

“They’re Rubbing it in my Face.” A study of Embodiment When Being Trans in PE

Kristin Vindhol Evensen¹, Håkan Larsson² & Elise Strømman¹

¹ Norwegian School of Sport Sciences; ² Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences

Author contact <k.v.evensen@nih.no

Abstract

Research that investigates the impact of heteronormativity on physical education (PE) is extensive. In this paper, we expand previous knowledge that describes PE as heteronormative, binary, and hierarchical by offering phenomenological analyses of transgender people’s experiences of PE. The paper builds on data presented in the third author’s master’s project (Strømman, 2022), in which she explores trans experiences in PE in a firstperson perspective. This paper, however, expands on embodiment, as it appears to be an underexplored approach when we seek to understand minority experiences. We bring attention to how the moving body is at the core of every human experience. In our analysis, we present five themes: 1) PE causes discomfort; “It’s like you wait to explode”; 2) It feels good to forget the troublesome presence of the body; 3) PE- still a subject with masculine connotations; 4) Even when binaries are challenged, discomfort persists; 5) Bittersweet solutions. In these themes, the moving body is accredited as an approach to understand the body as object and subject at the same time.

Methodologically, we combine embodied phenomenology and phenomenology of practice to get close to the embodied experiences of our participants. Where previous research has focused on structural binary arrangements in PE, we describe the embodied experiences of such arrangements. In other words, the occurrence of binary arrangements is not a new finding; rather, our contribution is how binary arrangements shape lived embodied experiences.

Keywords: embodiment, existentials, lived experiences, phenomenology, physical education, LGBTQ+

Introduction

I walk into the locker room. Some people there make fun of me continuously because I'm feminine and trans. They use the wrong pronoun for me. They tell me that since I'm gay, they definitely don't want me in the same locker room as them because "I was horny when I saw their cocks". Then they shove me around and down on the floor. (Gina, a trans person in her early twenties, recounts her memories of PE)

Research into transgender – or trans – people's conditions in sports, exercise, and physical education has gained considerable momentum in recent years (e.g., Anderson and Travers, 2017; Bianchi, 2017; Ferguson and Russell, 2023). The research indicates the often challenging and uncertain situations in which trans people participate in movement cultures (Barras and Frith, 2023; Kavoura et al., 2021; Love, 2014). Auran et al. (2024) illustrate how trans persons struggle even to become intelligible as humans in sports and exercise contexts. Trans persons are often welcomed in sports activities and training facilities. Still, when it dawns on the representatives of these activities and facilities what it means to participate as trans, they often become hesitant to welcome trans people. It thus seems complicated to participate in movement cultures as trans. Participation usually presupposes some form of discipline toward normality where trans persons need to somehow conform to binary gender norms (Auran et al., 2024).

Some, but still limited, research on trans in physical education exists. Here, trans persons are sometimes treated under the broader LGBTQI+ umbrella, which may mean that their experiences to some extent may disappear within the broader group (e.g., O'Connor, 2024; Korshavn, 2023; Landi et al., 2020; Müller and Böhlke, 2023). In some research, questions specifically about trans have a more prominent position (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Drury et al., 2023; Neary and McBride, 2024). However, most studies point out that trans people are a vulnerable group, that they are sometimes subjected to verbal and physical abuse, and that they experience difficulties in participating in activities with their desired gender group, much like in the case of Gina in the opening quote.

In several studies, a Spanish research group has explored pedagogical considerations and challenges associated with trans-inclusive teaching (Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2023; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2016). Recently, Devís-Devís et al. (2018) have argued for a shift from the more passive notion of 'inclusion' to a more active queer-trans pedagogy approach (cf. Landi, 2018; Larsson et al., 2014; lisahunter, 2019 regarding queer pedagogy

for physical education). The authors argue that queer pedagogy, to a greater extent than a focus on inclusion alone, can contribute to challenging the norms that contribute to trans exclusion.

Our review of the state of research shows, however, a strong focus on structural issues, such as the influence of social norms on the teaching of PE. For some time, research was dominated by structural analyses of the workings of heteronormativity, that is, the taken-for-granted assumption that people are heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is the natural sexual disposition (e.g., Berg and Kokkonen, 2022; Larsson et al., 2009; Larsson et al., 2011). According to both Landi (2018) and lisahunter (2019), too firm a focus on structures may obscure what is embodied, and as Shilling and Busnell (2009) state, there is a lack of research that addresses the lived experiences of those breaking gendered norms. Shilling and Busnell (2009) combine the emancipatory ambition of critical research with highlighting the lived experiences of their research participants. Our study has an emancipatory approach that is based on phenomenology and its recognition of the expressive body as existential in the life of every human. Previous research has provided insight into structural arrangements and others' perspectives of trans people's participation in PE. This provides important knowledge about social constructions that shape experiences. Nevertheless, these perspectives might displace stories that trans students themselves could have told. There is a risk that, despite the critical approach, the analysis ends up with being told from a majority perspective (the dominant norms). This resonates with the phrase "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 2000) from disability studies, which gained interest at the outset of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. "Nothing about us without us" emphasizes the importance of minority research, including stories that can challenge hierarchical structures from first-person perspectives. Such stories provide rich descriptions free from the filters that might be applied when majority voices tell their experience of the minoritized other.

To remedy the relatively one-sided focus on structural analysis in the study of trans in PE, in this paper, we apply embodied phenomenology through Merleau-Ponty's accreditation of perception. This paper aims to investigate embodied trans gendered experiences. We have done this to acknowledge previously unknown subjective trans experiences shaped by arrangements already known. Through evocative phenomenological anecdotes, we aim to make trans recognisable in the context of PE. We do not provide simple solutions to intricate questions but embrace how

knowledge inherent in subjective experiences might challenge attitudes toward normality. We concur with Landi (2018; 2019), who recognizes that the presence of those who resist normality creates positive alterations between stagnation and change. Embodied phenomenology as philosophy and analytical stance acknowledges the moving body as the hub of all experiences when humans interact with objects (materiality), in spaces (spatiality), in time (temporality), and with others (relationality) (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). These five (body, objects, spaces, time and others) are phenomenological existentials. Phenomenological existentials are analytical insight cultivators that guide the investigation of the phenomenon of being trans in PE. Embodied movements are understood as pre-reflective, performed tacitly without necessarily being translated into words in the moment of action (Standal, 2015). Subjective engagement with existentials is always embodied, and embodied phenomenology presents possibilities to understand why students experience situations differently (Thorburn and Stoltz, 2020).

Phenomenological investigations of students' experiences in PE are nothing new (e.g., Brown and Payne, 2009; Standal, 2015; Stolz, 2013). There are several empirical studies that utilize phenomenology, such as Lermeyer (2021) on nurse's touch, and Lewis (2019) on experience of racial embodiment. Yet, we have not been able to find any embodied phenomenological studies of trans in PE. Structural dimensions are important in phenomenological analysis, but structure moves to the background in favour of lived experience. Thus, in the introduction's opening quote, where Gina articulates her experiences of participating in PE, the primary focus is not on Gina's, as a trans student, subordination – and subjectification – to the heteronormative structures of PE context, but on how she experiences the mocking that she is subjected to, the inclination by her peers to call her by the wrong gender, and the stereotypical predatory sexuality attributed to her (by calling her a boy) as she tries to live the gender she ascribes to herself.

Phenomenological studies are not only important for highlighting trans people's lived experiences. There are also pedagogical reasons for combining structural analyses with phenomenological exploration. Dévis-Dévis et al. (2018) argue that stories about experiences, negative as well as positive, may support future PE teachers in making sensible and sensitive interventions in their teaching. In this sense, Gina's and others' stories can provide PE teachers with important pedagogical guidance. According to research (Apelmo, 2022; Larsson et al., 2018; Mordal-Moen and Green, 2014),

PE teachers (and PE teacher students) constitute a fairly homogeneous group with extensive – and positive – experiences of competitive sports. Although the goals of PE and sports are at least partially different (in Norway there is a clear distinction in that PE aims at general education for life while sports aim at specialist education and competition), ample research suggests a strong connection between sports and PE (Skille and Mordal Moen, 2021). This connection is kept alive through the historical and present points of contact between the fields. Caudwell (2014) focused specifically on this intersection between school and sports, and how it affected trans persons' embodiment. Trans students in Caudwell's study (2014) highlight that arrangements, such as locker rooms, team divisions in connection with ball games, and swimming lessons, shape a wide range of fluent identities for them and their peers (see also Eliasson and Fundberg, 2024; Larneby, 2020). A thick description of trans students' lived experiences in PE thus takes on significance in relation to a fairly homogeneous and sport-positive teaching faculty.

Embodied Experiences of Trans Experiences

Our theoretical framework is guided by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). This is chiefly because his approach provides methodological *and* pedagogical guidance, which offers this paper a possibility to balance binary and heteronormative pedagogical structures with subjective experiences. Merleau-Ponty challenges the idea of compulsory normality and emphasizes the value of diversity as ways of being that are qualitatively different and fully worthy. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and its analytical guidelines underline the importance of the lived body, which means that "the active, perceptual being of incarnate embodiment is the very opening to the worlds that allows us to have worlds in any sense (...), and without this sense of body, there is no experience at all" (Ihde, 2002, p. 17). Merleau-Ponty (2014) describes how the body has been understood through empiricism's objectivation of the body as well as intellectualism's emphasis on consciousness. In his perspective, empiricists and intellectualists fail in their attempts to describe human phenomena. Furthermore, he describes phenomenology of perception as a third path towards understanding human experiences. In his main work on embodied phenomenology, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2014), he acknowledges that the body is objective and subjective, and that movement is what sums up the objective and subjective parts into holistic experiences. He also problematizes

normality when he disagrees with perspectives that measure young people against adult standards and perspectives that compare lives with disabilities against lives without. If adults and the able-bodied serve as the gold standard, the competences of the young and the different are bound to be overlooked. In education, challenging adulthood and able-bodyism means letting the young lead the way without encumbering them with sedimented rules from the past (Merleau-Ponty, 2010). In our study, we provide evocative stories that show how trans students navigate their experiences in PE. Letting our participating students lead the way is done through presentations acknowledging that human beings experience their subjective situation as real. If students experience reproduction of old rules about how education ought to be arranged, infringements will result. Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 68) emphasizes the importance of the experiences of the child when he asks and answers: “Is it the case that pedagogy must presuppose an established morality confined to apply to preestablished values? We disagree; we cannot accept any preestablished values before knowing the child’s real situation”. Yet, when education diverges from pre-established values, a question of responsibility arises. How can adults keep youngsters safe if the young person is entitled to lead the way? Merleau-Ponty states that we must reflect on the concept of what it is to be safe. A state of total safety is a negative utopia, where: “avoiding all risks for the child will only create others” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 83). To let risks evolve safeguards the freedom that is needed for a young person to develop without unnecessary infringement. Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 83) recognizes that infringement is inevitable, but that it should be kept to a minimum:

Therefore, even without wanting it, we cannot avoid encroaching upon the child’s freedom. The adult’s duty is to nonetheless reduce this encroachment to what is strictly necessary: not to respect all the child’s fantasies, but also not to consider everything a fantasy. We must carefully examine our own attitude and avoid, in our behavior, acting upon past traumas instead of what is dictated by the present situation. It is necessary to go even further and accept risks for the child that we accept for ourselves. Avoiding all risks for the child will only create others.

If situations where perspectives meet are rare, there is a danger that the minoritized other will be objectified. Merleau-Ponty (2014) compares actions that objectify the other to the non-cognitive actions of an insect. These are dangerous actions that dehumanize the objectified as well as the one doing the objectification. As Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 378 states:

(...) the other's gaze does not transform me into an object, unless both gazes draw us back into the background of our thinking nature, unless we both establish an inhuman gaze, and unless each senses his actions, not as taken up and understood, but rather as observed like the actions of an insect.

To be objectified by the gaze of another is especially harmful when this other is a human being. As Merleau-Ponty (2014, p. 38) states: "A dog's gaze upon me hardly bothers me at all", but the human gaze takes the place of a communication that could have been. Thus, objectification through segregation annihilates the existence of the other and limits sympathy, and what could have developed into a relation stays pent-up.

The theoretical framework in this paper suggests that Merleau-Ponty was a body pedagogue as well as the philosopher of the body. The balance between embodied pedagogy and embodied philosophy becomes crucial and visible when trans students take part in PE as a subject shaped by binary heteronormative mentality.

Methods

To carry out Merleau-Ponty's methodology in an empirical project, we apply phenomenology of practice (van Manen, 2012; 2014) as a meaning-giving method in educational contexts. This gives us possibilities to stay close to how our participants Luca, Gina, Brede and Trym describe their embodied experiences as shaped in pedagogical situations. Van Manen states that "even though phenomenology employs empirical material, it does not make empirical claims. Phenomenology does not generalize from an empirical sample to a certain population, nor draw factual conclusions about certain states of affairs, happenings, or factual events' (2014, p. 249). Phenomenological inquiry cannot strive for empirical generalization from sample to population. Thus, our aim is not to generalize statistically, but to give rich and vivid descriptions of lived experiences. If the reader experiences resonance with the phenomenon in the text, phenomenological generalization is successfully conducted (van Manen, 2014).

Recruitment and Ethics

The project was approved by the internal ethics committee of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (NSSS) on November 5th (2021), and by the

National Centre of Research Data (NSD) on November 8th (2021). In late autumn 2021, the third author published a request on social media platforms for trans youth to recruit research participants over the age of 16.

The research participants Luca, Brede, Gina, and Trym were between the ages of 19 and 23 when the interviews took place. As they all have graduated from high school, they tell their stories retrospectively. Nevertheless, we claim that their stories are relevant since research shows that curriculum reforms can change practice only to a limited extent (Arnesen and Leirhaug, 2013). Van Manen (2012) refers to the retrospective in the words of Proust, as remembrance of things past. When we remember things past, fundamental life experiences provide possibility for re-interpretation, and the stories we include will not be as close to the lived experience as they could have been. This is the case here. Information is treated confidentially, and the participants' names are replaced with pseudonyms. We have excluded geographical descriptions or other details that can reveal their identities.

To ensure that the participants gave their consent freely, the third author met each of them digitally before they were presented with the consent form. In the digital meeting, she gave an oral description of the project and, if the participants were still interested in partaking, she sent them the consent form by mail. Then, she waited about a week before making contact to give the participants time to think about what their participation in the project might mean before they signed consent. To support the needs of the participants in case the interviews generated emotional reactions that were hard to handle, a gender consultant from FRI, an organization that promotes gender and sexual diversity, was available to the participants before, during, and after the interviews. All data was handled and saved according to the administrative arrangements of the NSSS.

Luca gave the impression of self-confidence. Straight back, voice loud and clear, smiles, with a goal-oriented walk. Luca is non-binary, which means that they do not conform to gender as one of two possibilities. Luca uses the pronoun they.

Brede answered questions rapidly. He appeared sincere and did not laugh during the interviews. Brede is a man and uses the pronoun he.

Gina appeared eager and engaged with an enthusiastic voice via digital communication. Gina is a woman and uses the pronoun she.

Trym appears modest, and in his own words, he likes to stay in the background. This is also the case in this paper, where Trym's voice is less

prominent than the voices of the other three. Trym is a man and uses the pronoun he.

The research participants are likely to be defined as particularly vulnerable. As stated by Domínguez-Martínez et al. (2020), Lenning et al. (2020) and Peitzmeier et al. (2020), transgender persons are likely to be exposed to hate crime, violence, and rape more often than others. To ensure that the needs of the participants were addressed, several precautions were taken before and during data gathering and in the writing process. The authors all have professional backgrounds in social sciences. The first author is a female white cisgender associate professor, kindergarten teacher and a special needs educator. The second author is a male white cisgender professor of sport pedagogy who is curious about various ways to queer physical education. The third author is a female white cisgender PE-teacher with a professional background in school and in the army.

Phenomenology of Practice

As we live our everyday lives, we experience the existentials of time, space, others, and things holistically through our bodies. In academic phenomenological work, however, researchers place experiences into categories, hone them linguistically, and craft the final text to stay as close to the experienced phenomenon as possible. A sense of openness and wonder should always guide the researcher's work to avoid pre-established understandings from taking precedence (van Manen, 2014).

To provide stories close to lived experiences, every true phenomenological project should apply the *phenomenological reduction* from beginning to end. The phenomenological reduction is a continuous process where the researcher utilizes *epoché*, the removal of what is not related to the phenomenon, and *reduction*, to bring increased clarity to the phenomenon where leading back to the phenomenon's mode of appearance (van Manen, 2014). In this paper, we adopt the approach of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty (2014, p. 112) makes his own subjectivity visible to the reader when he gives examples of his subjective embodiment, as in his description of the relationship between his arm, the telephone, and the ashtray. Showing what belongs to the phenomenon and what belongs to the writer by making the researcher's subjectivity visible is part of the phenomenological reduction (Dreyfus, 1991; van Manen, 2012). As our role as authors affects the paper, we make visible our backgrounds as authors and as trained professionals within pedagogy.

Data Gathering and Analysis

To stay true to how our project is rooted in the work of Merleau-Ponty, we acknowledge how we as authors have made an impact on process and product. Although we have little or no personal experience of what it means to be trans, we like to challenge gendered norms. Our interest in diversity has affected the project from its initial stages towards the final product and might have interfered with our possibilities to keep a critical distance towards our work. The choice of topic was made by the third author who through her pre-service education experienced that PE teacher education did not address queer themes. This lack of knowledge became even clearer to her when she met students who challenged gendered norms through her PE practicum.

A phenomenological project must be guided by a thesis statement or a research question that is clear, powerful, and to the point. To ensure reduction, we have constantly asked ourselves if what we answer is what we ask for. We have applied epoché when we excluded stories that did not stay close to the thesis statement “A study of embodiment when being trans in PE”, a statement which later was complemented by Brede’s quote “They’re rubbing it in my face”. Initially, removals were rough as we had to get rid of evocative stories not connected to PE, but as the process of analysis went on, we honed the text by removing reflections and keeping descriptions that shed light on embodied experiences in the context of PE.

In the first step of data analysis, the third author read the transcribed interviews holistically, which is in line with van Manen’s (2014) recommendation. Some participants had a lot on their minds that was not connected to PE, and the third author removed a considerable number of stories from the basic data, for example, stories about moving to new places. In the next step, the selective reading, the first and third authors discussed which themes said something significant about what it is like to be trans in PE. This discussion of what appeared as most prominent resulted in three themes that are described in the third author’s master thesis (2022): a) *PE as binary and heteronormative*; b) *The visible body*; and c) *Breaking the norms*. Then, when the first author started to work on this paper, she went back to the thesis to select lived experience descriptions (LEDs) that said something about the moving trans body in the context of PE. At this time, the second author was involved. With his experience within the field of PE, gender, and heteronormativity, he contributed when we sharpened the text linguistically and structurally, aiming to make the incomprehensible comprehensible through phenomenological anecdotes.

To hone LEDs close to the experiences of the participants, we shaped some of them further into phenomenological anecdotes. An anecdote is a short story that makes comprehensible what might otherwise be difficult to understand. It tells about a single incident that describes the phenomenon under investigation in vivid ways, as close to the lived experience as possible (van Manen, 2012).

We chose stories that kept close to analog, embodied experiences, and we excluded stories that tended to be reflective more than embodied. Yet, it is important to note that there is no symbolic language about embodiment without reflection. Thus, our phenomenological anecdotes will carry traces of our participants' reflections.

Results

All phenomenological anecdotes are created with the aim of keeping close to embodied experiences, yet structural pedagogical arrangements are part of the stories as a premise that shapes Luca's, Gina's, Brede's and Trym's experiences. The creation of a safe space, the desire to cry when you can't, paying excessive attention to the objective body, and the possibility of forgetting the body are experiences that the participants have, and these experiences can belong to the lifeworld of everyone. We have structured the results section by giving each result a short thematical introduction before we present the phenomenological anecdotes. Each anecdote ends with a brief thematical summary. The results pivot around the participants' descriptions of lived embodiment, characterized as spectrums of discomfort experienced when being trans in PE.

PE Causes Discomfort; "It's Like you Wait to Explode"

It is with ambivalence that we choose to start out with this theme, as it presents unstrained, excoriated embodied experiences of misgendering and gendered spaces in PE. Starting out in the uncomfortable, where Gina tells how misgendering is painful, we run a risk that the findings we present later will be interpreted in the light of discomfort. Yet, we consider this description as an epitome of embodied phenomenology. Gina tells:

You know that feeling you get when you notice that you should've cried all day, and it's this pressure behind your eyes, in your nose and in the throat? It's this kind of pressure, but sharp and more in the chest and

down to the stomach. It's like you wait to explode, and it was like that each time in PE.

Being misgendered is not the only thing that sparks frustration for Gina. Gendered spaces are also ever-present sources of irritation that she acts upon when she creates an alternative space for herself. She continues:

When we walk out of the locker room and are supposed to start PE class, we're divided into boy and girl groups. The teacher makes this even more visible when she lowers the partition wall so that the girls do weight-training on the one side with the boys on the other. Then, I must continue PE with the boys that made fun of me in the locker room. I walk invisibly towards the partition wall, and I hide in the narrow space inside it. I can barely fit in there, and I hide so that no one can see me. I stand there, I cry, all by myself.

Gina's experiences are intertwined with the others in the locker room and the gym, as well as with segregation when she acts upon the lack of an inclusive pedagogical organization and hides inside the partition wall.

It Feels Good to Forget the Troublesome Presence of the Body

Despite pedagogical arrangements based on pre-established values, Gina also talks about PE as a subject where the life-long joy of movement as an overarching goal can be fulfilled. This happens when teachers arrange activities where Gina can forget her body as a troublesome presence for a while. She says: "I love dodgeball, group activities with competition and stuff. I used to think that was great fun when I forgot that I struggled." Yet, when binary arrangements are too prominent, the possibility of forgetting the body appears unlikely for Gina.

Failing to comply with stereotypical gender performance also means that Brede needs to put up with comments on his bodily comportment. Still, in some activities, the objective sides of his body shift to the background:

I have had so many comments on my body, and especially on my butt, for example, "You're a boy, and you have a butt," and then they say that it is sexy that a boy has a butt. And I say like, "please, don't say that to me, I don't even have the body I want." That has made me think that when I run as warm-up, I think too rapidly, "how do I really look when I run". It makes me very uncomfortable when others run behind me as I feel that they stare at my butt since so many have commented on that before. If

I run with a football or a floorball stick, I focus more on that than on whether someone else looks at my butt or how I look. If I run with a ball between my legs, the others see if I do tricks and stuff, but if I don't, they look everywhere, and then I think "don't look here, and don't look there".

An object that extends what the body can do supports Brede in activities where he can forget his body. When fields of action are limited through given and limiting tasks ("run"), manipulating objects, such as a ball, expand Brede's outreach in the world. Merleau-Ponty (2014, p. 155) acknowledges that materiality can provide possibilities for extending into a world that would be experienced differently if this object were not at hand.

Luca also touches upon the possibility of participation in PE when the troublesome body is not too prominent. Luca tells that clothing has a lot to say:

I used to use a swimsuit, but then I found out that I could use shorts on the outside of that, so from then, I used both swimsuit and shorts to hate myself a little less. Well, not hate myself, but I found it very uncomfortable to show so much of my body, and because I did not want to shave, that was much more visible in a swimsuit.

Competitions, clothes, and objects shape experiences where the troublesome body can be forgotten. A troublesome body is a sensed body that is too prominent and visible, as described by Luca. Merleau-Ponty (2014, p. 84) describes how relations between humans and things affect how they carry themselves towards the world. When the swim shorts become a part of Luca's personal history, they cease being solely a piece of clothing. When interacting with the swimming pool, Luca experiences possibilities to "hate myself a little less" and then be able to direct attention towards the possible movements available rather than towards the body as a body that does not correspond with its surroundings. The lived experiences of clothing represented through a pair of swim shorts might provide Luca possibilities to reach out in the world without complying with the social expectations of shaving their body before entering the pool. Yet, these possibilities are only likely to happen when the object appeals to its user, in Merleau-Ponty's words, only insofar as the object "arouse thoughts and desires in me," (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 84).

PE – still a Subject with Masculine Connotations

Brede's and Luca's experiences align with how previous research describes PE as a subject with masculine connotations. Brede tells:

When I came out as trans, I was euphoric, I felt that I could let loose. When I managed to let loose in PE class, I was able to give of myself. Participation was more fun, and I felt that I had the right to be more masculine, and thus, I felt that I could use my body the way boys do.

Teachers and students carry cultural expectations about what a gendered body can do, and this “can do” is transmitted through the gendered language teachers use. Luca describes how language made them fall short when they performed push-ups:

There was a lot of this in primary and secondary school, where the girls and the boys were separated to do different tasks. The teacher said, “the girls can do the girl push-ups, the rest of you can do the real push-ups.”. I never managed to do a real push-up, so I felt that I did not do real PE. The PE teachers ought to know that this is not only sexism, but anyone who does not manage to do the real push-up feels that they do not do real PE.

Luca describes how teachers who use gender-neutral language shape a PE where no students are forced into an embodied gender hierarchy or what bodies can do when they tell: “The kind PE teacher used to say, ‘you can do it like this, and if you don’t manage, you can do it like that.’”. When Luca tells how their teacher talks reflectively, they shed light on the power teachers have to shape situations where every student can participate without the experience of their movements being diminished.

Even when Binaries are Challenged, Discomfort Persists

Brede recounts how PE teachers relate differently to his way of being Brede, and how the teacher's choices shape his feeling of (dis)comfort:

We run a 4 km test, and the demands for the boys are higher. If the girls and the boys have the same time, the girls will have better grades than the boys, no matter what. The teachers used to let me decide where I wanted to go. If I wanted to run with the boys, I still could get the time and grade of the girls, even if I identified as a boy. If I ran with the girls, I would get the grade of the girls, but I wanted to run with the boys. But one of my teachers claimed that it was boys or girls, and the time that goes with the

sex, that's it, and then I had to choose between a lower grade when I ran with the boys, or I had to be extremely uncomfortable when I ran with the girls.

This illustrates a situation where it is demanded of Brede to 'choose sides', that is, to conform to binary gender and comply with stereotypical gender performance. Brede pays for the possibility of having a good grade with the experience of extreme discomfort.

PE often begins and ends in a locker room where students change clothes, shower, and expose their bodies to the gaze of self and others. Luca tells:

No one made me feel weird or uncomfortable; it was just that I didn't feel at home there. Trans people have prejudices against themselves, thinking they're disgusting humans who look at others in the locker room and stuff like that. It's not that I think that I'm a disgusting person; I just tried not to look at others.

Luca describes how their classmates were not bothered by their presence or the way they looked at them. While Luca's feeling of discomfort is shaped by their internalized cultural preconceptions of disgust, Trym's experiences are shaped by how his classmates ask him questions about his body language.

Some of my fellow students asked me questions that made me aware of how my body language appeared, especially in the locker room. I avoided behaving like a creep or a pervert. I didn't look at the others, and I tried to get out as quickly as possible. I didn't want to create discomfort for the others, but I guess I ended up making myself uncomfortable.

Luca and Trym describe an urge not to appear as deviant, disgusting, creepy or perverted. In the locker room, they even avoid looking at the others in ways that might cause them discomfort. Yet, this steering of looks is done at their own expense.

Bittersweet Solutions

Whether based on attitudes, arrangements, or questions, segregation appears as a common practical solution that organizes who is inside and who is outside the PE community. Brede experiences this as bittersweet:

Well, in a way, it was sweet, you know, I shall not lie, you know. It was a luxury to have a locker room of my own, where I could make as much mess as I wanted. But it was kind of lonely. They're rubbing it in my face: You're different. I felt like kind of an outsider, you know.

Brede shows us that some bodies fit in with the privilege to move with ease in a world that is made for them. Others are hindered and experience friction, exclusion, and loneliness.

Discussion

To this point, we have not found any phenomenological studies about being trans in PE. We have utilized Merleau-Ponty's pedagogical principles, and we are aware that applying these principles might draw attention away from the study's main objective of understanding the experiences of trans students in physical education. Still, we include "the pedagogue" to emphasize the relations that shape our participants' experiences. The creation of a safe space, the urge to cry when you can't, too much attention towards the objective body, and the possibility to forget the body are experiences that can belong to everyone. Merleau-Ponty (2010; 2014) states that all movements are fully worthy if not measured within narrow understandings of normality. As in the findings of Apeldoorn (2022), who describes the intersection between disability and gender, Larsson and Auran (2023), who investigate how trans people challenge gender equality initiatives grounded in heteronormativity, and Larneby, (2020), who investigates gender in a sports high-profiled secondary school, our participants challenge sedimented normality as they express satisfaction when allowed to choose how and with whom to move. Still, challenging normality appears as rare, as teachers omit to problematize gendered hierarchies, as seen in Korshavn (2023). As Skille and Mordal Moen (2021), Berg and Kokkonen (2022), and Larsson et al. (2009; 2011) describe, hierarchies are sustained by the ways teachers organize pedagogy and by students who comply with this organization.

Teachers who express recognition through conscious language accredit students' different points of embodied departure. Luca's story about push-ups shows that their anger is on behalf of how movements that are considered feminine are placed low in hierarchies, on behalf of boys who move in unexpected ways, and on behalf of students who move in ways that do not fit into standardized norms. The language the teacher uses about girls (and

boys) and about real (and unreal), creates structures that limit students' possibilities to develop from their point of departure (cf. Landi, 2018; Lisa-hunter, 2019; Larsson et al., 2009; 2011). This aligns with Apelmo's description of how a girl with disabilities experiences being encouraged to move "in your own particular way" (2019, p. 708). The wheelchair-using girls in Apelmo's (2019) study discovered that their disability simultaneously exempted them from stereotypical expectations regarding gender. In an almost paradoxical way, this opened new opportunities for the girls.

As suggested by Fuentes-Miguel et al. (2023), Pérez-Samaniego et al. (2016), and Devís-Devís et al. (2018), teachers can take chances, question pre-established values, and be open to students' experiences to make inclusive pedagogical arrangements. If teachers dare to take chances, the dehumanizing effect of objectification is unlikely to happen (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). It is not only Brede, Gina, Luca, and Trym who will suffer from objectification; fellow students and PE teaching staff will suffer as well. Objectification limits thoughts, and when thoughts withdraw, none of the parties will have the possibility to experience and understand the actions of the other.

As previous research shows, PE is largely organized for students who fit into gender-binary, heteronormative, and able-bodied arrangements (e.g., Apelmo, 2019; Fitzpatrick and MacGlashan, 2016; Müller and Bölke, 2023). When students do not fit in, teachers tend to make categorical, individualized, and segregated arrangements. Hence, diversity is replaced with objectification, otherness and loneliness at the expense of the minoritized, as described by Brede when he recounts the loneliness he experiences in the locker room. PE arrangements that segregate the minoritized deprive minority and majority students of the possibility to be subjects of value among other subjects of value. This aligns with Apelmo's recent paper (2022), where she describes how physical education teacher education (PETE) constructs minority students as the problem. Hence, PETE sustains a line between the student with the able body and the student who is considered deviant.

Merleau-Ponty (2010) highlights that students' experiences will be shaped by the way pedagogues reflect on what it means to be safe. Safety, understood as segregation of trans students like Gina and Brede describe, is equivalent to Merleau-Ponty's description of established morality and pre-established values. Teachers who move away from pre-established values take risks that might create opportunities for a diverse range of students to relate to each other. These opportunities can be supported by

considerate use of objects, spaces, and activities. Gina and Brede highlight how differences diminish in activities that make them forget their objective bodies for a while. When they move with objects or in activities where binarism is not too prominent, they describe how the activity itself comes to the fore and that bodies in motion place what is difficult in the shadows for a while.

In the last result, Brede described an attractive, yet lonely, experience when he was deprived of possible relations with others when he had a locker room to himself. As there is always something at stake in relations with others, risks need to be taken while infringement must be kept to a minimum by the teachers. As Devís-Devís (2018) states, positive and negative stories told from first-person perspectives can have important impact on future practices in PE. In Brede's experience, his and his classmates' relational opportunities were replaced with Brede's otherness and exclusion, all expressed in a quote that emphasized how being alone is an embodied experience: "They're rubbing it in my face: You're different".

Conclusion and Critical Thoughts

To acknowledge the body as a hub of every experience is to accredit something humans have in common, rather than what keeps humans apart. Risks of othering trans students are thus made at the expense of a minority that is more exposed to offenses, hatred, and degradation than members of majority groups are. An accreditation of embodiment rather than a strive for normality means distributing risks in ways that do not necessarily privilege those already privileged by their majority status.

Even if PE teachers are prominent actors in our participants' stories, they should not be held responsible for the wide range of experiences alone. We follow Apelmo (2022), Müller and Bölke (2023), and Safron and Landi (2022), and encourage PETE educators – the piano tuners – to continue to challenge sedimented understandings of diversity and gender. Such challenges can support future teachers – the piano players – to influence PE as an arena for a more reflective and inclusive teaching. PETE educators ought to be aware of Larsson's and Auran's description (2023) of how separatist arrangements are likely to happen if the male cis body gets to dominate. We claim that this resistant hegemony can be challenged through embodied descriptions of how alienation and inclusion in PE are experienced when bodies challenge normality. We therefore encourage

curious, risk-taking PE teachers to work with diverse groups of students, striving to minimize infringements and ensuring that pedagogical solutions do not favor one group over another.

Our findings regarding discomfort, the possibility to forget the troublesome presence of the body, masculine domination in PE, challenged binaries and bittersweet solutions are present in PE also for students who are not trans. Thus, these themes do not belong to trans students alone, even if described by Luca, Brede, Gina, and Trym. Their descriptions of how differentness can be experienced as constantly present through pedagogical choices and actions align with what previous research tells us about how it is to belong to a minority in PE. Reflective use of spaces, language, clothing and objects, games and competitions that build on non-gendered and non-hierarchical organizations, might be pedagogical sources that protect students from negative attention and negative self-awareness.

We recognize that this paper does not address challenges in today's climate in diverse contexts well enough. Tendencies in Norway imply that hatred and fear directed towards minority groups in general, and towards LGBTQ+ in particular are increasing (Barne-, ungdoms-, og familiedirektoratet, n.d.). We have included concepts from Merleau-Ponty (2010; 2014) that are directed towards students who challenge normality; still, we have not extensively discussed whether these concepts apply also to students who are not trans. We encourage future researchers to investigate the embodiment of minorities' experiences to understand how PE are experienced within the frames of social structures already known. An even more comprehensive embellishment of how pedagogical arrangements are experienced by trans students might create other evocative stories that can make trans experiences more comprehensible in a more inclusive future PE.

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