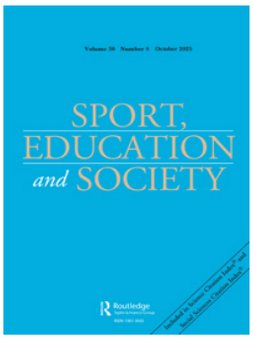

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'Listen to students because they know more': physical education teachers' views and experiences of teaching gender diverse students in England

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ABSTRACT

Physical education (PE) is heteronormatively structured, which creates barriers for gender diverse students. An increasing body of literature focuses on LGBTQ+ issues in PE, but there has been less focus on gender diversity specifically. Adopting a Bourdieusian perspective, this paper explores PE teachers' views and experiences of teaching gender diverse students in England. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 PE teachers, and reflexive thematic analysis led to the construction of two themes: 'the PE field: strongly entrenched "rules of the game"' and 'questioning the doxa: understanding and awareness of gender diversity in PE'. The first theme demonstrates that, similar to previous research, sex/gender-segregated changing rooms and lessons, and gendered kit were highlighted as particularly problematic features of the PE field. The second theme illustrates that participants had different levels of knowledge and understanding of gender diversity, and the extent to which they reported adapting their practice to meet gender diverse students' needs varied. The results indicate that the PE field continues to marginalise gender diverse students, but teachers recognised a need to provide an inclusive environment. To do this, they emphasised building relationships with and listening to gender diverse students.

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Transgender; LGBTQ+; Bourdieu; qualitative; inclusion

Background

The inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) young people is a prominent issue for those responsible for the provision of education and sport (Drury et al., 2023). Previous research indicates that schools are places of discrimination for LGBTQ+ students (e.g. Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Bower-Brown et al., 2023), and this is particularly the case in physical education (PE), where issues for LGBTQ+ students are magnified (Drury et al., 2023; Ferguson & Russell, 2023). Phipps and Blackall (2023, p. 1111) describe PE as 'a heavily gendered space with imposed gender roles and a focus on the body'. Unlike other subjects, physicality is central in PE, with attention paid to how the body moves and looks (Müller & Böhlke, 2023a). As the body is the predominant way of expressing gender, PE is an environment where gender is central (Müller & Böhlke, 2023a).

Müller and Böhlke (2023a) argue that there are likely to be LGBTQ+ students in every class in every school, while Bower-Brown et al. (2023) note that an increasing number of young people identify as

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gender diverse. Following Bower-Brown et al. (2023), we use 'gender diverse' as an umbrella term for people who do not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g. transgender, non-binary, gender fluid, gender questioning etc.). Although academic literature relating to LGBTQ+ people's experiences of PE is growing, there is a lack of research specifically concerned with gender diverse students (Drury et al., 2023; Landi et al., 2020). Müller and Böhlke (2023b) urge PE researchers to recognise the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ+ community and to further explore the varied experiences of the community's subgroups, such as those who identify as gender diverse.

We agree with Drury et al. (2023) that teachers are key to ensuring gender diverse students are supported and included in schools, and specifically in PE. Therefore, we aimed to build on Drury et al.'s (2023) study by further exploring secondary school PE teachers' views and experiences of teaching gender diverse students in England. The UK has been described as a hostile and challenging place for gender diverse young people, with politicians and the media engaging in 'culture wars' regarding trans rights (Horton, 2024). Draft guidance regarding gender diversity in schools and colleges published by the previous (Conservative) government (Department for Education, 2023) has raised concerns about potentially causing further harm due to the lack of 'input from gender diverse voices' (Johnson & Mughal, 2025, p. 1938). Furthermore, a recent (April 2025) UK Supreme Court judgement regarding the definitions of 'sex' and 'woman' has led to fears that gender diverse people will be excluded from single-sex spaces, with 'potentially devastating consequences for [their] health, safety, and rights' (Connolly et al., 2025, p. 2). By specifically recruiting PE teachers with experience of teaching gender diverse students in this context, we also aimed to gain insights into advice they would give other teachers regarding teaching gender diverse students. This aim aligns with Haase et al.'s (2025) recent call for further research with PE teachers who have experience of gender diversity in schools, to gain a deeper understanding of their attitudes and needs. We draw on Bourdieu's concepts of field, doxa, habitus and capital to analyse the factors associated with their views and experiences.

Bourdieu's theory encompasses both structure and agency (Roberts, 2016), and therefore is useful in explaining how individuals are socialised into gender norms (Preece & Bullingham, 2022). According to Bourdieu's theory, people enter fields in society, where they encounter 'a structured system of social positions and rules that govern behaviour' (Roberts, 2016, p. 135). As such, fields are microcosms of society, with their own rules and values (Wacquant, 2008). Within the PE field, certain 'rules of play' (Roberts, 2016, p. 135) determine what is acceptable. Like all fields, PE has its own rules and practices, including how it is heteronormatively structured (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022) and often reproduces traditional binary gender expectations through its content and practices (e.g. activities and class groupings based on sex/gender) (Preece & Bullingham, 2022). Heteronormativity is based on the assumption that there are only two genders, which reflect biological sex, and that natural sexual attraction is between opposite genders (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Cisnormativity refers to the assumption that everyone identifies with the sex assigned to them at birth, and therefore that cisgender people are 'normal' (Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Pontes et al., 2025). These ideas are ingrained in society, and inscribed in social practices including the (physical) education system (Müller & Böhlke, 2023a; Neary & McBride, 2024; Phipps & Blackall, 2023; Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024), with certain ways of being, in terms of sexuality and gender, considered more acceptable than others (Caldeborg & Öhman, 2020; Kean, 2021). Bourdieu (1977) describes such collective taken-for-granted beliefs and norms as the doxa of a field. The doxa is adopted by agents within the field, with conformity to certain behaviours holding particular value (Tomlinson, 2004). Adhering to these rules, through internalising the individual and group habitus, enables people to strengthen their social standing in that field (Roberts, 2016).

Produced through past experiences and events, the habitus is the system of dispositions that influences how we think and behave (Bourdieu, 1990; Wacquant, 2008). It is predominantly formed in early life and adolescence, and is the product of interdependent relationships and cultural and social patterns (Roberts, 2016). Bourdieu emphasised the bodily character of the habitus, i.e. a person's outward identity, characterised by ways of being, walking, talking and presenting themselves (Atkinson, 2020). Within their families, and through other institutions including schools and

the media, children encounter cultural messages regarding what is considered to be appropriately gendered behaviour (Kean, 2021). Fields that value heteronormativity and cisnormativity, such as PE, contribute to the reproduction of traditional binary gender norms; Preece and Bullingham (2022, p. 267) argue that 'entrenched gendered practices within the PE curriculum' reinforce a gendered habitus. Müller and Böhlke (2023a) conclude that, of all LGBTQ+ students, gender diverse students are most impacted by the heteronormative structure of PE. This structure is reproduced in multiple ways, including through sex/gender-segregated classes, activities, and changing rooms, and gendered PE kits (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Ferguson & Russell, 2023; Müller & Böhlke, 2023a; Phipps & Blackall, 2023), meaning gender diverse students are forced to choose between their assigned and desired gender (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Neary & McBride, 2024). As a result, PE is often a difficult context for gender diverse students (Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2023). They may feel out of place (Roberts, 2016) and become marginalised (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022); their habitus does not conform to the heteronormative and cisnormative practices of the field, and they may lack the capital that is valued in PE.

A field is a place of capital exchange, where agents compete for resources and positions in the field's hierarchy (Atkinson, 2020; Bourdieu, 1990). As such, the amount of capital someone possesses determines their status in the field (Wacquant, 2008). Bourdieu (1986) outlines four primary forms of capital: economic (financial), social (group membership, social relationships), cultural (e.g. knowledge, skills), and symbolic (prestige, respect) (Hewitt & McEvilly, 2022).

The capital valued in PE correlates with the heteronormative structure and gender expectations of the subject. Therefore, being cisgender allows people to more easily navigate the field (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022). In PE, a certain gendered habitus holds value, making this a form of symbolic capital (Brown, 2005; Preece & Bullingham, 2022). Stereotypical views about 'natural' male physical superiority, based on an assumed 'biological gap' between men and women (Hargreaves, 2002), reinforce the gender binary and the idea that sporting success requires traditionally 'masculine' traits such as strength and power (Hewitt & McEvilly, 2022). This association between sport and masculinity is normalised and reproduced in the PE field (Roberts et al., 2020). Interestingly, Devís-Devís et al. (2018) found that trans boys enjoyed PE, as the hegemonic masculinity associated with sport and competence in PE meant they experienced some acceptance from male classmates. Trans girls, however, did not have similarly positive experiences; their femininity was seen as unsatisfactory and they found PE a negative and demotivating space (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). This research highlights how gender diverse students are not a homogeneous group and may have varied experiences of PE. Sáenz-Macana et al. (2024) report that, while trans students often report negative PE experiences, non-binary students in particular are less likely to have positive experiences. This is because PE curricula reinforce the gender binary, and non-binary students feel caught 'in the middle' (Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024, p. 172). Their habitus and (lack of) capital mean they do not 'fit' in the field. Capital is the 'success criteria' for navigating a field; if a student possesses certain capital, they can succeed in PE (Preece & Bullingham, 2022). Consequently, a lack of cultural and symbolic capital, because of gender identity, is a barrier to participation (Storr et al., 2022).

LGBTQ+ students' experiences in PE have generally been documented as negative (Müller & Böhlke, 2023a), with evidence that homophobia and transphobia are commonplace (e.g. Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Herrick & Duncan, 2023; Storr et al., 2022), and often overlooked by teachers (Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024). The few previous studies focusing on PE teachers' experiences of teaching LGBTQ+ students indicate that additional teacher education on LGBTQ+ issues is vital, as many teachers feel unable to meet LGBTQ+ students' needs due to a lack of knowledge (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Drury et al., 2023; Haase et al., 2025). Some teachers in Berg and Kokkonen's (2022) study sought to challenge the heteronormative structure of PE, by teaching mixed-gender classes and using gender-neutral language. However, others seemed to merely 'tolerate' LGBTQ+ students, defend existing (heteronormative and cisnormative) practices, and indicate that challenging the status quo was too difficult. The participants in Drury et al.'s (2023) research, which specifically focused on PE teachers' experiences of teaching gender diverse students, recognised the

importance of providing an inclusive environment and indicated their readiness to adapt their practice. However, they generally felt they lacked the knowledge to facilitate trans-inclusivity in PE (Drury et al., 2023).

Previous research shows that PE is a site of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, and its structure and practices contribute to LGBTQ+ students being marginalised. Literature specifically concerned with gender diverse students is lacking, and little is known about PE teachers' experiences of accommodating these students specifically. Müller and Böhlke (2023b, p. 1022) observe the dearth of PE-specific research that could 'serve as a basis for action'. Therefore, our focus on PE teachers' views and experiences of teaching gender diverse students aimed to provide additional insights into the factors they consider key in ensuring these students are included and supported.

Methods

The study received ethical approval from The Faculty of Medicine and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Chester. Data were generated during the summer of 2022 by the lead author, Lillie, who conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 12 PE teachers. Lillie is in her 20s, identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, and has many relatives and friends who are members of the LGBTQ+ community. She is a qualified PE teacher, who has worked as a cover/supply teacher. When undertaking her PE teacher education, Lillie taught numerous gender diverse students. She felt she lacked knowledge of how to ensure these students were truly included in PE. As a qualified PE teacher, Lillie had numerous contacts to approach regarding participating in the study. The fact that she was a PE teacher herself may have encouraged some teachers' participation and possibly made them more comfortable with the interview situation, which they may not otherwise have felt, given the potentially sensitive research topic. Lillie's 'insider' knowledge of the PE field, and positionality as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, means other researchers may have made alternative assumptions about the data and interpreted it differently (Tynan & McEvilly, 2017). Therefore, the second author, Nollaig (early 40s, cisgender woman, member of the LGBTQ + community), who supervised the study, acted as a 'critical friend' by, for example, providing feedback on the draft interview guide, and encouraging Lillie to consider other ways to interpret the data and refine the final themes (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Sampling took place in a purposive and convenience-oriented manner (Jones, 2022). The inclusion criterion was being an in-service secondary school PE teacher with experience of teaching gender diverse students. Eight participants were recruited via Lillie's personal contacts. The other four were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby some of the initial interviewees suggested other participants who also met the inclusion criterion (Jones, 2022). Five participants identified as (cis) male and seven as (cis) female, and all 12 were heterosexual and white British. Their average age was 32 (range: 23–44), and they taught at six different non-selective state secondary schools in England. We do not claim the findings are generalisable to all PE teachers, but by providing participants' biographical information, we hope readers can consider how the results may (or may not) transfer to other contexts or samples (Smith, 2018).

Ten interviews were conducted in person, in private rooms at the participants' schools. Two interviews took place online, via Microsoft Teams, as this was more convenient for these participants. The interviews were conversational and flexible, with the use of open-ended questions, along with prompts and probes to delve into the participants' views and experiences (Jones, 2022). Lillie asked each teacher to discuss, for example, their teaching history and teaching style, their understanding of gender diversity and experience of teaching gender diverse students, if and how they changed their practice as a result of teaching gender diverse students, their views on their department's and school's approach to gender diversity, and advice they would give other teachers regarding teaching gender diverse students. The average duration of the interviews was 49 minutes. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by Lillie. She then conducted reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016) using NVivo.

Reflexive thematic analysis involves identifying patterns, or themes, across a data-set and then interpreting and describing their 'meaning and importance' (Braun et al., 2016, p. 191). The six-phase process began with Lillie familiarising herself with the data by reading the transcripts numerous times. She then used NVivo's node function to systematically work through the data-set and generate initial codes (e.g. 'student interactions' and 'policy'). Following this, Lillie constructed broader 'candidate themes' (Braun et al., 2016, p. 198), by identifying patterns across the data and combining codes, before reviewing and refining the themes. Nollaig also read the transcripts multiple times, with the aim of developing a collaborative, nuanced perspective on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As mentioned above, Nollaig acted as a 'critical friend' and helped refine the analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In reviewing the themes, for example, we combined separate themes titled 'understanding and awareness of gender diversity in PE' and 'moving towards gender diverse inclusivity' into one theme labelled 'questioning the doxa: understanding and awareness of gender diversity in PE'. This theme was one of the two finalised themes, along with 'the PE field: strongly entrenched "rules of the game"'. We now discuss both themes, drawing on Bourdieu's theory to support our analysis. Pseudonyms are used to protect the teachers' anonymity.

Results and discussion

The PE field: strongly entrenched 'rules of the game'

The data indicated there are strongly entrenched ideas and rules about gender in the PE field, with participants recognising that PE therefore has subject-specific challenges for gender diverse students. Comments included:

> There's other difficulties or other barriers within PE that the whole school wouldn't encounter. (James)

> The nature of PE, that really explicit use of the body and the communication of it is always going to be difficult for our … students that aren't cisgender. (Laura)

The doxa of the field (Bourdieu, 1977) means a certain gendered habitus and the attached cultural and symbolic capital enable some students to navigate PE more easily than others, reinforcing a social hierarchy that privileges adherence to heteronormativity. The participants acknowledged this by highlighting barriers gender diverse students face. Supporting previous research (e.g. Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Müller & Böhlke, 2023a; Phipps & Blackall, 2023), the teachers spoke in particular about sex/gender-segregated changing rooms and lessons, and gendered kit.

Previous research indicates that gender diverse individuals find changing rooms difficult spaces, which are often associated with feelings of self-consciousness, stress and embarrassment (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). All participants described changing rooms as a key barrier to gender diverse students' participation in PE. Comments included:

> Changing-wise is probably the biggest one [issue] in terms of what space is available where they feel comfortable and so on, so we just have to accommodate them for getting changed (Ian)

> I think it's the changing that has to be adaptive, and that's their most vulnerable thing in PE. It's not the actual lesson, that's fine, it's the changing. (Anna)

> They hate the changing rooms and they find that's a barrier to even starting and ending the lesson (Kelly)

The continued use of binary-gendered changing rooms indicates the entrenched nature of heteronormativity in schools. However, all the participants recognised the need for gender diverse students to have alternative changing provision. The teachers described how they tried to accommodate this by allowing gender diverse students to change in spaces such as shower or toilet cubicles, or accessible toilets. Such alternative spaces were not always considered ideal, however. Gemma recounted a gender diverse student questioning the appropriateness of using a disabled toilet by remarking, 'I'm not disabled so I don't want to use that'. Anna described how using multiple changing spaces raised

practical difficulties for teachers because 'they have to be supervised'. Gemma and Laura (who taught at different schools) said it was particularly difficult if the spaces were located 'away from [the] PE' department (Gemma) or when numerous students wanted to use them, leading to 'a queue waiting outside' (Laura). An issue raised by multiple teachers was that their schools were limited in terms of the changing spaces they could offer gender diverse students:

> Given the restrictions we've got with space, changing facilities and toilets … it would be nice, wouldn't it, to have another building put on where we could have improved the facilities, but financially as a school we can't, so … we do the best with what we've got really (Ian)

> We have put in a plan to change the changing rooms and just the biggest thing is the money 'cause obviously it's going to cost loads (Kelly)

Aside from practical and financial challenges associated with providing alternative changing spaces, another issue raised was that these spaces were often also gendered. This situation is particularly problematic for non-binary students (Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024). As Laura explained, allowing gender diverse students to change in the toilets 'still doesn't resolve the issue of, "well, you don't want to get changed in the gendered changing room, so I'm going to send you to the gendered bathroom"'. Kelly said gender diverse students who changed in the toilets usually went to the ones designated for 'the gender they were born as … [student] wants to transition to a male but she normally goes in the female toilets'. Devís-Devís et al. (2018) note that segregating practices make gender diverse students choose between their assigned and preferred gender, and they often choose their assigned gender to fit in and avoid harassment.

The participants' acknowledgement that gendered alternatives for changing may not effectively accommodate gender diverse students suggests a resistance to the heteronormative doxa. Kelly, for example, argued that 'changing rooms are so outdated in so many schools and … I just don't think it's right for the current climate'. Notably, however, none of the participants questioned the requirement for students to get changed in the first place. Nobody suggested, for example, allowing students to wear appropriate kit to school on PE days, which would eliminate many of the issues associated with changing. As illustrated by the teachers' comments, they offered alternative changing spaces to gender diverse students, but binary-gendered changing rooms featured in all of their schools. This traditional structure situates binary gender as the doxa in PE. This structure is also evident in the practice of sex/gender-segregated lessons, which was commonplace in the participants' schools.

Although sex/gender-segregated lessons are problematic for gender diverse students (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024), PE classes are often still structured in this way, with previous research highlighting many PE teachers' preference for teaching boys and girls separately (Gråstén & Kokkonen, 2022). The participants provided several justifications for segregated lessons. Hannah stated, 'we teach our groups in terms of, you know, traditional, I guess, girls' group and a boys' group', while Daisy argued, 'We're doing what we've done for so many years which has worked'. PE teachers accept the structures and practices of PE as the way things are done, meaning the traditional heteronormative structure is reproduced as part of the 'rules of the game' (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022). Heteronormativity was evident in numerous comments about how mixed-gender lessons would cause distractions and a lack of focus:

> I think the dynamics with girls when they hit Year 9 … I think with boys in there … they become self-conscious (Anna)

> Girls do get a bit self-conscious sometimes, so you seem to get a bit more focus when they're in single-sex (Faye)

> Probably the girls would play more up to a male member of staff and vice versa, which is natural (Elliot)

The claim that girls would 'naturally' be 'self-conscious' or 'play up' in front of male students or teachers assumes and normalises the gender binary and heterosexuality. In a similar vein, several participants justified segregated classes on the basis of assumed biological differences between girls

and boys. Anna argued that 'boys, when they reach a certain age, hormone-wise, become a lot bigger than girls, they become a lot stronger and that. You can't argue with that, that's genetic'. By rationalising segregation on the basis of biological differences between male and female students, the teachers reinforced the gender binary. Some teachers further justified this stance by referring to sport policy. For example, Laura stated, 'The reason that we would then still teach … single-sex is just due to some of the regulations, like rugby, for example, where they're not allowed to play mixed'. Such legislation highlights how the gender binary is reinforced on an institutional level through policy, maintaining the heteronormative structure of the field (Kean, 2021).

Despite the dominance of sex/gender-segregated PE lessons, all participants indicated they were happy for students to select which class to attend. Previous research shows that segregated classes often make gender diverse students feel 'in the middle', as they are required to choose between their assigned and preferred gender (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). Several participants noted, however, that students who had moved classes had a positive experience, illustrating that gender diverse students are a varied group who do not all experience PE in the same way. Kelly mentioned a gender diverse student who switched from a 'female-only PE group to a male-only – well, boys-dominant – group and … felt more comfortable'. Similarly, Faye said, 'There is one [student] that is identifying as a female so as soon as we've gave her the option to be with the girls, she feels much more comfortable'. Research suggests that for some students who transition and move to a different gender class, PE can become a more positive experience (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). However, Collin spoke about a gender diverse student who had changed classes and not had a positive experience: 'Some of the lads in that class weren't entirely accepting of it and weren't the nicest'. Previous research reports that classmates can be a source of discrimination (Müller & Böhlke, 2023a), and numerous participants indicated that problems arose due to classmates' actions. James attributed this to students' ignorance: 'Based on stupid language used, obviously being slightly uneducated on the facts and so not understanding the … topic or their sort of peers' feelings'. As cisgender students are socialised into the practices of PE, their habitus embodies the expectations of the binary gender system (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022). Consequently, a gendered group habitus develops, with the doxa of binary gender naturalised. Bourdieu (1990) states that those who do not comply with the doxa are sanctioned, hence the discrimination of gender diverse students by their cisgender peers.

Although moving classes was an option for students, several teachers remarked that gender diverse students often did not move to the class of their preferred gender. Laura and Collin both experienced this situation at their schools:

> I don't think he's ever made it into boys' PE … he doesn't really like PE and is probably quite weak, it's just not made a comfortable transition for him (Laura)

> We trialled him coming into the boys' PE lessons but it wasn't somebody who was particularly good at PE anyway … I think that then made them feel even more inferior in terms of their sport (Collin)

According to Laura and Collin, the students in question did not possess the capital to succeed in PE, with Collin indicating that this capital is particularly related to sporting ability. Collin's conflation of PE and sport illustrates the entrenchment of the 'PE-as-sport-techniques' approach, which has been described as a 'one-size-fits-all form of the subject' (Kirk, 2013, p. 978) that can exclude and marginalise many students (Berkshire et al., 2025). The above comments indicate that a student's (perceived) lack of physical ability means they do not possess the physical capital needed to navigate the field of PE (Brown, 2005). This, combined with a lack of desired gendered habitus, which is valued as a form of symbolic capital in PE (Preece & Bullingham, 2022), means gender diverse students may not possess the capital to successfully 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1986).

Mixed-gender classes are one way of reducing the problems for gender diverse students that segregated classes pose (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Ferguson & Russell, 2023). Some teachers believed mixed-gender classes were a better choice for meeting gender diverse students' needs, with Laura saying she 'pushed for' them at her school. She explained, 'there is zero purpose for single-

sex PE; there was nothing gained from it'. Elliot's school also had some mixed-gender PE classes; in his view, 'because we have mixed lessons, they're confident within them … we haven't got that barrier'. Drury et al. (2023) highlight the need for teachers to look past the gender binary when teaching PE in order to create positive learning environments for gender diverse students. The students in Berg and Kokkonen's (2022) study similarly argued that mixed-gender lessons would help challenge the gender binary in PE, reducing a barrier to participation for gender diverse students.

Another barrier the participants highlighted related to the PE kit students are required to wear. Gemma described a gender diverse student who felt 'so uncomfortable … they asked me if they could go and get back changed again into their uniform 'cause just didn't feel comfortable in their PE kit'. Many teachers indicated that their school's PE kit was gendered, with boys and girls having different items of clothing that represented more masculine or feminine attire. Gendered kits were a result of traditional practices, complying with the heteronormative and cisnormative doxa. As Faye stated, 'They probably shouldn't be called girls' and boys' [kit] to be honest, but that's just the way it has been'. Having kits labelled as masculine and feminine highlights how a field reproduces and enforces gender rules. This practice again makes gender diverse students choose between their assigned and preferred gender (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). However, most teachers indicated they were happy for students to wear either the girls' or boys' kit, no matter their gender identity. In Faye's view, 'it wouldn't be a massive deal so maybe we should take off the names "girls' PE kit", "boys' PE kit"; as long as it's [school] kit I'm not bothered what they wear'.

Fields adapt and change as a result of convergence with other fields, practices and policy (Webb et al., 2020), meaning the doxa can be altered. This section has shown that, even though gendered and heteronormative practices remain strongly entrenched in the PE field, there was evidence of teachers questioning and adapting these traditional practices to support and accommodate gender diverse students. Their knowledge and understanding regarding if and how to do this, however, varied.

Questioning the doxa: understanding and awareness of gender diversity in PE

The data showed that long-serving teachers experienced a shift in the field, with an increase in the number of gender diverse students in their classes. Ben, a head of department with 20 years' teaching experience, reflected: 'I think 10 years ago … a lot of staff would have just brushed it off and not been as supportive as they could have been, whereas now it's such a big topic of conversation'. Gemma, a teacher with 13 years' experience, similarly stated, 'five years ago, I didn't teach any [gender diverse students] … it has been a bit of a steep learning curve'. A field's rules and regularities are internalised through the habitus (Roberts, 2016), meaning the doxa are embodied in PE teachers' habitus. Gender diverse students being open about their gender identity opposes the expectations of the field. Consequently, PE teachers view this as a 'steep learning curve', as they are required to consider if and how their practice should be adapted to accommodate students who do not possess the capital valued in the field.

Previous research indicates that teachers often have limited knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues, including the barriers gender diverse students face, hindering their ability to promote an inclusive environment (Drury et al., 2023). Many participants felt they lacked understanding regarding gender diversity, which they related to a lack of training. Although some said they had received continuing professional development (CPD) on gender diversity, the training was often considered ineffective. Collin described his training as minimal and overwhelming: 'I don't remember loads from it. I remember being a bit kind of blown away with loads of new terms'. Drury et al. (2023) similarly found that CPD was sometimes too broad and did not focus on PE-specific issues. These authors indicated that their participants' knowledge about gender diversity varied, with multiple factors contributing to this, including training received and the wider school's approach to gender diversity.

According to Drury et al. (2023), a whole school approach is necessary. Otherwise, inclusion efforts are isolated and dependent on individual teachers, rather than systemic (Pontes et al., 2025).

However, many participants in our study were either unaware of if their school had a policy or they had no knowledge of such policies' content. As Gemma said, 'The honest answer to that is I don't know that there's an official policy'. Several teachers indicated that the lack of (knowledge of) policy limited their ability to meet gender diverse students' needs. Laura explained, 'This comes down to policy and not being sure what we're allowed to do'. She questioned if such a policy should be produced by the government: 'Does that policy need to come higher up, is that actually a Department of Education thing that should exist before we can write our own policy, in terms of, like, the legality of stuff like that?'. While data collection took place before the publication of the Department for Education's (2023) draft guidelines, Laura's comment demonstrates how the wider field of the education system has more authority than an individual school or department. As the structure of Western society still reflects heteronormative values (Preece & Bullingham, 2022), and the UK in particular has been described as a difficult context for gender diverse people (Horton, 2024), these values are passed into the education system. The recent UK Supreme Court judgement is likely to affect future policy too, impacting on teachers' practices and gender diverse students' experiences in a context where supportive policies are already lacking (Johnson & Mughal, 2025).

Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2018) highlight that little is known about the effectiveness of gender diversity policies in schools. However, many participants indicated that a school-wide policy would be useful, as it would provide them with more understanding of how to tackle barriers and issues. As Hannah stated, 'without having some sort of whole school approach to how things should be dealt with, we're always going to be reactive, we don't have a strategy for it'. This comment aligns with Drury et al.'s (2023, p. 1126) finding that the good practice described by teachers in their study was similarly 'reactive rather than proactive' because they lacked prior knowledge. Depending on such 'reactive' approaches means gender diverse students are reliant on individual teachers' awareness and goodwill, while the status quo is maintained at the institutional level (Pontes et al., 2025).

Some participants' lack of knowledge and understanding of gender diverse students' needs was evident in their comments about adapting their practice (or not). While, as noted above, teachers were open to accommodating gender diverse students in terms of changing rooms, class groupings and kit, there were varied views regarding the extent to which their practice needed to be adapted. A common assertion was that gender diverse students should fit in with the traditional structure of PE:

> We've had to go out of our way to sort of make her [gender diverse student] feel included (Faye)

> Everybody is very open to making whatever changes need to happen to make that student feel comfortable, but still within the parameters of what's fair to every other student. (Hannah)

These comments indicate that accommodating gender diverse students must fall within the 'rules of the game' in PE; there are limits to the extent to which the doxa can – or should – be challenged. Berg and Kokkonen (2022) similarly found that teachers were willing to accommodate gender diverse students' needs, but in compliance with the heteronormative practices already in place. These authors report that teachers saw LGBTQ+ students as 'crossing the line' when requiring adaptations to meet their needs; this view was used to maintain the heteronormative structure and practices of the field.

A further justification for maintaining the status quo was evident in the way several participants argued that adapting their teaching practice could make gender diverse students stand out. As James explained, 'If the gender diverse student did see me change or the group change … they will themselves know that something is wrong and will probably feel uncomfortable'. When asked for advice he would give other PE teachers, Ian similarly stated, 'Just don't teach them as any differently as you would to any other student in your class because everybody is different in some way'. Collin argued that gender diverse students did not want any 'fuss': 'They will just want to be a part of stuff normally, they don't want us to have to change the way we do anything'. While this argument

may be well intentioned, it is important to recognise that a gender diverse student's habitus does not correlate with the 'rules of the game' of PE; thus, regardless of how they feel, they may be unlikely to ask teachers to change their practices, as they are situated at the margins of the field and hold little relevant capital to influence the doxic view (Bourdieu, 2001). The above comments also illustrate these teachers' lack of recognition that equality is not the same as equity, and serves to reinforce the (cisnormative) status quo (Pontes et al., 2025).

This focus on equality, rather than equity, underpinned another reason some participants gave for not adapting their teaching practice: they believed it was already inclusive:

> Irrespective of what … my group looks like in terms of gender, I don't think I'd necessarily change the way I teach or my expectations. (James)

> It doesn't matter whether I've got boys in front of me, girls in front of me, gender-neutral – to me, you're just all students who need to have a positive experience of PE, so yeah, nothing has really changed. (Ian)

Berg and Kokkonen's (2022) participants similarly alluded to treating all students the same no matter how they identified; the teachers seemed not to consider that there was a need to change the traditional heteronormative practices in place. Berg and Kokkonen (2022) suggest that this view is similar to teachers being 'colour blind' in critical race studies.

Some participants (particularly the women), however, were more conscious of the need to change their practice, recognising that PE is not always a welcoming space for gender diverse students. Hannah and Anna stressed the importance of ensuring gender diverse students could do PE with their friends, so it would be a 'comfortable' and 'safer space' where they would 'feel better supported' (Hannah) and not be 'in a vulnerable position' (Anna). Kelly discussed a gender diverse student's lack of confidence in PE and how she changed her lesson accordingly: 'I know [student] struggles with performing in front of people, so … didn't want to do the long jump in front of everyone so I set them off in a little group that, you know, they feel comfortable with'. Helping gender diverse students accrue social capital, by establishing relationships with others in the field, may help them navigate PE more easily, rather than feeling like 'outsiders' (Hewitt & McEvilly, 2022).

Kelly also talked about introducing a wider variety of activities: 'new sports like frisbee … it's quite a neutral sport so maybe including a bit more of that'. Varying the activities on offer, beyond 'traditional' sports, can challenge the heteronormative and cisnormative structure of PE (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). In a similar vein, Elliot argued that his participation in dance challenged traditional expectations: 'My background, it sort of breaks it [the stereotype] even more to have sort of a biggish lad [i.e. big man] that's spinning on his head teaching rugby'. Reducing stereotypical assumptions about activities means the gender binary and expectations of masculinity and femininity in PE can be challenged (Preece & Bullingham, 2022), potentially enabling gender diverse students to have more positive experiences (Devís-Devís et al., 2018).

Several teachers mentioned the importance of not making assumptions about students' gender identities, and therefore being mindful of the language they used to address their classes. Daisy explained, 'If you walk into a room and say "hey girls" or whatever, like I would in the changing rooms, actually one of them may be thinking, "oh that doesn't really apply to me"'. By using neutral group terms, teachers can avoid making assumptions about students' genders and promote a more inclusive environment (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022). Ian advised teachers to be conscious of the terminology used to address students, but not to 'overthink it' and if they accidentally offend someone, 'acknowledge it and just say, "I'm sorry"'. These comments illustrate the emphasis the teachers placed on building relationships with gender diverse students. The participants emphasised a need to talk to gender diverse students about how they could provide an inclusive environment. This was the key suggestion most participants made when asked for advice they would give other PE teachers. Comments included:

> I think having conversations with students that are open and … just learning more about those students. (Anna)

> Listen to students because they know more … they will teach you probably more than what you will teach them. (Laura)

These comments align with previous recommendations that gender diverse students' voices should be centred (Drury et al., 2023), and that LGBTQ+ students should be involved in informing and evaluating policy, PE curricula and teacher education (Herrick & Duncan, 2023). Numerous participants emphasised that initiating this communication was not necessarily easy, but that it was a vital aspect of their role:

> I think, ultimately, you've got to have the awkward conversations … to make sure you're doing the right things for them … you're going to make mistakes, but I make mistakes with all of the kids I teach … it's no different, you're human at the end of the day, you can do what you can do. (Gemma)

Gemma's advice to other teachers was to 'do your damnedest to make sure that you make the kids in your care just as comfortable as they can be'. Again, the suggested ways to do this revolved around 'communication' (Gemma) and 'listening' (Hannah).

As well as talking to gender diverse students, some participants mentioned consulting relevant colleagues. Ben spoke about how having a gender diverse colleague 'made staff more aware of how they treat the students', while Laura said having a non-binary member of staff at her school was a 'game changer' because gender diverse students had an 'adult in the building that they identify with'. Kelly mentioned getting advice from her head of department, who was the parent of a gender diverse child and so had 'a personal attachment to it and … she's just really, really good at having those open conversations'. It was clear that having colleagues with lived experience of gender diversity helped disrupt the heteronormative and cisnormative doxa in schools.

Research indicates that teachers play a key role in adapting PE to create a more inclusive environment for gender diverse students (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Drury et al., 2023). This section has shown that the participants' views differed in terms of the extent to which they felt they needed to adapt their practice to include gender diverse students. While a consistent thread throughout the data was the importance of ensuring all students' needs were met, some teachers (particularly the men) felt their practice was already inclusive. Others, however, were more conscious of trying to ensure gender diverse students truly felt safe, comfortable and included, rather than assuming this was the case.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore PE teachers' views and experiences of teaching gender diverse students. Similar to previous research, sex/gender-segregated changing rooms and lessons, and gendered kit were highlighted as particularly problematic features of the PE field. The teachers' knowledge and awareness of the issues gender diverse students face in PE varied, as did their views on the need to change their practice. All participants agreed that accommodating gender diverse students was important, and there was evidence of them – to varying degrees – questioning the doxa of the field. However, the entrenchment of the gender binary and heteronormativity meant gender diverse students were 'slotted in' (Faye) to the existing structure; teachers provided accommodations by tweaking aspects of their practice, rather than making large-scale changes. Some teachers (Laura and Kelly in particular) recognised the need for more radical change, but most participants indicated this was not possible (or perhaps necessary). Thus, although the teachers questioned the doxa of the field to some extent, it remained strongly entrenched. The results therefore indicate that PE remains a challenging context for gender diverse students.

A key aim of this study was to explore the advice the participants would give other teachers, and they highlighted above all the need to build relationships and communicate directly with gender diverse students. The findings underscore that gender diverse students are not a homogeneous group and therefore do not all experience PE in the same way. This means it is vital for teachers to engage with gender diverse students individually to learn about their specific needs and

preferences, to ensure they feel safe and supported in PE lessons. It is important for us to acknowledge that, because we only focused on teachers' perspectives, we have no knowledge of the views of the students being referred to, and if they would agree or disagree regarding the experiences the teachers described. We also recognise the limitations of one-off interviews, both in terms of the claims we can make about the teachers' practice and the ability to deeply explore potentially sensitive topics. Future studies could develop the depth of research in this area by conducting case studies, which could include other groups of participants (such as gender diverse students themselves) and additional methods (such as participant observation). Although small in scale, this study revealed a gendered pattern whereby the women were generally more willing than the men to adapt their practice, and two of the youngest participants (i.e. Laura and Kelly) were the most vocal about the need for more radical change in schools. Gender and generational differences across PE teachers' perspectives and practices may therefore be other areas for future research to explore in more depth.

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