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Pre-service teachers' experiences of learning to teach LGBTQ students in health and physical education

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Abstract

The purposes of this research were to: (a) explore and interpret four pre-service Health & Physical Education (H&PE) teachers' beliefs and experiences of learning to teach lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students, and (b) examine their articulation of strategies to support LGBTQ students. The research was framed by teacher beliefs and feminist theory. Data were generated from interviews and course syllabi. Findings showed that participants were committed to inclusionary practices but were critical of the lack of opportunities to learn about gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ issues in their pre-service H&PE teacher education. Few could articulate specific strategies to support LGBTQ students. The results of this research suggest that in the particular context of the study, in the very least, there may be a need for more intentional and specific attention to LGBTQ issues in pre-service H&PE teacher education.

Keywords: Inclusion, pedagogy, gender, sexuality, teacher education

Résumé

Les buts de cette recherche étaient les suivants : (a) explorer et interpréter les croyances et expériences d'apprentissage de l'enseignement à des élèves lesbiennes, gais, bisexuels, transgenre et « queer » de quatre étudiants en formation à l'enseignement de l'éducation physique et la santé; (b) examiner leur articulation de stratégies pour appuyer les élèves LGBTQ. Les croyances des enseignants et les théories féministes ont orienté la recherche. Les données de la recherche proviennent d'entrevues et de plans de cours. Les participants étaient engagés envers des pratiques inclusives et également critiques du manque d'occasions d'apprentissage portant sur le genre, la sexualité et des enjeux LGBTQ dans leur programme de formation. Peu d'entre eux pouvaient articuler des stratégies spécifiques pour appuyer les élèves LGBTQ. Les résultats de cette recherche suggèrent qu'il pourrait y avoir, à tout le moins dans ce contexte spécifique, un besoin de porter une attention spécifique et intentionnelle aux enjeux LGBTQ en formation à l'enseignement en éducation et santé.

Mots clés : inclusion, pédagogie, genre, sexualité, formation à l'enseignement

Introduction

*Did you see that... he didn't make one shot, he is such a fag.
Honestly, I don't even know what he's doing here...Let him play the flute or
something, I'm sure he'd like that.*

The whole change room bursts out in laughter.

Okay gents, let's get going! yells our teacher.

Thank god, I need to get out of here.

This kind of conversation was typical before and after every Health and Physical Education (H&PE) class for one of the authors whose H&PE experience was rife with homophobic bullying from many peers, and apathy and ignorance from the teacher. The content of H&PE remained a source of enjoyment and challenge but the context was not a safe nor a happy place. These experiences were frequent, vicious, and remain a source of emotional distress.

Young people who identify as LGBTQ often find themselves in communities where heteronormative beliefs and homophobic bullying are salient features of their lives (Farrelly, Norman, & O'Leary, 2017; Landi, 2018). Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, and Tompkins (2014) stated: "Homophobia and transphobia [...] contribute to [...] three-quarters of LGBTQ students and 95% of transgendered students [feeling] unsafe in school" (p.5). As a result of these negative experiences, LGBTQ students are far more likely to demonstrate low academic performance in comparison to their peers and are susceptible to major risk factors for mental health including feelings of hopelessness, depression, and an increase in suicidal thoughts and/or attempts (Bishop & McClellan, 2016).

Health and Physical Education and sport in schools are contexts where LGBTQ youth feel especially vulnerable, due to a pervasive culture of "compulsory heterosexuality" and conservatism (Landi, 2018; Linghede & Larsson, 2017). It is perhaps ironic that H&PE may also be seen as one context where normative views of sexuality can be challenged because issues of gender and sexuality are included in most H&PE curriculum documents. Indeed, the elementary and secondary H&PE curricula in Ontario outline specific outcomes for students to learn about gender and sexuality. This means that teachers of H&PE are accountable for teaching these topics in their classes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

While the inclusion of gender and sexuality issues is welcomed by many stakeholders in Ontario public education, the recently elected provincial government initially repealed parts of the 2015 H&PE curriculum that specifically dealt with these topics. The repeal was presented under the guise of a lack of consultation in creating the 2015 curriculum, as well as ensuring representation of all family values, including those that are overwhelmingly heteronormative (Bialystok, 2019; Lum, 2018). Taking a similar political stance, the United Conservative Party (UCP) in Alberta recently proposed an agenda of "outing" students to parents if they decide to join gay-straight alliances in their secondary schools (Bellefontaine, 2019). Such political manoeuvres exemplify how and why young LGBTQ people in Canada continue to feel unsettled and threatened in their schools and communities.

At the time of writing, the Ontario government's proposed overhaul of gender and sexuality content and pedagogy had been "watered down," yet a new policy that allows parents to opt their children out of H&PE lessons where these topics would be dealt with means such issues remain topics of political and educational debate. It is for these reasons that LGBTQ students might well claim that schools continue to be places where they experience a lack of understanding and

acceptance, and why LGBTQ students remain at risk of being marginalized through the curriculum and in their schooling lives (Boyland, Swensson, Ellis, Coleman, & Boyland, 2015; Kearns et al., 2014).

These circumstances are compounded when considering the role of teachers in facilitating LGBTQ inclusive pedagogies. For example, some teachers feel uncomfortable or lack confidence to facilitate discussions of issues that might be deemed sensitive or controversial, while others claim religious freedom or dissonance with the subject matter (Bailey, Vasey, Diamond, Breedlove, Vilain, & Epprecht, 2016; Tompkins, Kearns, & Mitton-Kukner, 2019). Furthermore, there are some teachers who argue that explicit LGBTQ supportive actions, such as standing up for LGBTQ rights, is actually discriminatory against other students (Shelton, Barnes, & Flint, 2019). It has been shown that teachers' decisions and actions in addressing these issues (or not) can directly influence their students' perceptions of the LGBTQ community, and potentially further ostracize marginalized students (Boyland et al., 2015; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017).

In light of these active and passive forms of resistance, the introduction of several policy reforms upholds teachers' rights and obligations to introduce anti-homophobic topics and content. For example, *Bill 13: The Accepting Schools Act*, "allows publicly funded schools in Ontario to include acceptance of LGBTQTIQ₁ students and allows teachers to speak of this openly, without negative repercussions" (Brard & Nicolaidis, 2014, p. 29). Additionally, this legislation produced new legal obligations for school districts to address homophobic bullying, execute accepting school dynamics for marginalized students, and implement equity and inclusive based pedagogies (Brard & Nicolaidis, 2014).

In addition, many new teachers are being introduced to inclusive practices in teacher education programs, including ways to implement gender inclusive language or by participating in ongoing professional development geared specifically to thinking about ways to work with LGBTQ students in schools. In a study where pre-service teachers learned about the impact of critical curricula and social justice education within their teacher education contexts, Kearns et al. (2014) demonstrated disruption of heteronormativity and homophobia in the classrooms of those pre-service teachers. Similarly, Kitchen and Bellini (2012) found that through participation in an LGBTQ inclusion workshop, pre-service teachers felt more prepared to work with LGBTQ issues.

It is clear that there is potential to achieve a more just and positive educational experience for LGBTQ students from specifically addressing how future teachers learn about LGBTQ issues and how to foster inclusive classrooms; however, there remains a distinct lack of insight into how and what future teachers of H&PE learn about working with young LGBTQ people in pre-service teacher education programs. With the inclusion of topics of gender and sexuality in H&PE curriculum documents, H&PE teachers hold a significant responsibility to create safe spaces in schools for LGBTQ students (Morrow & Gill, 2003). It is therefore crucial to understand how future teachers of H&PE feel about their teacher education in relation to working with LGBTQ students. The purposes of this research therefore were to: (a) explore and interpret pre-service H&PE teachers' beliefs about and experiences of learning to teach LGBTQ students, and (b) examine pre-service H&PE teachers' abilities to articulate pedagogical strategies to support inclusion of LGBTQ students in H&PE classrooms.

¹ The expanded acronym that encompasses all representations of this vast community is LGBTQQQIP2SAA.

Pedagogies that Support LGBTQ Students in H&PE

There is a small body of published research on LGBTQ issues in H&PE (Landi, Flory, & Safron, 2019) broadly speaking, and less still on specific pedagogies that teachers can use to support LGBTQ students in H&PE. Some have suggested that H&PE enables opportunities to interrogate heteronormative values, however, there often remain deep-seated conservative values and norms that need to be challenged and deconstructed for this goal to materialize (Larsson, Quennerstedt, & Ohman, 2014).

The reliance on traditional ways of teaching H&PE (e.g., direct instruction, reliance on team sports) means that heterosexist ideals remain the norm, leaving many students to feel ostracized and unwelcomed. Interestingly, even H&PE teachers who identify as part of the LGBTQ community report discomfort in broaching these issues in schools, as there is “a cultural stigma that conflated homosexuality with mental illness, pedophilia and promiscuity” (Landi, 2018, p. 2). This is demonstrated in the work of Sykes (2004), who identified a schism in how teachers counter homophobic language in H&PE. Much like the tensions faced by teachers in a study by Tompkins et al. (2019), Sykes (2004) explained that some LGBTQ teachers were willing to risk having others challenge their own sexual orientation for the betterment of all students, whereas some teachers hesitated in countering homophobic language due to their experiences of physical and psychological bullying.

We identified only two empirical studies that specifically focused on LGBTQ issues and pedagogies that teachers can use to support LGBTQ students in H&PE. The small body of work we identified aligns with findings from a recent review of literature on LGBTQ issues in H&PE by Landi et al. (2018). They found only 37 published empirical works on LGBTQ issues in H&PE since 1982, with only three focused on pedagogical approaches in schools and pre-service teacher education; it can be inferred that much more work needs to be done in this area. Sykes and Goldstein (2004) examined the use of performed ethnography in pre-service teacher education to represent the lived experiences of gay, lesbian and queer physical education teachers in schools. The ethnography involved sharing with pre-service teachers a montage of short stories representing homophobic attitudes teachers had faced inside and outside of schools. The narratives allowed pre-service teachers to question the heteronormative and homophobic beliefs found within H&PE, while taking ownership of how they could personally counteract these beliefs by integrating anti-homophobic pedagogies.

In aiming to identify ways to subvert gender normalcy in H&PE, Devis-Devis, Pereira-Garcia, Fuentes-Miguel, Lopez-Canada, and Perez-Samaniego (2018) presented case-studies to pre-service teachers grounded in queer-inclusive pedagogy. Several participants legitimized gender binaries and heteronormativity, showing an aversion to transgender students, yet others demonstrated more accepting beliefs, however, they still lacked awareness of how to be “truly accepting” (Devis-Devis et al., 2018, p. 623). This lack of awareness is concerning, as the legal obligations of H&PE teachers to teach about gender and sexuality means they may be far more capable of positively or negatively affecting the rights and well-being of marginalized students in their classes (Brenyo, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Teachers’ beliefs and feminist theory offer useful theoretical frames to inform this research. Teachers’ beliefs are defined as “psychologically held understandings about the world that are felt to be true by the individual to the extent that they are relied upon as a guide to personal thought

and action” (Ni Chroinin & O’Sullivan, 2016, p. 97). Beliefs are purported to be so strong that they directly influence teachers’ knowledge, to the extent that beliefs and knowledge are intertwined and serve as a filter through which teachers create their reality (Pajares, 1992).

Beliefs provide a type of support for pre-service teachers as they begin to search for pedagogies that represent rather than disrupt their own assumptions. This may even result in beginning teachers choosing familiar approaches over those have been shown to be effective and provide powerful or transformative learning experiences for their students. Loughran (2006) has referred to this process as “hunting and gathering”, as pre-service teachers selectively identify tips and tricks for teaching they experienced as students and felt met their own personal needs. In other words, pre-service teachers will often make pedagogical decisions based on the alignment specific teaching approaches have with their beliefs about teaching, which have been developed since they were young children. Philpot and Smith (2011) demonstrated that many pre-service H&PE teachers believe that science-based subjects (e.g., anatomy, biomechanics) are more important and are treated more seriously than those based in the social sciences. As a consequence, those H&PE teachers may position bioscience content atop a disciplinary hierarchy, which may lead to devaluing other content grounded in the social sciences; topics that may address inclusion, social justice, accessibility, history, politics, and so on.

Teachers’ beliefs also inform how teachers address LGBTQ issues (Bishop & McClellan, 2016). Schneider and Dimito (2008) found that many teachers support LGBTQ students’ rights but believe their job “will be in jeopardy if they address LGBTQ issues openly” (p.50). Similarly, Taylor, Meyer, Peter, Ristock, Short, and Campbell (2016) found that “teachers mostly ignored or prevented discussion surrounding sexual diversity in the classroom, noting that teachers had difficulty saying words such as gay and lesbian throughout...” (p. 114). While some of these findings may be attested to a lack of professional education on LGBTQ inclusion, one cannot overlook the fact that some teachers possess homophobic and heterosexist beliefs (Bailey et al., 2016; Brenyo, 2016).

Feminist theory offers an appropriate lens through to consider ways to disrupt normative beliefs about gender and sexuality. Feminist theorists seek to deconstruct all inequalities that reside within society, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. hooks (1984) describes feminism as “a struggle to end sexist oppression... it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination ... as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence” (p.24). Such an approach can provide valuable insight into how normative beliefs play an integral role in marginalizing individuals with varying genders and sexualities. Feminist theory can go beyond analysis of gender alone, supporting critique of the intersection of social classifications, stating: “The sexism, racism and classism that exist...resemble systems of domination globally, but they are forms of oppression which have been primarily informed by Western Philosophy” (Laquer, 1990, p.35). Therefore, feminist theory is helpful to understand and interpret oppression, marginalization and power with varying degrees of emphasis or focus in relation to social groups. This clarification of feminist thinking is of great importance, as the marginalization faced by LGBTQ students in schools is predominately founded upon widely held beliefs that place “non-normative” sexual identities (i.e., those other than heterosexual identities) on the lower rungs of a hierarchy of sexuality in society (Clarke, 2002). Feminist theory may help to explain the influence of social norms on pre-service H&PE teachers’ experiences of learning to teach young LGBTQ people who have been historically marginalized and oppressed.

Methodology

Qualitative methodologies help researchers develop an understanding of “the relationship(s) between people’s life stories and the quality of their life experiences” (Jones et al., 2014, p.83). There is value in being able to describe and interpret pre-service teachers’ experiences and the ways these shape their beliefs, assumptions and perceived professional preparation for working with LGBTQ students.

Context: Setting and Participants

The research took place at Briarwood University², which offers concurrent and consecutive degree options for pre-service H&PE teachers. The concurrent degree is taken over six years, with students completing undergraduate courses in physical education and teacher education simultaneously (as well as courses to qualify them in one other subject). The consecutive education program involves students completing a four-year undergraduate degree, then applying to a two-year teacher education program.

To ensure that participants could offer experiences in line with the research purposes, we selected a purposive sample from the concurrent and consecutive degree programs at Briarwood University. Our sampling scheme (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) was purposive in that we sought participants who could represent, through description, their experiences of learning to teach H&PE in a pre-service teacher education program. We also sought to have a mix of gender representation if responses to the invitation to participate allowed (i.e., a mix of gender was evident in participants who volunteered). This was not done for the purposes of comparison of, for example, males and females, but to attempt to gain a rich data set from which to make interpretations.

Following the initial invitation to students in several H&PE courses at Briarwood, we emailed five students who expressed interest. Four agreed to participate (Cole, Christian, Drake and Katie) and one did not respond. The intersecting identities of participants showed they all came from relative positions of privilege. For example, Cole and Christian were white-settler, cisgender males in their fourth year of the concurrent program where they were taking kinesiology, physical education, and teacher education courses simultaneously, as well as completing practice teaching placements. Drake and Katie were registered in or pursuing the consecutive education route. Drake, a white-settler, cisgender male was completing the fourth year of an undergraduate physical education degree and had applied to the B.Ed. program, while Katie, a white-settler, cisgender female, was in the second year of the B.Ed. program, having completed a four year degree with H&PE being her teachable subject. It should be noted that by self-selecting to participate in this research, participants were likely encouraged to participate in this research given some resonance with the topic.

Data Collection and Analysis

There were two primary data sources, both of which were generated during 2018: (a) three semi-structured individual interviews with each participant (for a total of twelve interviews), and (b) a document analysis of H&PE course syllabi from Briarwood University. We used these two specific forms of data collection in an attempt to triangulate claims made in the interviews with information from course syllabi. This can also bolster trustworthiness in our interpretations (Glesne, 2016).

² The university name (Briarwood) is a pseudonym, as are the names of the four research participants.

The three individual interviews with each of the four participants reflected a past, present and future approach. That is, the first interview focused on past experiences that might inform beliefs and practices regarding working with young LGBTQ people, the second addressed present experiences, and the third involved participants thinking about their future teaching practices. Through the interview process, rapport building was a fundamental aspect of this project (Jones et al., 2014) due to potentially sensitive subject matter, especially when examining participants' experiences with homophobic bullying in H&PE contexts. As such, promoting a sense of trust through active listening and non-judgmental questioning was vitally important, which provided more in-depth narratives from participants in response to the implementation of these strategies (Jones et al., 2014).

All interviews lasted approximately one hour. Transcripts were developed throughout the data collection process, which were shared with participants, who were asked if the transcript was an accurate reflection of their intended meaning in the interview, if they would like any changes to be made, or if they would like anything to be added in order to develop deeper narratives (Glesne, 2016). The transcripts were not verbatim in that pauses, inflections, 'ums and ahs', and so on were not transcribed. Furthermore, throughout the duration of the interview process, the first author worked with the participants to construct their experiences through an iterative process of interviewing, transcribing, and member checking. Specifically, member checking was done through the interview process by emailing the participants with a typed-transcript of each interview and asking if any changes needed to be made or if anything would like to be added, thus ensuring that the narratives represent what the participant(s) said, and allow the participant(s) to build upon the experiences and develop deeper narratives (Glesne, 2016; Jones et al., 2014). These narratives provided invaluable insight into understanding the phenomena of H&PE teachers' preparation and preparedness in working with LGBTQ youth.

In reference to document analysis, syllabi from 20 relevant courses (i.e., the syllabi were from courses participants had taken or would take in their program) were gathered from the Briarwood University website, where all course syllabi are publicly available. Courses were deemed relevant if they were "core" or "elective" courses in the participant's major area of study (i.e., physical education). This meant that "context" courses that could be taken in any department in the university were not included. Of those 20 courses, 10 had foci in kinesiology or physical education (such as sociology of sport and foundations of movement studies,), six were specific to teacher education (such as H&PE "methods" courses) and four were about general themes in education (such as diversity in education).

Data analysis was thematic and followed a modified version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, where a theme is defined as a recurring pattern in the data. The first phase required familiarization with the data, through reading and re-reading all interviews and course syllabi. The second phase involved coding key phrases that stood out as significant in relation to the research purpose/s. Phases three and four involved examining codes to identify connections within the data, while also making preliminary themes and separating those themes from one another. The fifth phase involved stating what was unique and specific about each theme; this resulted in collapsing themes that were not overly distinct. The sixth phase is the writing of the report, which appears in the next section. The syllabi analysis was completed by using keywords searches, utilizing the words "LGBTQ," "homophobia," "discrimination," and "sexuality" that would be searched for in the course syllabi from Briarwood University. These searches may offer degrees of support for participant statements about their pre-service teacher education experiences.

Results & Discussion

In this section we analyze and interpret the qualitative data gathered during the data collection process. The following two themes were generated from the analysis of participant data: (1) influence of beliefs shaped by prior experiences as school students, (2) influence of beliefs shaped by experiences as pre-service H&PE teachers.

The participants expressed a commitment to inclusive attitudes and practices for all students, including those who identify as LGBTQ. For example, Christian felt that inclusive practices would help ensure the safety of all students and was a priority for his future teaching practice; this general sentiment was echoed by most participants. There was also some tension in how inclusivity of the LGBTQ community was fostered. For instance, referring to the ways one could identify their gender and sexuality, Cole stated that “[the LGBTQ community] is going a little overboard with all the different sexualities and stuff.” While we did not interpret Cole’s overall belief system as prejudicial, it captures an unwillingness to accept the presence of multiple sexualities and, perhaps, the LGBTQ community as a whole. This could, in turn, have strong implications for how he would broach topics about gender and sexuality when teaching H&PE but also how we might interact with, for example, trans students. Cole’s profile as a white-settler, cisgender male who identifies as heterosexual may also contribute to a lack of understanding and empathy concerning issues faced in the LGBTQ community; a point raised elsewhere in discussing the lack of diversity in the H&PE field writ large (Douglas & Halas, 2013).

When asked what contributed to their attitudes about members of the LGBTQ community, most drew from personal experiences outside of formal educational contexts. For example, Katie spoke about her best friend’s sibling who identified as trans; she felt the relationship she developed with her friend and sibling led to increased awareness and empathy toward members of the LGBTQ community. Drake also drew from personal experience in speaking about family friends who attended the Toronto Pride Parade. He said:

I’ve had family friends who I’ve gone camping with every single summer since I was born and they would go to the Pride Parade in Toronto every single year so that was like the first introduction to what Pride was for the LGBTQ community... their descriptions of what the parade was... [They said] it was happy, expressive, non-judgmental.

Both Katie and Drake identified significant personal experiences as shaping their attitudes toward LGBTQ people and issues, and it was these two participants who were most willing to discuss topics about the LGBTQ community both in a personal sense and in the classroom.

Constructivist theories of learning suggest that personal experiences of learning and teaching inform how teachers learn about, view, and approach their roles as teachers (Richardson, 2005), and it was clear from the data that the influence of personal experience played a strong role in shaping teachers’ beliefs about LGBTQ students and serves as a prominent pattern or theme in the data. However, other strong influences on teachers’ beliefs include experiences of teaching while they were (a) school students themselves and (b) students in teacher education programs. In the following sections we present analysis according to those two main themes.

Influence of Beliefs Shaped by Experiences as School Students

Most participants described having few, if any, experiences of school H&PE that disrupted traditional assumptions about gender and sexuality. It was not felt that teachers attempted to disrupt power relations in the class (or in society more broadly), such as offering alternative activities that

did not contain hypermasculine qualities of power and performance that tend to dominate school H&PE programs (Finnessy, 2016; Nash & Browne, 2015). With hegemonic masculinity carrying immense social capital, any slight deviation from this ideal can lead to marginalization and scrutiny amongst peers (Block, 2014), particularly in the H&PE classroom, where such ideals are placed in the spotlight. As such, all participants noted how their elementary and secondary H&PE experiences reproduced traditional social norms relating to gender and sexuality, including hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and gender norms. For example, Katie felt that assumptions were reinforced about the arts being seen as feminine in nature, whereas H&PE was considered masculine. This was done through teachers offering, for example, activities in sex-segregated formats, privileging team-based competitive sports and games for boys' H&PE and artistic forms of H&PE for girls (e.g., dance), or not challenging discriminating language. Cole used the example of a comment such as “you throw like a girl” being left unchallenged by his peers or teachers, while Christian suggested any discipline from teachers about such issues was either weak or non-existent. The normalizing of these practices and statements manifested in participants recognizing that many of their school H&PE experiences perpetuated stereotypes and expectations according to gender and sexuality. It is encouraging, however, that, from their relative positions of privilege, all four research participants were critical of these types of experiences, adopting a feminist lens to their experiences of school H&PE to critique the structure of power relations. Yet, given the strength of prior school experiences on understandings of pedagogy, others may interpret these types of passive intervention as good or at least acceptable teaching practice if left unchallenged.

Participants also spoke about a general lack of attention being paid to topics related to gender and sexuality in H&PE, despite there being curricular outcomes in Ontario. For example, Drake stated:

In talking about [the] LGBTQ community and gender as a spectrum, we never ever did... you know transgender folks, we never covered that topic and I think that would be something that is monumental to cover – like much earlier than high school as well... So I feel like we could have got a lot more in depth with those topics.

Reiterating the power of personal experience, Katie explained that she drew far more from those experiences than formal learning experiences in school:

I had this kind of like street knowledge about what was happening in the gay community... but none of that was covered in class, so I can really only like put myself in the shoes of my best friends' siblings and think ‘wow’, like what were they going through at that time?

As fairly recent students in the Ontario education system (i.e., in the past 15 years), these comments from Drake and Katie raise questions about the ways in which Ontario's pupils are introduced to gender and sexuality topics. As Drake acknowledges, the passive pedagogy he experienced can leave students uneducated, unaware and ignorant of LGBTQ issues, despite outcomes related to these topics being present in policy documents set in the Ontario H&PE curriculum.

When asked why they felt their teachers tended to avoid teaching topics about gender and sexuality, or why they might reinforce rather than challenge assumptions, stereotypes and practices about gender and sexuality, participants theorized about connections between the personal and professional beliefs of their teachers. For example, some spoke of how professional judgment and teacher autonomy (which they were mostly in favour of), sometimes meant that important topics

and conversations were avoided. Cole recalled that in his high school H&PE classes he learned “a little bit of sex ed depending on the teacher and how comfortable they were teaching”. In this comment (and a similar one from Katie: “maybe my H&PE teacher wasn’t super comfortable with covering those topics”), Cole suggests his teachers would avoid in-depth lessons about sexual health or gender and sexuality in light of other topics they felt more comfortable to teach. Katie felt that teachers might be more apprehensive in dealing with sensitive subject matter, like LGBTQ issues, due to responses from members of the community, saying: “I think that [lack of LGBTQ education] comes a lot from people who are afraid of what the parents are going to say... You don’t want the backlash. So, people would just rather negate it and not talk about it.” In appeasing some stakeholders, it is clear that students’ learning is strongly affected, particularly when it comes to sensitive subjects. For example, in accommodation of certain religious beliefs, students in some contexts can be excused from lessons concentrating on sex education, growth and development and sexuality (Benn, Dagkas, & Jawad, 2011; Brenyo, 2016) – a policy being pushed by the current Ontario government. Decisions like this which are made to appease parents who vocally oppose these curriculum outcomes highlights how teachers may feel obliged to accommodate parents’ wishes. In turn, the opinions of parents can thus inform the opinions of teachers about what H&PE content is acceptable and what is not.

Some participants also felt that a lack of inclusionary practices for LGBTQ students may have stemmed from a false assumption that there were no LGBTQ students in their classes. For example, Katie believed that teachers tended to avoid LGBTQ issues due to a lack of visibility of these students in their classrooms: “a lot of teachers might not think that they have students that are part of the LGBTQ community.” Yet, Katie drew from a personal experience to challenge this perception, recalling:

[A unit focusing on the LGBTQ community] would have really comforted my friend, but also me because you know, I was there with my best friend at these times, like having all these questions [...] like what is that, what does that mean? And what is happening?

Landi (2018) cautions that when teachers rationalize their decisions based on these assumptions, it can perpetuate the idea of compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexism. Thus, in implicitly assuming there may be no LGBTQ pupils in their classes, H&PE teachers may continue to reinforce traditional assumptions about gender and sexuality. Being open to alternative interpretations about gender and sexuality, and assuming *there are* LGBTQ pupils in their classes could reduce ostracism these students face and begin to make the LGBTQ community and their rights more visible in H&PE and in schools.

One’s “social location” also plays an integral role in perpetuating low visibility of LGBTQ students in H&PE (Shields, 2008). For example, teachers who are mostly white-settler, cisgender males (as many in the H&PE profession are) may be more likely to follow status quo protocols, therefore leading to less disruption of societal norms and their presence in schools (Douglas & Halas, 2013). This dynamic is particularly relevant for pre-service teachers who are trying to “fly under the radar” and not stand out as challenging the status quo because of a perception that course and teaching evaluations may hinge upon “following the rules” and playing the role of a traditional teacher (Rossi, Sirna, & Tinning, 2008). Therefore, it can be especially difficult for beginning teachers to enact inclusive teaching practices when such assumptions are left unchallenged and there continue to be perceptions that alternative perspectives are not welcome in classrooms.

Influence of Beliefs Shaped by Experiences as Pre-service H&PE Teachers

When asked if they could recall any formal learning experiences about LGBTQ students or issues throughout their university courses (e.g., lessons or readings), participants recalled little, if any focus. For example, Cole stated:

I remember it was in second year ... There was either a lecture, but it might have only been half lecture on it... but [LGBTQ] was never focused on in lecture but maybe there should be lectures on it every semester.

Likewise, Katie could not remember a specific class focused on LGBTQ issues in any of her coursework, and, moreover, knew that her course textbooks contain information on this community but the instructor decided to focus on other content. This contrasted with Katie's desire to learn more about working with LGBTQ students:

I feel like we didn't have an entire lecture focused in on the LGBTQ community, which I really wish we did... How are you going to deal with students who might be a minority in your classroom?

Christian also noted that he had not taken any equity or diversity-based classes, despite wanting to: "I don't really think we've taken any equity or diversity [courses]... we should actually... for sure. I'm hoping we do that in teachers' college". The syllabi analysis showed one teacher education course that focused on diversity and equity in schooling, and we find it surprising that Christian (who was enrolled in a concurrent education program) had not taken this type of course prior to the fifth year of their degree. It may be that he ended up taking this course following our data collection.

In general, all felt there was a lack of formal learning experiences focusing on the LGBTQ community in H&PE. Analysis of course syllabi at Briarwood University provides some support for this assertion, with 16/20 (80%) not featuring any of the keywords we used (i.e., LGBTQ, homophobia, discrimination and sexuality). Furthermore, when looking at kinesiology and H&PE courses specifically, only 20% (2/10) of these courses had one or more keywords in their syllabi. When looking at general education courses, no (0/4) syllabi possessed a keyword while 33% (2/6) of teacher education syllabi possessing at least one keyword. Although this analysis was not exhaustive, it provides provisional corroboration for some of the participants' claims regarding a lack of inclusion of LGBTQ topics, issues and pedagogies in their pre-service teacher education courses. Although there are likely salient differences from institution to institution, these findings support claims by Douglas and Halas (2013), who found that gender and sexuality issues were addressed the least in analyses of syllabi approved by the Canadian Council of Physical Education and Kinesiology Administrators (CCUPEKA).

As with their teachers, participants felt teacher educators also may have avoided gender and sexuality topics due to perceived discomfort. For example, Cole noted the autonomy teacher educators and other professors have to include or exclude particular topics: "it depends on the Prof's focus." Katie also noted the perceived level of comfort of teacher educators:

I feel that we aren't yet in the place of teaching LGBTQ rights and opening up that conversation [...] into our classrooms or where we in teacher education are getting that background to open up that conversation, so I think it comes from a place of... we're not like necessarily comfortable with it because our instructors are uncomfortable with it.

As well as suggesting discomfort from teacher educators, several participants felt that certain marginalized groups (e.g., LGBTQ, First Nation, Metis and Inuit [FNMI] Peoples, or those with disabilities) were given preferential treatment over others in pre-service teacher education courses.

They suggested this was partially due to the particular course or the preference of the teacher educator, but also to decisions and policies made by governments, and uptake of those in the media and society. For example, Katie stated:

I think [lack of focus on LGBTQ education] comes from a place of there's not enough time to go over everything in teacher's college and I think you know what we go over at large is what we are told to go over from a governmental perspective.

Katie commented that FNMI-based strategies were taught far more than those that focus on including LGBTQ students: “We haven't really had the time to go over [LGBTQ] in specifics, which is too bad because we do talk about you know, FNMI [based learning] for weeks on end”. Cole also notes how inclusion was a focus in some of his H&PE classes in university, but in disability studies:

I've learned a lot about inclusion for physical education [contexts]... including individuals with disabilities, but aside from that not really any inclusion like strategies or anything... but not anything related to LGBTQ.

This is not to discount or critique the need for a renewed emphasis on FNMI or disability issues but highlights ways in which issues affecting some marginalized groups are at times emphasized over others, at least from the perspective of the research participants. However, it also shows that pre-service teacher education programs may not be doing enough to demonstrate and inform pre-service teachers' understanding about the intersectionality of members of marginalized groups. Such an understanding may lead to better pedagogical development concerning, for example, ways inclusive strategies and approaches aimed at members of one community can be introduced, enacted, and adapted for members of other communities.

At a time when matters of gender and sexuality were at the forefront of the provincial government's education policy reform, Katie's comments about the role of governmental agendas are informative, particularly in how such decisions can shape the formal learning experiences in pre-service teacher education. Similarly, Cole said:

With what the government's doing now... taking [the updated H&PE curriculum] away... I disagree with that completely. I just find from a young age that stuff needs to be talked about or else it's not going to be addressed, and people are going to go on, like the [next] generation and be so biased because they had no education on it.

In general, participants did not feel confident about teaching LGBTQ students in H&PE and, beyond the use of reflective approaches to analyzing their practices, could not articulate specific pedagogical approaches and strategies they had learned in their pre-service teacher education experience that they would use in the classroom. For example, when asked how they might respond to homophobic bullying, their responses were mostly vague. For example, Christian initially stated that “he didn't know”. While he acknowledged that the safety of all students was crucial, he was not able to describe any specific strategies to prevent or address this type of situation.

Both Drake and Katie asserted that their university experiences have not provided them with learning experiences to help them support LGBTQ students, and more intentional and specific experiences are required. Drake said: “I don't think [Briarwood University] has done a good enough job providing holistic answers [to LGBTQ issues]”. Similarly, Katie said:

I don't think I'm prepared... I think that this is where I wonder... how do I unpack this in a classroom of like, you know, grade four or five students in maybe under a health topic or even just unpacking it in everyday situations?

As a result, Drake acknowledged how he had turned to other experiences and sources to learn how to include LGBTQ students, stating: “As a university student, learning how to include [the

LGBTQ] community has mostly come from actually being involved in teaching youth at summer camps”. Likewise, Katie explained how she was informally researching how to use correct pronouns when working/communicating with transgender individuals, something that was not learned through her formal education.

From our experiences, while we can attest to broad advocacy and inclusion of courses and other learning experiences related to inclusive pedagogy and equity in pre-service teacher education programs, data from these participants suggest that more specificity in how to work with the particular needs, interests and backgrounds of members of marginalized communities is strongly needed, particularly, in this case, those that support members of the LGBTQ community.

Conclusions

The purposes of this research were to: (a) explore and interpret pre-service H&PE teachers’ beliefs and experiences of learning to teach LGBTQ students, and (b) examine pre-service H&PE teachers’ abilities to articulate pedagogical strategies to support inclusion of LGBTQ students in H&PE classrooms. Teachers’ beliefs and feminist theory offered theoretical frames through which to analyze and interpret the data. Our findings suggest these participants held mostly accepting beliefs about LGBTQ students in their classrooms, with some demonstrating initiative to learn more about and advocate for members of this population. These findings also support the work conducted by Kitchen and Bellini (2012), who found that many pre-service teachers were comfortable discussing LGBTQ issues (to a point). While such accepting views are somewhat comforting, feminist theorists might describe these views as liberal rather than radical, where a main aim is to promote tolerance and acceptance rather than deconstruction of societal structures and systems. Given the prevalence of heteronormative and masculine ideals in much of what continues to be done in H&PE, this analysis suggests that radical reforms are perhaps in greater need than previously.

An important finding was that many participants often referred to experiences with members of the LGBTQ community outside of rather than from within school contexts. When school experiences were referred to, they tended to be about things that were not done or that were done poorly rather than well. Moreover, most participants were openly critical about the lack of formal learning experienced in their pre-service teacher education regarding LGBTQ students, both in general terms and in specific reference to H&PE. In this way, the findings are similar to those of McCaughtry, Dillion, Jones, and Smigell (2005), who point out that while many pre-service H&PE teachers typically demonstrate accepting views regarding the LGBTQ community, the result of a lack awareness or experience in working with the issues, may mean that they struggle to enact their beliefs in teaching practice. While many demonstrate accepting belief systems they often lack the experience or repertoire of pedagogical skills and language to put these beliefs into practice.

This research provides insight into what pre-service teacher education programs may be able to do to improve opportunities for their teachers to better understand working with LGBTQ students. Specifically, the results suggest a need for pre-service teachers to be given more meaningful and practical experiences to work with LGBTQ students, informed by strong theoretical and empirical research. This research builds upon findings by Kitchen and Bellini (2012) as well as Clark (2010), who found that general pre-service teachers are lacking in their preparation to integrate LGBTQ students into their classrooms, but we extend these findings by focusing specifically on H&PE in schools.

One approach that H&PE teacher educators may wish to use is an activist approach to teaching girls in H&PE (Oliver & Kirk, 2017). Oliver and Kirk (2017) call for teachers to embrace the “feminist ethic of risk,” and, moreover, take “this risk as a willingness to take small steps towards transforming oppressive practices even though complete change seems or is improbable” (p. 315). Larsson, Quennerstedt, and Ohman (2014) also described a situation where a teacher actively confronted heteronormativity in the H&PE classroom following students challenging male and female roles in traditional forms of folkdance. Instead of the teacher stating “we do it this way because it’s always been done this way”, the teacher reflected with the class that “one does not have to dance boy and girl... It’s my heterosexual norm that haunts me here” (Larsson et al., 2014, p. 16). Presenting these situations as critical incidents or pedagogical cases (whether actual or hypothetical) could support pre-service teachers in thinking through these types of scenarios and developing specific approaches they could integrate into their developing practice.

With the continued prevalence of homophobic bullying in Canadian schools, teachers need to be well prepared to provide inclusive learning environments for all students (Mitton-Kukner, Kearns, & Tompkins, 2016). This research comes at a time of ongoing political and societal challenges to the human rights of people from marginalized communities, such as those in the LGBTQ community; challenges that have implications for their educational experience, as well as to their overall health and well-being, sense of identity, and feelings of belonging in society at large. It also comes amidst calls to renew a social justice agenda in H&PE research (Robinson & Randall, 2016; Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018), and to offer more attention to LGBTQ issues in H&PE in order to better meet the diverse needs of all learners in contemporary schools. While we feel that improvements have been made in how all students in H&PE are included, there is need to go beyond designing lessons and activities that promote maximum participation (as opposed to, for example, elimination games). While these approaches are certainly welcomed, because H&PE is often a time and place for many LGBTQ students where harassment and bullying occur, this research suggests that far more needs to be done to provide strong and powerful experiences for pre-service teachers, particularly those who are becoming H&PE teachers. H&PE teacher education programs not only need to offer time and space for pre-service teachers to discuss and learn about issues related to gender and sexuality, they need opportunities to engage with specific experiences, and develop tools and strategies that enable them to enact not only inclusive, but also anti-oppressive pedagogies so that all students whom they teach are exposed to empowering and meaningful experiences in H&PE.

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³ Following the history of much of her work, throughout the manuscript we use the same lower-case lettering to cite and reference bell hooks.

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