodies, which is a wrong image. (Student 8)

Experiences of discrimination by PE teachers related to gender-stereotyping in PE practices. Some students reported that PE teachers assumed that girls would be less competent than boys in PE and in specific activities. One (Student 7) described how, when practicing soccer in a lesson, the boys had played the game while the girls practiced kicking the ball: 'Then I've just gone over [to the boys' soccer game] and it hasn't been a problem for the PE teacher. But the assumption that girls do figure-skating and boys play ice-hockey, that's not so nice'. Another young interviewee (Student 8) described the gendered assumptions of a male PE teacher who was surprised a girl showed competence in ice-hockey. A third student (Student 6) recounted a ballroom dancing class where the PE teachers had acknowledged that: 'Not all girls take the girl's role and not all those who take boy's role are boys. But we say so because it is easier'. This student would prefer PE teachers to speak about followers and leaders, 'so that the language would be inclusive'.

The LGBTIQ+ students seemed to feel burdened by the responsibility of making their experiences understandable to their peers. For the transgender interviewees especially, their problematic relation with their body was intertwined with 'dysphoria', making running, dancing, swimming, wearing a t-shirt, and using locker rooms unpleasant. Some used breast-flattening binders, which made breathing difficult during physical activities. The term dysphoria was used by the interviewed LGBTIQ+ students themselves. As a medical term, gender dysphoria describes incongruence between experienced/expressed gender and gender assigned at birth (Olshan, Eimicke, and Belfort 2016). This medical language seems to be the one the interviewed students have learned to use when speaking about themselves:

[...] I've said that I don't want to dance with boys because it causes me dysphoria and everyone [other students] has been like 'Can't you anyway take part in dancing?' I've been like it's not the point that I can't, no one takes it seriously [...] but that I can't do that. And that's the reason: I cannot do it because it feels bad. It feels uncomfortable. You don't do things either if they hurt you. [...] when I dance with boys it somehow robs me of my identity. I feel uncomfortable, my breathing becomes difficult. It's like I can't be in this situation anymore. That's one reason why I've been allowed to change groups in dancing. It's been pleasant for me but it's that that they don't understand when I say that it is because of dysphoria in which I feel uncomfortable and I start to hate myself in that situation and I can't breathe. They don't understand it. Even if I have like how many times explained it and it has ended up that I've said 'hey, you should google it, I don't have the strength to explain it to you anymore'. (Student 5)

These are clearly valid feelings in transgender individuals, and naming them might help; however, as Devis-Devis et al. (2018a), referring to Butler (1990), point out, language sets limits to gender experiences and possibilities and ends up producing what it names. '[...] through the use of the terms such as [...] "gender dysphoria" [...], the biomedical discourse has yielded mismatching identifications between trans persons and their bodies, causing negative feelings against them

and lots of unnecessary suffering’ (Devis-Devis et al. 2018a, 625). The use of medical discourses is usually based on the assumption that being LGBTIQ+ means being ‘different’ or ‘other’ and thus reproduces cisgender and heterosexuality as the normal form of existence. The interviewed students told how they had constantly to reply to other people wondering about their gender and enlighten their peers about gender diversity. The ways in which people speak about the world and themselves show how they have incorporated the social structures surrounding them: in other words, the social is inscribed in the body (Skeggs 2004).

However, some of the students queered the traditional powerrelation in which the majority attempts to ‘tolerate’ minorities. For example, one interviewee reported discussing with other LGBTIQ+ young people that they wish to focus on how education should change ‘on the general level’ than on how they themselves feel about sexuality and gender, as ‘we already come from minorities, so we want to modify it [education] so it’s better for everyone’. Like in this argument, the minority position can also be a resource enabling one to put oneself in others’ shoes.

Compared to the PE teachers, the LGBTIQ+ students paid more attention to power relations and structural discrimination in their accounts. It seems that the intersection between habitus and the field of PE had implications for the inscription of the social in the bodies of the students. Despite feeling left with the responsibility for justifying and explaining their experiences, they also reshaped and resisted these positions and practices, producing alternative ways of being in the field of PE.

### Heteronormative practices and ways of challenging them

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) does not list many specific activities for PE. Instead, the document mentions games and ballgames, ice-, nature-, music-, and dance-related activities, gymnastics, swimming, other water activities, including water rescue (NCBI 2014, 434–435). As in the previous studies (Kosciw et al. 2018; Landi 2019), the most common examples of problematic practices in PE concerned ballroom dancing, locker rooms and toilets, and swimming. These are also situations where the binary gender order becomes visible. Like Fitzpatrick and McGlashan (2016), we find opening up these binaries in PE has potential for disrupting the field.

Some PE teachers reported considering the role of potential transgender or non-binary students in gendered PE practices. Despite their apparent awareness that the binary gender distinction is potentially uncomfortable for non-cisgender students, these teachers nevertheless considered that categories other than male/female cannot replace the normative gender distinction. Some PE teachers reported considering heteronormativity and the gender order at the societal level. However, queering of the status quo was considered challenging:

[...] it is difficult because there are many things in society which are men versus women, like locker rooms. I understand why this is so but how could we build the kind of society or schools where it wouldn’t be visible or wouldn’t be a challenge if one is non-binary or transgender. [...] like swimming in PE, when we go to the locker rooms, there are women’s locker rooms and men’s locker rooms. That forces the distinction. Or if we want to teach traditional dances, I have thought about that also that it is not a must to teach them, I’m not strictly of that opinion. But there are things, maybe, in society where there are roles just for women and men. So, should one dismiss all of these? Like, should we just be like that there are no women and men, which is also a somewhat odd direction in my opinion. (PE teacher 6, man)

Thus, students outside of the binary gender categories are treated as exceptions who should be considered in teaching but whose existence cannot disrupt the existing gender binary-based practice. Here, in our interpretation, the heteronormative status quo remains as the ‘feel for the game’.

However, some teachers had sought to queer the heteronormativity of PE practices. One (PE teacher 9, woman) taught mixed PE groups in a school with several openly LGBTIQ+ students. She reported avoiding the words ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ when teaching. Similarly, than conceptualized previously as queer tango (Coll, Enright, and O’Sullivan 2014; Devis-Devis et al. 2018a), and queer potential during a dancing lesson (Larsson, Quennerstedt, and Öhman 2014), in ballroom dance classes, she used the words ‘followers’ and ‘leaders’ so that students did not have to feel positioned

in a specific gender category. This teacher also told students at the beginning of the PE course that toilets were an option for changing their clothes if they did not want to use either of the two locker rooms. Furthermore, she generally offered alternative activities to all ‘regardless of their gender or not making assumptions’. She thought that ‘little things’ make the everyday life of LGBTQI+ students easier without their becoming stigmatized as ‘different’. Another teacher (PE teacher 9, woman) reported initiating a discussion on the challenge presented by binary locker rooms in a staff meeting that culminated in the decision to set aside one locker room out of four for students who ‘do not feel they belong to either gender category’.

The LGBTQI+ students described positive situations where they had the opportunity to decide their dance role or whether to participate in a ‘girls’ or ‘boys’ team or group:

[...] pair-dancing, I really like it a lot when I’m allowed to take the boy’s role. It makes me feel good and masculine [...] At secondary school my friends happily danced with me in a way in which I took the boy’s role. It was also really nice. [...] It depends on what kind of dancing. If it’s an oriental dance or if I’m in a girls’ group, it’s a little bit distressing. (Student 10)

All the interviewed students had experiences of both mixed and gender-segregated PE groups. Mixed groups were common in primary school and in optional PE lessons in lower and upper secondary school. The students were rather unanimous about how to promote equality in PE. Eight out of ten would like mixed groups in PE in all grades.

[...] I think there should always be mixed groups in PE. And when it is always explained that, well, boys are physically stronger, I think that idea makes thing worse because there are these different groups. And because the boys are put to play ice-hockey and the girls for example to dancing. [...] Of course, mixed groups would be much easier for gender minorities. I don’t see any need for segregation. (Student 7)

According to the LGBTQI+ students, the binary gender division would be weakened if all the students were in mixed groups and no differentiation made between girls’ and boys’ activities. While none of the LGBTQI+ students saw PE activities as problematic per se (except swimming), almost all stated that, as a general principle, students’ voices should be heard. As in earlier studies (e.g. Landi 2019), the students hoped that in the future PE teachers would be familiar with the diversity in gender and sexuality and educated about competence-related reductive gender stereotypes. They wanted PE teachers to ‘use inclusive language’ and avoid using the words ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ (Student 4). The students also wanted either unisex locker rooms or separate locker rooms so as not to have to change in the toilets:

Like there would be mixed groups and a unisex locker room and briefing of teachers that gender and sexuality are diverse and all people should be treated equally. [...] And that intervening against discrimination and bullying is done for real. [...] No one is born racist or sexist, they learn it. [...] Everyone should be treated equally and non-binary people, transgender and sexual minorities are also considered. It doesn’t matter what the PE activities are, as long as it’s not like ‘let’s play football, girls over here, and boys over there’. The activities don’t matter, if only there are mixed groups. (Student 2)

To summarize, while some PE teachers had made some efforts to queer gender normativity in PE practices, most saw the questioning of heteronormativity as too challenging. Nevertheless, previous studies (Coll, Enright, and O’Sullivan 2014; Landi 2019; Larsson, Fagrell, and Redelius 2009) have shown that while traditional PE settings often support heteronormativity, they are also spaces where heteronormativity can potentially be challenged. The LGBTQI+ students reported that participating in PE activities would be more agreeable if they could themselves decide on their roles and groups. However, the social was inscribed in their bodies in ways that not only led to tiresome questions (or silences) by peers on issues of gender and gender diversity, but also led them to reflect on heteronormative practices and make outspoken suggestions on how to promote equality in their PE education. Landi (2019) also found that, by influencing teachers’ practices, LGBTQ students are also steering the PE curriculum and practices in a more inclusive direction and that ‘as a result, the field

is forced to swing toward moments of transformation in order to stay relevant with youth culture' (Landi 2019, 2; also Coll, Ollis, and O'Keeffe 2020).

## Conclusions

The PE teachers emphasized individuality and saw possible discrimination against LGBTQI+ students as arising from the actions of their fellow students. This ethos of individuality reduces LGBTQI+ students to minorities whose practices differ from heteronormative practices not only in the social domain of PE but sometimes also on the societal level. As LGBTQI+ students' difference is seen in relation to the individual's body and preferences, it was predominantly constructed by the PE teachers as merely to be tolerated and was sometimes even invisible in PE lessons. The individualizing view also highlights the difficulties in critically reflecting on one's own position, attitudes, and practices and the assumptions underlying these (also Coll, Enright, and O'Sullivan 2014). We interpret the PE teachers' data as showing a wish to protect LGBTQI+ students, although mainly through accommodation to existing practices so that their 'difference' or queerness is invisible to the other students. However, this mode of protection itself creates a paradox: the actions of most of the present PE teachers promote heteronormativity (Devis-Devis et al. 2018b; Larsson, Redelius, and Fagrell 2011; Lehtonen 2003, 2012; Morrow and Gill 2003; Piedra et al. 2016) and thus do not contest this 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1984). Diversity is thus mainly assimilated or individualized within prevailing practices, less frequently queering practices per se. We find that this induces a tension between tolerance and equality that underwrites existing power relations.

In turn, as in current civil rights movements, the LGBTQI+ students want real equality. They paid attention to lived power relations and structural discrimination, and to how gendered norms and inequalities become embodied (Skeggs 1997, 2004). At the same time, they would challenge existing practices by queering: they see shortcomings in these practices, wish to change them, and do not always act according to the existing 'feel for the game', such as by changing their PE group or activity and by asking the question 'why'.

Tolerance and equality materialize themselves in PE through embodied practices. Our data reveal that the same treatment does not fit all. Challenges remain in implementing the reformulated guidelines on gender-awareness in everyday PE in Finnish schools. As many scholars (Berg and Kokkonen 2020; Coll, Enright, and O'Sullivan 2014; Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2016) have proposed, it is important that equality and gender-awareness are mainstreamed as a component of PE teacher education. Moreover, the critical potential of LGBTQI+ students' views should be utilized in the development of pedagogical and educational policy decisions.

## Notes

1. The term cisgender refers to people whose legally recognized gender at birth is aligned with their gender identity (Green 2006).
2. Transgender refers to the gender identity of people who find that the gender labels assigned to them at birth are not consistent with their sense of self (Whittle 2006). They might identify with a different gender identity from their legally recognized gender assigned at birth, or they might resist gender categorization by identifying as for example non-binary (Tompkins 2014).

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