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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Everything is more difficult when you are different: analysis of the experiences of homosexual students in Physical Education

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to analyse the experiences of seven homosexual students (four boys and three girls) in Physical Education (PE). Their families are also involved in the study, looking in depth at how their children's experiences have affected their daily lives throughout their adolescence. A qualitative approach is used, exploring the students' and families' perceptions from an analytic approach called 'thinking with theory' (Jackson & Mazzei, [2012]. *Thinking with theory in qualitative research: Viewing data across multiple perspectives*. Routledge), with which we try to highlight the networked functioning connections and tensions between some basic ideas of gender performativity theory and the data obtained from the experiences of the students and their families. The data collection instruments used are interviews with the participants and discussion groups with their families. The results show how the construction and reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes in PE lead them to reject the subject in many cases. They show how, on many occasions, their role is relegated to the background, presenting certain fears and insecurities about taking the initiative in activities. In some cases, the relationship with their peers is clearly limited, receiving gestures of mockery and insults from others. The families admit to having suffered a lot at certain times during their children's schooling. They explain that there is still a long way to go to achieve true acceptance and inclusion in PE.

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Introduction

LGTBI people, implicitly or subconsciously, are victims of constant discrimination in their daily lives, affecting their personal and professional identity (Craig et al., 2017; Sykes, 2011). This is most acute in the field of physical activity and sport, where the body is exposed to the oppressive gaze of others (Owens et al., 2016) and the fear of being unmasked affects LGBTIQ people's participation (López-Cañada et al., 2019). Some researchers point out the discrimination and barriers to participation experienced by LGBTIQ people in Physical Education (PE) (Berg & Kokkonen, 2021). On the one hand, there are studies that report PE teachers' tendencies to defend heteronormative practices, creating a paradox of 'tolerance' that helps marginalise non-heterosexuality (Berg & Kokkonen, 2021). On the other hand, students often find PE distressing and frightening due to locker-room and other gender binary-based practices (Devis-Devis et al., 2018b). Therefore, with the aim of working for their equal right to participate in educational and social life, it is important to understand

and overcome all these practices and feelings towards LGBTIQ in PE. In particular, this study analyses the situation of PE in the Spanish context, since the number of studies and the academic approach that emerges from different research lines and groups show that this problem is worthy of study. Our work continues insisting and delving into this line of educational research, aspiring to promote effective transformation.

LGBTIQ research in Physical Education

Some didactic approaches of PE are closely related to inherent social and cultural aspects, often determined by body and gender stereotypes (Greenspan et al., 2019; Lambert, 2018). Some of these approaches generate situations of discrimination towards LGBTIQ people (Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2018). This approach, although rarely acknowledged by teachers, leads to school practices that subconsciously generate pressure and insecurity for students who deviate from this established body and gender pattern (González-Calvo et al., 2019; Velija & Kumar, 2009). In this vein, studies such as those of Greenspan et al. (2019) reported that LGBTIQ participants felt unsafe in school athletic contexts, while McGlashan (2013) also emphasised that homophobia was prevalent in PE experiences.

Some PE researchers have used queer, feminist or post-structuralist theories to examine queer topics within PE (Landi, 2019). Thus, queer bodies have been theorised as 'abject' or 'repressed' within the field (Larsson et al., 2009; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2016; Sykes, 2011). In this sense, PE must be worked on from a comprehensive, reflective, critical and inclusive perspective (Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2021; Larsson et al., 2014; Safron & Landi, 2021), since the current silent and coercive approach could cause psychological and affective damage to students (Hall & Rodgers, 2019).

A renewed approach to PE is needed, especially when the subject has historically been a repressive place for homosexuals (Landi, 2018; Landi et al., 2020). Therefore, although the changes regarding sexual identity that have taken place in the last two decades have been far-reaching (Sykes, 2011), there is still much to be done in this field.

LGBTIQ research in Spanish Physical education

This study focuses its attention on the Spanish PE context, where there is significant interest in the LGBTIQ situation in PE and physical activity (Devis-Devis et al., 2018a; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2016). Academic literature on this topic in Spanish PE has been prolific in recent years, with several lines and research groups involved. Overall, it suggests that experiences in PE influence LGBTIQ and trans people's attitudes towards physical activity and sport (López-Cañada et al., 2019), as well as showing that heterosexist and homophobic behaviour is normal in PE classes, where teachers are aware of these behaviours (Piedra et al., 2016).

From a queer pedagogy perspective, Devis-Devis et al. (2018a) suggested that embodied experiences are of significant importance in the process of gaining empathetic imagination on gender diversity. They conclude that similar initiatives to raise awareness about gender diversity and disrupt normalcy are necessary, claiming that policies of recognition need to enhance empathetic imagination to foster the possibilities for recognition and dialogue between gender privileged and oppressed individuals and groups.

Following the same line, Devis-Devis et al. (2018b) also found that heteronormative contexts strongly determined trans people's experiences in PE. Trans participants, especially those not performing gender conforming practices, were abjectified in PE classes. These circumstances create several types of exclusion and rejection, as well as episodes of harassment. The same situation has also been suggested in the Spanish context by Piedra et al. (2016), who reported homophobic behaviours among students and even towards PE teachers.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation of this study emanates from queer theory, which is critical of essentialist views of sexuality and gender inspired by the belief that gender is naturally different. Instead, it approaches those concepts as social and cultural phenomena, often through an analysis of the categories, binaries and language in which they are said to be portrayed. According to this theory, gender and sexual identities are mainly seen to be demonstrably defiant definitions and configurations.

Specifically, to carry out this research we followed the theory of gender performativity as the main framework of reference (Butler, 1990). It should be noted that gender performativity cannot be considered synonymous with queer theory, as the latter is made up of a diverse group of theoretical contributions, one of which is gender performativity. This approach seeks the recognition of sexual diversity and gender expression, framed within the paradigm of anti-essentialist deconstructive politics. This approach describes the formation of identity and subjectivity, tracing the process by which we become subjects when we assume gender. Therefore, there are no sexual identities or gender identities essentially or biologically inscribed in human nature (Butler, 1990).

This theoretical approach is influenced by other theories such as Beauvoir's feminist approaches (1970), Derrida's theory of deconstruction (1974) and Foucault's constructionist vision of sexuality (1993). All in all, performativity can be understood as a device of social and political power that uses sex and gender as a subjective construct regarding the body that ends up being naturalised within the framework of a prevailing culture (Mouffe, 1999). In this sense, given that PE is an important place for the development of an understanding about one's body, physicality, physical literacy, relationships, health, affect, emotion, etc. (Lisahunter, 2019), it can be further argued that body movements can also be conceived as an integral part of performativity (Larsson et al., 2014). Therefore, since bodies, body movements and actions are seen in current PE practices as a way to perform, maintain and reinforce gender categories, we should examine it in PE teaching (Joy & Larsson, 2019).

The aim of this research is to analyse the experiences of seven homosexual students (four boys and three girls) in PE. Their families also participate, describing how their children's experiences have affected their daily lives throughout their adolescence. This is a significant contribution because, to our knowledge, this topic has never before been addressed in PE, integrating the perception of the families. Specifically, to seek new ideas on the topic, the main research question is related to how things work, trying to reveal the interactions, feelings and tensions experienced.

Materials and methods

Design and procedure

The study analyses the participants' experiences in PE throughout secondary education. Before the start of the research, permission for a project involving non-adult human participants was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the main investigator's University. Moreover, the study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Individuals were clearly informed about the aims of the study in order to give informed consent. They were encouraged to answer the questions as truthfully as possible and were assured of the confidentiality of the data.

The research process followed four steps:

Phase 1. Setting the study's objectives and establishing the timeline: the researchers reflected on the contribution of conducting a study that combined the PE experiences of homosexual students and the perception of their families. The researchers' close contact with PE teachers in the schools facilitated contact with the students and their families. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, this phase was the key to building trust with the participants.

Phase 2. Conducting the interviews with the students: the questions were established in line with the research objective and question. All of them were conducted individually, online via *Microsoft Teams*. They were recorded for later analysis.

Phase 3. Preparation of the focus group with the families: the questions were prepared based on the interviews conducted with their children, thus seeking complementarity in the answers. Subsequently, the discussion group was held online using *Microsoft Teams*. The entire discussion group was recorded for later analysis.

Phase 4. Analysis of the collected data: after being thoroughly reviewed, all the results obtained were transcribed. At the same time, the researchers reflected, first individually and then together, on the procedure carried out based on the research objectives.

Setting and participants

Seven homosexual students (four boys and three girls) with a mean age of $15.12 \pm .92$ years participated. All were in the last (fourth) year of compulsory secondary education in three different state schools in northern Spain, each with more than 400 students. All participants had attended all four years of compulsory secondary education in the same school. Throughout these years, each participant had had at least two different PE teachers, which ensured a diversity of experience in the subject. To ensure anonymity, the pseudonyms used in the research were: Pedro, José, Raúl, Andrés, Sonia, Lara and Cristina. The families of all the participants agreed to take part in the research, arguing the need to draw attention to the problems and discrimination that their children had suffered during their schooling. All families had a middle socioeconomic status. In particular, 7 mothers and 5 fathers participated in the study. All of them were aware of the homosexuality of their children and supported them.

Data collection

Two different methods were used to collect information. On the one hand, interviews were used to ensure the analysis process with each of the participants was as in-depth and individualised as possible, thus guaranteeing their security and trust. On the other hand, a focus group discussion with the families was used, as the aim was to exchange a diversity of experiences with their children from different perspectives. The questions asked in both cases were directly related to the research objective. This involved applying methodological coherence in the design developed in the research (Gregory, 2020). It should be noted that the results structure was established in line with the research objectives.

Student interviews

Each of the seven students was interviewed individually at the end of the first term of the 2020–2021 school year. These interviews were conducted online via *Microsoft Teams* and lasted 90 min. The parents were informed by letter about the nature and purpose of the study and written informed consent was required from both the children and their parents/legal guardians. The researchers had previously held a meeting with each student and their families to explain the purpose of the research and how the interviews would be conducted. The interviews were semi-structured, that is, the questions were not closed since the ongoing dialogue allowed each student to expand on their opinions, experiences and reflections (Husband, 2020), promoting an overall perspective of the study from a wide and reflexive point of view (Nowak & Haynes, 2018). These interviews are intended to increase the scope of the research, examining the participants' experiences in PE classes.

Family focus group

This focus group was carried out with the students' families at the end of the first term of the 2020–2021 school year, after the interviews. Again, the *Microsoft Teams* online platform was used. The

sessions lasted 90 min and were recorded for later analysis. The focus groups were carried out with the aim of achieving the purposes of the research. The researchers tried to establish a climate of participatory trust in which each parent intervened as they saw fit. They did not move on to the next question until all the families had participated in the previous one, with the researchers taking on the role of moderator in the interventions (Del Rio-Roberts, 2011). The families' responses were analysed as a whole in order to establish thematic blocks according to the categories generated. The questions posed in the focus group addressed what families perceived in relation to their children's experiences and feelings.

Data analysis

Analysing the students' experiences and the families' perceptions in an integrated way involves interpreting what happened from different perspectives, all of which are closely linked to the theory as well as to the emotional sphere of the participants. After an initial examination of the data, we found that a focus on the macro was at some levels predictable and certainly did not produce different knowledge. That is to say, firstly we felt tempted to present major themes or categories when writing up the findings. Each of these themes would have been grounded in data, and we could have created a description by staying close to the data. However, this type of methodological approach would not have resulted in different knowledge because our formulation of the categories would have been driven simply by our experience and that of our participants, devoid of any new approach that reported genuine knowledge beyond that already known. Therefore, we tried a different analytical approach called 'thinking with theory' in a methodological attempt against postpositivist and interpretive imperatives that inhibit the inclusion of previously unthought data and limit interpretation, analysis and meaning making (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). By applying 'thinking with theory', we tried to highlight the networked functioning of thought and, thus, to open up the possibility of previously unthought approaches.

Inspired by Jackson and Mazzei (2012), we present a way of 'thinking with theory' based on: (a) putting concepts to work by mixing theory and data, (b) trying to show how they constitute or make one another, and (c) working with the data repeatedly to create not only linear knowledge but also plausible connections and tensions between concepts and meanings. So, using this 'thinking with theory' approach in qualitative enquiry we try to eschew the use of concepts for what they mean and instead put to use concepts to show how they work, what they do and what they allow. In this methodological attempt, data are made not found, assembled and ever dynamic (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020).

To organise and display the findings we followed the orientations of Miles et al. (2014) by creating a visual network of results, understood as a collection of nodes or points connected by links that show experiences, feelings, processes, concepts, etc., in order to illustrate the authentic relationships between variables in the accompanying research narrative (Figure 1).

Positionality

Research represents a shared space, shaped by both researchers and participants. As such, the researchers' identities also have the potential to impact the process. Therefore, in this section, we describe who we are, our relationship with this project and topic, and how our position might have influenced the findings. Prior to conducting the research study upon which this paper is based, we have worked as lecturers in PE Teacher Education for several years, as well as working as PE teachers in secondary schools. Although we have not experienced discrimination in our daily lives due to our sexual orientation, our experience working with diverse LGBTI students during our careers has led to our interest in conducting qualitative research to learn more about their experiences. Through conversations with homosexual students in informal environments we have heard stories in which they shared struggles with homophobia and prejudice and wished

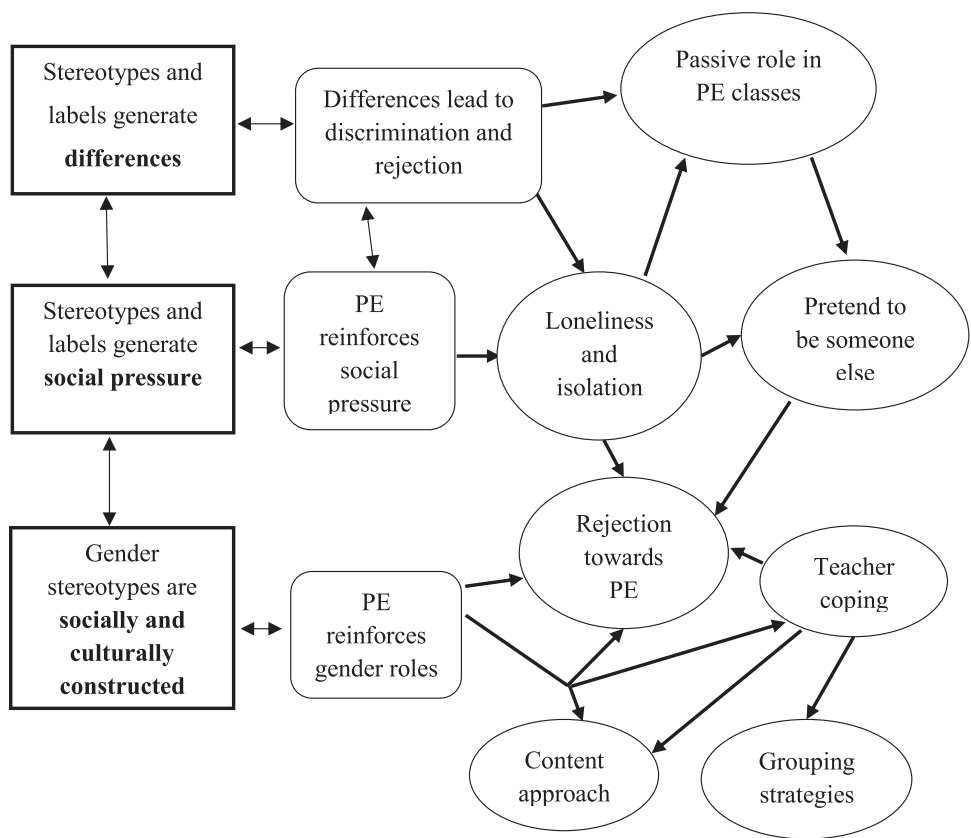


Figure 1. Network of homosexual PE students' experiences in secondary school.

their stories to be heard. Therefore, we have carried out this research project in the hope of developing an understanding of the ways in which homosexual students experience PE in order to overcome some of the difficulties and prejudices they have to deal with.

Results

In the network displayed in [Figure 1](#), we observe several connections and links between theory and data (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013). Through this network we present the dynamics around three essential theoretical ideas, located on the left side of the figure, and a number of concrete elements that emerge from the data and specify these theoretical ideas into genuine and authentic knowledge related to the field of PE. This approach shows several connections, narratively described and exemplified below, which help us to understand the phenomenon with greater depth and richness.

Stereotypes and labels generate differences

One of the starting ideas that emerges in line with the theoretical foundation of our analysis is that heteronormative stereotypes are at the root of the problem. The existence stereotypes and labels seem to be one of the underlying factors that generates discrimination and rejection in PE classes. As a consequence, the students state that they prefer to assume a passive role during classes in order to avoid rejection, even pretending and assuming roles and behaviours with

which they do not really identify, as we will see later. Students recognise from their experiences that in a number of cases they have felt strange, observed and even questioned for the simple fact of being different. These stereotyped attitudes and constant comparisons generate situations of discrimination and rejection, which end up meaning that these students prefer not to have an active role in PE classes.

'In many cases, I have felt like the odd one out in PE classes, just because my sexual identity was not the same as the majority.' (Raúl) *'Sometimes they are not direct comments, but you feel observed by others, being afraid of making a mistake [...].'* (Lara). *'On a number of occasions, I have had to pretend to like girls just to be accepted by others.'* (José)

This situation leads them to feel displaced, preferring not to play an active role in class because of what others might think.

'I have felt self-conscious, with many fears and insecurities about having an opinion or giving a demonstration in PE.' (Cristina) *'Sometimes I felt that my body did not respond when I wanted to move; I felt paralysed [...].'* *'Faced with this, and although it was not what I wanted, I chose to stay in the background.'* (Andrés) *'I always liked to be in the groups with the girls, as I felt much more comfortable with them. That has meant I've received insults from the boys like 'sissy' on more than one occasion.'* (Andrés).

Students say that they have become accustomed to having a label attached to them. While this situation is hard in any context, it is even more evident in PE, as they are more exposed to others:

'In PE classes, it is impossible to hide, and when you don't feel safe, it is very bad [...]. You feel that you are in the wrong place and that your body doesn't act the way it should. It is a tremendously unfair situation.' (Sonia) *'Often, at a certain age, you feel pressured to be attracted to boys and to act like girls should.'* (Lara)

They recognise that, in many cases, the best thing to do is to go unnoticed, thus avoiding the commentary or the gaze of others:

'At first, I used to confront others when they laughed at me, although later on you realise that it is not worth it' [...]. 'You prefer not to intervene in order to feel calmer and not be teased.' (Pedro) *'I've never liked football, and it seems that being a boy and not liking football are incompatible [...]. As I do ballet and classical dance, the others have always looked at me like a freak.'* (José) *'I am outraged to see how some sports are considered masculine and others feminine, stigmatising each one to a sexual identity.'* (Andrés)

The families recognise that it has not been easy to put up with certain situations experienced by their children at school. They state that some of the most difficult experiences have taken place in PE. They argue how these bad experiences have had a negative impact on their daily lives:

'From the beginning, we accepted Cristina's sexual identity and supported her in everything [...]. However, this was not the case at school'. 'Many of her classmates, even without knowing that she was homosexual, have questioned her and even insulted her at times.' 'The most traumatic experiences have been in PE [...]. Raul came to loathe everything to do with physical activity and sport.' 'In PE, being constantly exposed, the teasing and scorn were more direct.' 'Sonia has often come home not wanting to talk to anyone and very sad [...].' (DG)

The families also state that their children have not been comfortable during classes because they feel different since they do not fit the generally accepted stereotypes. They emphasise that they have not really known how to act:

'It is a very unfair situation [...]. To take away an adolescent's freedom like this is incomprehensible in 2020.' 'There is a hidden repression, in many cases to do with the body, that needs to be tackled at school.' 'The first reaction I had was to go to the school and get angry with teachers and the management team [...]. Then you realise that this is not the best option, as you could do harm and put your child under more pressure.' (DG)

This situation shows how students' experiences have led them to have a residual position in PE classes, often being marginalised. Not conforming to the canons of heteronormativity means that they are relegated in many of the activities and pigeon-holed in many others.

Stereotypes and labels generate social pressure

The second theoretical idea connecting with the data analysed is the affirmation that 'stereotypes and labels generate social pressure'. The data suggest that PE experiences reinforce social pressure since classmates do not want to interact with those who do not fit into heteronormative stereotypes. This makes homosexual students feel lonely and isolated, which not only reinforces their passive role in class, as we have seen before, but also encourages them to behave differently from how they feel, generating a certain rejection of PE. All in all, as a result of the stereotypes established in PE classes, students feel discriminated against and isolated from their peers:

'I have felt betrayed by some of my classmates over the years [...]. There are few people who stand by your side when they pick on you or make fun of you.' (Sonia) *'In PE, I have never stood out, and that, together with the fact that I am homosexual, has often made me feel lonely.'* (José)

They state that being homosexual has caused them to be rejected by others, which is clearly observed when their classmates decide to place themselves in other groups due to the social pressure they feel, what clearly connects with:

'It hurts a lot when you see how friends who have always been with you suddenly leave you aside because of peer pressure.' (Lara) *'They don't want to be associated with you because you're the gay one, and that could mean that people make fun of them too [...]. That's why they prefer to separate themselves from you.'* (Andrés)

They indicate that, most of the time, it is not direct rejection discrimination but constant day-to-day details that make them feel bad:

'The worst thing is that in many cases the discrimination is not through direct attacks, but you feel that people are talking badly about you, that you are questioned when you speak or do any exercise in PE.' (Pedro) *'In PE, I have been questioned and looked down on just for the way I dressed or the way I hit a ball, which makes you feel really bad.'* (Raúl)

They recognise that at certain times peer pressure has led them to pretend and act in ways they did not want to. They only did this in order to be accepted. Therefore, since PE does not let students be as they really are and feel, it distorts the process by which students become subjects. In any case, they emphasise that, as the years go by, they overcome this situation and accept themselves as they are, and there is no reason to change the way they feel.

'In the classes, you notice that only one body type, one way of dressing and one way of feeling is accepted, having to like girls [...]. I admit that, in some cases, I have faked emotions in order to be accepted by others [...]. Over time you realise that this doesn't make any sense and that you have to show yourself as you are.' (Andrés) *'Now with the passage of time you stop placing importance on certain comments, but they do a lot of damage [...]. Over time, I've ended up only trusting my real friends.'* (Sonia)

The families indicate that adolescents are very cruel at times, sometimes not with bad intentions, but they are influenced by others:

'I am aware that adolescence is a very complicated stage in which they care a lot about being valued by others and that the problem in many cases is more with the system than with themselves.' *'Education, and more so PE, should focus on the acceptance of all ways of thinking, encouraging interpersonal relationships within the group'. 'You can't learn anything if you discriminate against others, and this should be taught to students from the beginning.'* (DG)

The families state that their children had stopped liking PE, whereas they had been very motivated by it when they were young. They state that if this happens, it is because the teaching process is flawed:

'Pedro has always loved PE [...]. When he started having problems with others because of his homosexuality, everything changed [...]. He said that he preferred to stay at home and play with his phone than go out to do sports with his friends.' *'Lara loved PE until she began to feel complexes and insecurities due to the pressure she suffered in class [...]. What is clear is that, if this happens, there are clearly educational problems at school'* *'The teaching process in PE cannot be based solely on the contents or on the type of sports played [...]. It is essential to pay attention to the feelings, emotions and characteristics of the students.'* (DG)

This situation is perpetuated in PE, where traditional corporal practices emphasise this discrimination even more. Thus, it seems that a new PE model that does not permit and feed these situations should be proposed.

Gender stereotypes are socially and culturally constructed

A third theoretical idea that links with the data analysed is that signifying that 'gender stereotypes are a socially and culturally constructed'. In this case, PE seems to operate as a platform to reinforce the construction of these gender stereotypes. Specifically, some particular situations in PE that students report in this regard have to do with the way in which content is treated, grouping strategies and the disregard that some teachers show in situations of discrimination.

In this sense, PE classes do not currently generate a climate of motivation and inclusion but quite the opposite. There is a clear connection with the theory here, since it is the acts and habits carried out in the name of gender that produce, reproduce and reinforce gender in PE. Neither groupings nor exercises nor specific content approaches allow all students to feel comfortable. Likewise, some teachers do not seem to be really concerned since they maintain traditional and heteronormative habits and behaviours.

From this perspective, PE promotes traditional performance of the authoritarian discourse of heterocentric hegemonic supremacy that reinforces socio-cultural realities rather than transforming them into more inclusive ones. That is, rather than fighting the limitations of gender performativity, PE reinforces the heteronormative legacy. On the one hand, the students indicate specifically that much of the rejection and pressure they have experienced in PE classes is related to the way they are grouped and made to demonstrate in front of others:

'I always felt a lot of pressure when we were being grouped [...]. I knew that either I would be quick to get into a group with someone, or I would probably be left alone.' 'I got to the point of panicking about PE and not being able to sleep the night before a practical test [...].'*' (Sonia) 'I have never been bad at PE, but the stereotypes attached to me because I was homosexual always hurt me [...]. I noticed how there were boys who didn't want to play with me for fear of what others would say, and that hurts a lot.'* (José)

They highlight the insults they have received, associated with the way they dress, speak or express themselves. They express the pressures they have felt in PE for being a certain way and having to like specific content:

'My sexual condition caused me to receive discrimination because of the way I dressed and my physical appearance [...]. On more than one occasion, I have been called a faggot.' 'If I didn't play football or basketball like the other boys, I was already labelled as the odd one out.'*' I felt very displaced when the boys talked about which girls they liked the most [...]. they asked me and I had to make it up.'* (Pedro) 'In several cases, I felt questioned because I didn't dress the same as the rest of the girls or because my haircut was different [...]. These situations were exacerbated in PE classes.'*' (Lara) 'I have always played rugby, and many of my classmates thought it was only a boys' sport.'* (Lara)

On the other hand, regarding the role of the teacher, the students stated that the teacher did not pay much attention to this type of discrimination:

'Honestly, I never felt the teacher's support [...]. They were more concerned with the work content than with all the situations of discrimination that arose in class.' (Raúl) 'I do remember that a classmate was punished when she disrespected me, but then everything turned against me when the teacher was not there.'*' (Cristina)*

They recognise that there has been a considerable difference between some PE teachers and others, although they see the need for a change in the subject that is more focused on respect for diversity:

'Some teachers did take each of the student's emotions into account more [...]. Others were only concerned with the work objectives and the results obtained.' (Pedro) 'It cannot be that a subject that seeks the wellbeing of the student allows these situations to arise [...]. Much more attention should be paid to diversity.'*' (Lara)*

The families report how their children have had a hard time in class, feeling bad about themselves for not thinking like their classmates:

'It is very hard as a parent to see how your child suffers unfairly, just because they don't think and feel like others do [...]. 'If discrimination already exists in society, school should be a place where people are respected above all else.' (DG)

They state that PE should be very inclusive, as values are the first thing that should be promoted through sport:

'What is the point of doing sport if it is not under an inclusive approach for all? [...]. The values of sport towards respect for others must be the priority [...]. If this is not done at school, we cannot expect it to be done anywhere else.' (DG)

All in all, it has been shown how labels in relation to sexual identity, reinforced by a strong heteronormative approach in PE from both students and teachers, lead to constant situations of discrimination in class. Therefore, in light of the results, we can assume that PE is influenced by concepts and behaviours based on social and cultural heteronormative stereotypes and seems to reinforce an inappropriate 'essentialist' approach of gender that needs to be transformed.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to analyse the experiences of seven homosexual students in PE, also taking into account the families' perceptions about their children's feelings. The results have shown how being homosexual has led to limitations and rejection in PE and no encouraging or positive experiences were found among the analysed discourses. These findings are contrary to published studies indicating that society is increasingly tolerant towards gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals (Adams & Anderson, 2012; Oswalt & Vargas, 2013). However, there is also past research arguing that there is the hostile climate towards homosexuality in the field of PE (Hemphill & Symons, 2009; Sykes, 2011), as well as towards other sexual orientations that differ from heterosexuality (Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2016). This discriminatory situation reported in our study, which has been described previously in the Spanish context (Venegas, 2013; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2016; Piedra et al., 2016; Devis-Devis et al., 2018a, 2018b; López-Cañada et al., 2019), shows how the interviewed students assumed a passive role in the classroom, mockery from their classmates and pressure and insecurity about the way they express themselves, feel and act in front of others.

In relation to the first theoretical idea underlying our analysis, it has been observed how heteronormative stereotypes and labels generate differences. In this sense, previous literature suggests that gender roles and relations in PE are exemplified through normative and stereotyped expectations (Greenspan et al., 2019) following heteronormative social patterns (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016). Specifically, in this study, homosexual students state that they are used to being undervalued or ridiculed because of their sexual identity, so they therefore prefer to go unnoticed in PE. These models are replicated by children from an early age, limiting their full freedom to feel as they wish (Williams, 2017). In particular, PE currently seems to negatively affect the experiences of boys who do not fit into the hegemonic expectations of masculinity (Hickey, 2008). In many cases, far from being sensitised to this situation, PE, through bodywork, legitimises these social behaviours, pigeonholing the typologies of sporting practices according to gender and hegemonic masculinities (Devis-Devis et al., 2018b; Gerdin, 2017; Millington et al., 2008). In the face of this, students with other sexual identities choose to remain in the background in the classroom. The families of the students have expressed how difficult it has been for them to see their children suffer and not be able to do anything about it, highlighting that, in many cases, the worst experiences have been in PE. The subject of PE should therefore address the gender perspective by challenging the current curricular practices (Flintoff & Scraton, 2006; Penney, 2002).

With regard to the second theoretical idea with which we analysed the results, affirming that stereotypes and labels generate social pressure, students reported having felt lonely and displaced by their peers in PE, in most cases through indirect discrimination caused by social pressure from their classmates. In line with Devis-Devis et al. (2018b), our research also suggests that this

pressure build gender segregation in PE lessons. In addition, in line with the results of Piedra et al. (2016), the interviewed students stated that, on more than one occasion, they have pretended in order to be accepted by others. In this vein, Benítez-Sillero et al. (2021) reveal how one of the most relevant aspects for adolescents is the approval of their peers and that in order to achieve this, they do not hesitate to modify their patterns of behaviour, in some cases discriminatory, with the sole purpose of obtaining the support of the group. In this vein, Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir (2015) show how homosexual adolescents, faced with the repression they have suffered for years from society, suffer damage to their personalities, expressing contrary emotions that even make them feel bad about what they feel. In our study, some students and their families highlighted that their children stopped liking PE because of rejection by their peers. In this vein, when PE teaching is based on the development of corporal pedagogical practices that foster respect and inclusion of students, motivation towards the subject increases significantly (Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2021). This motivation must be sustained by teacher support, which does not always exist from our student's perspective.

In relation to the third theoretical idea covered by our analysis, regarding the fact that gender stereotypes are socially and culturally constructed and performed, the data show how current PE practices reinforce gender roles and differences. This fact causes traumatic situations in PE, especially when students have had to demonstrate in front of others. They felt questioned and oppressed because of the way they spoke, moved and even dressed. These results are in line with those reported by Sykes (2004, 2011), who describes several circumstances of discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion experienced by queer participants during PE lessons. In addition, the students have described how the teacher did not pay much attention to these rejections and discriminations, thus reinforcing heteronormativity in PE lessons, which is in line with previous research (Devís-Devís et al., 2018b). Research such as that by Campbell et al. (2018) indicates that PE is taught in an orthodox masculine nature, which prevents students from discovering, exploring and expressing different gender identities. Thus, PE needs to set itself up as a subject that breaks with any stereotyped social pattern, fleeing from the corseted curriculum and promoting open and participatory practices in which no student feels pressured and discriminated against because of their sexual, social or gender condition (Cameron & Humbert, 2020). To this end, teacher training in the emotional sphere is key, using motor skills as a reflective and inclusive element and not with a merely physiological focus (Hickey, 2008). In this sense, as the families in our study suggest, PE teachers have the potential to challenge and counteract dominant gender discourses and practices (Yager et al., 2020).

All in all, the results obtained are approached according to the theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), considering that sexual identity is a social and cultural construct and that the dichotomous approach that forces students to position and classify themselves should be eradicated from schools and, specifically, from PE. This is the only way to break with hegemonic approaches based on heterosexuality, with PE being an essential subject in this regard, so that we can set aside neoliberal political impositions and the body can be approached from its pedagogical perspective.

Conclusions

This work sought to contribute new ideas on how things work by trying to reveal the network of interactions, feelings and tensions they and their families experienced. We have applied a different analytic, called thinking with theory, which has helped us highlight what counts as real in the PE setting.

The results clearly show how PE experiences have led to the students not experiencing school as a place where they can feel accepted by others. Their families have experienced this process in a negative and powerless way. From these results, we can conclude that PE currently reinforces role construction and discrimination, but we are convinced that PE could also have great potential for the opposite, that is, to counter gender roles and stereotypes.

This research makes a significant contribution to previous literature on sexual identity and PE, as it not only analyses the experiences of students in their last year of compulsory education, it also gives a voice to their families. However, the research has some limitations: (a) it does not give a voice to PE teachers, and (b) it does not focus on specific types of physical activities and sports practices. As future lines of research, it would be interesting to carry out specific observations on what happens in the classroom, contrasting the students' experiences according to the methodological approach used and/or the contents applied. It would also be interesting in future research to analyse the possible evolution of students' experiences during their schooling period or changes before and after coming out of the closet (if that is the case).

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