

K–12 Methods: Physical Education

This module focuses on 2SLGBTQ+-expansive content related to physical education. You may also be interested in consulting the [Health module](#), as these areas are connected through their focus on various aspects of bodily health and physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

What does it mean to queer teaching methods courses on physical education and health content areas?

Queering approaches to physical education and health more broadly can take a variety of forms, from basic inclusive practices to enacting queer pedagogies to expand conceptions of physical activity, health, and wellbeing by questioning normative assumptions about physical education and health pedagogy. It is important to recognize that 2SLGBTQ+-expansive education in health and physical education is more than simply including accurate content about 2SLGBTQ+ health and identities—though these are vital practices and should include gender-expansive material of trans, nonbinary, and intersex bodies and that affirms 2SLGBTQ+ identities in every aspect of health curriculum. Queering approaches also mean challenging heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions about physical activity, what the goals of physical education are, and who feels able to participate—as well as prompting teacher candidates to reflect on their misconceptions and feelings about 2SLGBTQ+ identities and content in physical education curriculum.

Physical education often relies on gender binaries, from gendered change rooms to gendered team sports, which either contribute to unsafe environments for 2SLGBTQ+ people or reinforce essentializing narratives regarding gender/sexuality. These gendered divisions are also often embedded in the management of physical space, such as arbitrarily separating boys and girls for scheduled practice times, and the organization of activities, such as gender-based team sports, which can equate to a form of preferential treatment or structural sexism that is built into athletic venues, programs, and environments. Physical education also centres the body and its performance within PE's subject matter, which can make physical education an alienating and uncomfortable space for many 2SLGBTQ+ people. Creating designated times and spaces reserved for students who are marginalized on the basis of gender and sexual identities may help alleviate discomfort for 2SLGBTQ+ students. Ensuring 2SLGBTQ+ (including trans, intersex, and nonbinary) people are able to participate fully, readily, and safely involves providing a safe space but also requires questioning the aims and goals of PE to develop 2SLGBTQ+-expansive practices in physical education to ensure that the enjoyment and pleasure of physical activity is accessible to everyone, not predicated on superior performance, elite competition, or gendered expectations.

Why do we need to do this?

- *Homo/bi/transphobic attitudes persist in many physical education settings and many 2SLGBTQ+ feel unsafe in change rooms and gendered spaces and during activities* (Ayazo & Sutherland, 2009; Hutton, 2017; Taylor & Peter et al., 2011). Generally, unsafe

spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students are associated with “gendered” spaces, such as washrooms or change rooms, where there is more attention paid to bodies and who is allowed to enter those spaces, which results in gender policing behaviours and greater surveillance of bodies.

- *Sport is often reliant on gender binaries for organization (e.g., girls team, boys team) and beliefs about gender norms are often reinforced by attitudes about gender in sport activities (e.g., physical skills are masculinized [Block, 2014; Gard, 2002; King, 2008; Landi, 2018]; women athletes are called “lesbians” in a derogatory way regardless of sexual orientation because of their physical excellence [Krane, 1997 cited in Ayazo & Sutherland, 2009]).*
- *Physical education emphasizes a focus on the body as its subject matter, centring fitness, ability, sport skills, and athletic performance (e.g., running, kicking, throwing, dancing). This increased attention on the body can be uncomfortable for students who are questioning their identity or whose bodies do not align with dominant norms (e.g., intersex, trans, or gender nonconforming bodies; not thin; those with physical disabilities)—and this increased attention, often framed by competition, can open students up to criticism and judgement from peers, potential abuse, and may cause others to simply question any claim to “normality” (or belonging) among students (Gard, 2002).*
- *Medical/scientific discourse is commonly accepted as the dominant, objectively “accurate” framing for physical education; challenging this monolithic, singular understanding of health as being contingent on fitness and diet health regimes, is important to queering physical education. In emphasizing primarily scientific discourse of health (where health is understood as a product of fitness and a “sound” diet), other forms of knowledge about health and other ways of promoting and understanding health/activity are devalued (Gard, 2002; Landi, 2018; Sykes, 2011b). This has implications for discussions about “acceptable” body types and sizes, how gender is regarded in physical education, and how physical education curriculum is understood as applying for students. For instance, Wright (1996) emphasizes the links between a rationalist, scientized understanding of health and physical education, pointing out how current dominant conceptions of fitness and sport skills reinforce a “masculinized” culture/tradition of physical fitness (e.g., building character, toughness, achieving patriarchal body ideals such as being thin and fit and physically strong).*
- *Even when queer theorization of sport is taken up, it often relies on homonormative politics, which erases racializing forces, reaffirms whiteness, and still relies on gender divisions in sport as a major organizing principle (e.g., King, 2008, 2009; McDonald, 2006).*

How do we do it?

- *Provide comprehensive and accurate information about 2SLGBTQ+ experiences in physical education and utilize approaches for queering physical education. This approach is fundamental to the ones that follow. Giving teacher candidates opportunities to read research about and approaches to ensuring 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion in sport and physical*

education is a key intervention (e.g., Cauldwell, 2014; Gard, 2002; King, 2008; Landi et al., 2020; Sykes, 2011b).

- *Ensure physical education is a safe space for 2SLGBTQ+ students*, including change rooms areas, team sports, and classroom instruction/activities. PE teacher education is a key intervention point to break the cycles of homonegativity/transnegativity, homophobia/transphobia, and cissexism/heterosexism in schools (Ayazo & Sutherland, 2009; Greenspan, Griffith, et al., 2019; Greenspan, Whitcomb, & Griffith, 2019; Kulick et al., 2018), especially in spaces where many queer and trans persons report feeling least safe (such as change rooms). Interventions that ensure safety, such as countering homophobia in PE classes (Sykes, 2004) or ensuring that 2SLGBTQ+ students can participate fully and readily in PE activities, is a necessary first step. This means expecting trans and non binary students to be in class; ensure there are practices in place and lesson plans are always underway in every PE class that are inclusive of trans and nonbinary students—so that they do not become exceptions to be accommodated, a "crisis" to adapt to, or have to ask where they belong. Regardless of whether a student has disclosed to the teacher or not, PE class should be a place where 2SLGBTQ+ students feel they belong and know where they can change and how they can participate.
 - *Ensure safe changeroom options for nonbinary or trans individuals.* Change rooms, locker rooms, and washrooms are commonly reported to be unsafe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ people, often because they are highly gendered spaces that are under-supervised or out of the sightline of teachers. It may be beneficial for teacher candidates to think about what their responsibilities are in this regard, including how teachers can “supervise” these spaces. It would also be beneficial to ensure that every student has access to safe changing spaces (whether single-stall change rooms or students are given access to gender-neutral washrooms); making access to appropriate change rooms contingent on disclosures of sexual/gender identity, or disclosures of harassment they are experiencing, makes access to safety and belonging contingent on students taking a risk—as requiring students to disclose gender non-conforming identities may not be something they are ready for or wish to do. (There may also be benefits in allowing other students to use these safe changing areas as homophobic, biphobic, transphobic harassment often occurs for non-2SLGBTQ+ students or for students based on body size, gender expression, or other grounds.)
 - *Seek to create 2SLGBTQ+ welcoming spaces in physical education to counter the experiences of bullying, discrimination, and exclusion that often occur in school athletic settings.* This may entail professional development or input from school mental health specialists (Greenspan, Whitcomb, & Griffith, 2019).
- *Ensure that people who have trans or nonbinary genders are not singled out or given conflicting messages about how they ought/are able to participate in class or in team/school-wide sport.* Attending to gender identity is very important here, but gender expression (e.g., nonconforming dress or behaviours) is also a key consideration, especially when looking at overt gender policing behaviours and subtler forms of gender normativizing attitudes and discourses that reinforce gender stereotypes or promote

gender conformity (e.g., conceptions of women athletes as being “lesbians” because of gendered bias against women’s physicality; conflation of physical fitness with masculinity; gender policing through harassment or comments about performance).

- *Reorient physical education practices to be accepting of 2SLGBTQ+ bodies, gender non-conformity, and different types of bodies.* Physical education takes “the body” and physical activity/performance as its subject matter, often placing emphasis for successful student activity and social inclusion on regulating and performing according to assumed social norms about gender, weight, and skills proficiency. As Gard (2002) argues, it is “physical education’s focus on the body that makes it a significant site for the construction of gendered identities” (p. 51). Challenge teacher candidates to question normative assumptions about gender binaries and consider how gender expression and gendered bodies are regulated through “performance” discourses (either along lines of masculine/feminine performance or within the heterosexuality matrix). Have teacher candidates think about ways that physical education is complicit in reinforcing cisnormativity and heteronormativity.
 - Prompt teacher candidates to critically reflect on the aims of physical education and the implicit assumption of health as being an absolute outcome of fitness. Not all bodies look, perform, or function the same—and different bodies may respond differently to activity or diet. Practices based on the “absolutes” presented through a scientific-medical model of health are not unchanging or absolute, but reflect dominant views about what bodies are *acceptable*. Prompting teacher candidates to reflect on what healthy living looks like, what healthy eating is, and what a “fit” body looks like can be an opportunity to interrogate how 2SLGBTQ+ bodies are regulated, how racialization and ableism are reinforced, and the ways that physical health and mental wellbeing can be connected.
 - Challenge ways of thinking about bodies that conflate health solely with fitness, body size, or gendered performance/athleticism. Placing fitness and health outside the body, as a goal beyond students’ reach to be attained, reinforces negative self-image and may contribute to body dissatisfaction and reinforce dominant, harmful conceptions of bodies.
 - Confront social normativities and discourses about what the goal of physical education is, and challenge gendered conceptions of activity (e.g., dancing or aerobics are feminine, rugby or coordination are more masculine).
 - As Sykes suggests, “To challenge cisgender privilege and transphobia requires questioning the value placed on masculine ways of moving, acknowledging the arbitrariness of organizing students’ bodies and teaching approaches according to two gender categories only, and creating gender-neutral locker rooms and gymnasias as spaces for bodily privacy and sensitivity” (2011a, p. 21).
- *Challenge binary divisions of gender in sports.* Avoid binary gender divisions in physical education that reinforce normative assumptions about gender (such as, “boys are doing Activity A and girls are doing Activity B”). Avoid using gendered language to address students or that presumes binary distinctions (e.g., avoid “okay ladies” or “hey guys” and

opt for more inclusive language such as “okay athletes” or “hey Grade 8s”). Consider ways of dividing your class into teams or groups to participate, such as creating teams based on skill level, competitive drive, or familiarity with the sport (e.g., put those that have played before and are familiar with the “rules” in one group and those that haven’t in another group; put those that are on the school team in one group and those that aren’t in another; put students who are highly competitive together and those who are playing for fun or less fixed on the outcome together); pay attention, move students around, and encourage students to enjoy the activity (and be responsive when they don’t).

- Integrate team sports and remove gender binary divisions from sports in your classrooms, intermural activities, and, if possible, inter-school sporting events. Rather, give attention to ability, aptitude, and skill development in organizing teams (e.g., Hutton, 2017). From an early age, sport is often divided between men’s/boys’ divisions and women’s/girls’ divisions which reinforces the gender binary and constructs essentialist discourses about the “inherent” differences between men and women (e.g., men are stronger or inherently more skilled). The attitudes underlying these divisions also lead to privileging of men as being more capable athletes with more potential, which contributes to the material prioritization of men/boys for receiving extra attention, specialized coaching, or other attention to develop as athletes. In this privileging of men, the athleticism and accomplishments of women athletes are discounted and systemically invalidated by being treated as secondary. And beyond these issues, gender binary divisions imply that trans and nonbinary athletes have no place or need “special” accommodations to be involved in PE/physical activity.
- *Note:* An important part of this curriculum will involve teacher candidates reflecting on their own misconceptions, attitudes, and biases regarding inherent differences between men and women; encouraging self-reflection and taking up conversations that critically interrogate beliefs about gender, athletic performance, and misgivings about what mixed gender sports/teams involve. Prompt reflection on why removing gender divisions from sport makes people uncomfortable or upset.
- *Know about policies at the school/district or provincial/territorial level that inform trans and nonbinary participants’ right to participate in sport, and critically discuss with teacher candidates how these policies are implemented or not, what their limitations are, how they might subvert or reinforce cisnormative gender assumptions, and how they might better address 2SLGBTQ+ students’ needs. Addressing personal attitudes and misconceptions about trans and nonbinary people will likely be involved in these approaches, both for teacher candidates and in talking about how these policies may be recognized (or not) among staff in individual school contexts (e.g., principals, other teachers, parents) and school districts (e.g., superintendents, inclusive education coordinators).*
 - Ensure policies are in place that allow students to participate in sport in their affirmed gender; these may need to be addressed at the school district or provincial/territorial level, but it is vital work in ensuring that 2SLGBTQ+ students can participate in physical education equitably. Include content that looks critically at what policies exist locally at the school, district, and provincial/territorial or regional

levels. Identify gaps in policy or places where there are inequitable provisions that may limit trans or nonbinary students' participation, or push them into uncomfortable or harmful situations.

- Discuss the “limitations” of policy and the need for implementation that addresses misconceptions or biases that might contribute to harmful participation. For example, if a policy allows a trans student to participate on the team of their affirmed gender, the attitudes and reception of teammates or opposing players might make this a harmful, dangerous, or unwelcome space. This is a necessary factor in addressing inequity in physical education—and teacher candidates should be prepared to address problematic behaviours and work toward social inclusion among student peers.
- *Recognize the harmful discourses that threaten 2SLGBTQ+ people in physical education and work to shift discourses about what constitutes knowledge in and the educational aims of physical education.* Challenge medical-scientific approaches to physical education that conflate exercise or physical activity with fitness or that make weight loss and body regulation an indicator of health.
 - Physical education is shaped by heteronormative, gendered practices that have created spaces that are often homo/bi/transphobic and heterosexist (e.g., Ayvazo & Sutherland, 2009; King, 2008; Landi, 2018). Sport scholars have also pointed out the ways that dominant discourses reinforce whiteness and masculinity, neglecting to interrogate positions of privilege and normativity in sport (e.g., King, 2008, 2009; McDonald, 2006; Sykes, 2006). Disrupting these narratives and shifting the discourses by altering our ways of speaking about sport, health, and physical education are key to challenging oppressive norms regarding gender, sexuality, racialization, and ability.
 - Discourses of “healthism” that treat physical education purely as a scientific-medical enterprise reinforce a masculinized/gendered approach to physical education; even framings that rely on games (and winning), skill development, character-building attitudes, or the inherent worth of exercise in and of itself can reinforce oppressive gender regimes and power dynamics (see Gard, 2002; Landi, 2018; Sykes, 2011b). Rather, physical education can affirm pleasure in activity, challenge sexism and homophobia, resist the temptation to conflate “thinness” with fitness (and, relatedly, attractiveness or acceptability), and validate “forms of physical activity that are playful, spontaneous, and incidental” (Gard, 2002, p. 56). As bodies are treated as the main topic of and site of instruction for physical education, seeking to shift our discursive approaches to physical education in order to ensure that sexual and gender diversity (as embodied subjectivities) are affirmed is central to ensuring that students feel safe and benefit from physical education (Gard, 2002).
- *Queer approaches to physical education, including challenging performance-based competition and competitive attitudes in physical activity.* Queering physical education means challenging the dominant, normative, and accepted body of knowledge that is traditionally assumed to comprise phys ed instruction; scholars point out that physical

education is often dominated by medicalized notions of health and fitness wherein scientific knowledge is applied to an unproblematized understanding of adherence to fitness “best practices” as necessarily resulting in good health for students (Gard, 2002; Landi, 2018). These discourses simplify complex and multifaceted issues of health and assume a universalistic application of scientific, medicalized knowledge, which does not always work for students and has the potential to alienate, construct one acceptable image of what a healthy body should look like, and remove the “pleasure and affective experience” of physical education (Landi, 2018, p. 5).

- Centring physical education on competition, even implicitly, focuses on skill-based performance outcomes rather than encouraging physical activity or recognizing the inherent pleasure in activity. Games that even implicitly value “winning,” or that rely on winning as an indicator of successful participation, communicate that winning is the most important value in physical activity and that successful participation hinges on it, which can marginalize students and ultimately compromise the aims of physical education. Further, the “public” nature of performing athletic acts during class and in front of peers can bring unwanted attention to 2SLGBTQ+ students and bodies. Just because teachers are not evaluating students based on their abilities does not mean their peers aren’t (e.g., having students choose teams can lead to students excluding one another as “undesirable” based on their performance; students excluding those who are not deemed being worth having on their team; feeding competitive framings by reinforcing winning as the main value in activity discourages students from learning new skills or from participating when they do not feel adept). Even seemingly innocuous activities like fitness tests and their accompanying measures can contribute to students’ competitive attitudes and behaviours, as well as reinforcing notions of acceptable/ideal bodies. Reorienting physical education to encourage pleasure in and the enjoyment of activity has the potential to shift attention away from performance-based indicators to ones that encourage participation and play. As Landi (2018) argues, this has the potential to shift beyond a focus on “making kids healthy or skilled” (though these are important educational objectives), to affirming these in ways that “allow students to affirm their subjective experiences and develop activities and movements that are suited for all students” (p. 12).
- Have teacher candidates consider how their own sexual orientation and gender identity impact discussions of physical education and physical health (e.g., Ayazo & Sutherland, 2009, discuss phys ed teachers’ strategies for “managing” their own sexual and gender identity in classes; Landi, 2018, provides an autoethnographic account of his experience as a physical education teacher and links it to a queer-inclusive physical education). Prompting teachers to reflect on their own views on what health, wellness, and fitness look like—and how they are achieved—can prompt teacher candidates to interrogate the dominant paradigms of education. Further, encourage teachers to consider the materiality and subjectivity inherent in physical education, including what types of bodies are valued or held up as exemplars of health and fitness—e.g., how 2SLGBTQ+ bodies and persons appear or are talked about, racialization of fitness and bodies, fatphobia and medicalization

in health and fitness, how colonial and hierarchical relationships structure sports and organize knowledge about health, and so on. For example, we might prompt teacher candidates to consider how their own experiences impact the ways they teach phys ed. Do they rely on a “technocratic” or scientific understanding of the body and what constitutes fitness? Do they rely on competition as a motivator for activity (and do they assume this is a universal motivator)? Do they emphasize the pleasurable or affective experiences of activity? (Gard, 2002; Landi, 2018).

Teaching Activities

- *Challenge heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions about health and fitness.* Prompt students to think about how physical education works to reinforce gender binaries and heteronormativities. Have students read an article about queering physical education (such as Gard, 2002; King, 2008; Landi, 2018; Landi et al., 2020; McDonald, 2006; Sykes, 2006) and critically take up the article’s arguments through practical application and/or development of teaching/lesson plans and units. How do these activities work to challenge gender and sexuality norms? How might we develop phys ed as a safer space for 2SLGBTQ people?
 - Discuss the need for gender-affirming spaces to change and ensure that teacher candidates understand why they are needed to ensure trans and nonbinary students (even if they aren’t “out”) feel safe. Talk about how physical education teachers can have these conversations and advocate for creating these spaces with their administrators.
 - *Be proactive, not reactive.* Teachers do not need to wait for 2SLGBTQ+ students to be “visible” before they start making changes, as that places the onus on individual students to request changes and disclose their identity, which they may not be ready to do or feel safe to do yet; rather, teachers can enact changes to structures and systems in advance to support 2SLGBTQ+ students.
 - *Challenge the gendering of team sports.* For a practical skills activity, challenge students to organize teams in ways other than gender binary divisions of boys and girls. Sport often relies on gender binary divisions as a core organizing principle, so even if classroom activities are not organized this way, school teams often are. Prompt teacher candidates to come up with other methods/strategies for dividing class or school-based team sports. For instance, divide students by their understanding of the sport/activity or create groups based on ability/skills or competitive attitudes, as this will help ensure that all students are able to play at their level and decrease chances that individuals will be judged by their peers about their abilities; other strategies may rely more on “arbitrary” divisions, such as creating groups based on birth month or height.
- *Develop practical skills and strategies to intervene in homo/bi/transphobic harassment, and demonstrate how to develop 2SLGBTQ+ welcoming classrooms.* Research has shown that physical education spaces are considered by many 2SLGBTQ+ students to

be unsafe spaces (Greenspan, Griffith, et al., 2019; Kulick et al., 2018) and often homophobic/transphobic language is used as a way to regulate behaviour, police identities, and confer validation of people's abilities and physical performance (Ayazo & Sutherland, 2009; Kulick et al., 2018). Teacher candidates need to understand how these discourses work to regulate 2SLGBTQ+ people and have opportunities to develop concrete strategies and plans for how to address homonegative and transnegative language and attitudes.

- *Emphasizing pleasure and enjoyment in physical activity.* Many games and activities rely on competition as an organizing principle; challenging competitive understandings of sport and game playing can help to reinforce the learning and pleasure aspects of trying new activities and sports. The unstated, unquestioned assumption that competition is a core component of physical activity—with clear winners and losers or high performers and low performers, even while telling students fun and enjoyment are the most important things—can be very confusing and create discord among students (as some are competitive and some are not). Rather, reorienting activities and games around non-competitive principles and emphasizing pleasure in physical activity can help students take pleasure in their bodies—rather than develop shame or negative feelings about it.
 - Have teacher candidates develop non-competitive activities or restructure games in a way that shifts away from performance-based indicators of “successful” participation. Have students think about how to play a traditional sport, such as basketball or soccer, while addressing/resisting the compulsion toward competition. This may involve developing activities where teamwork is needed to accomplish a goal or to develop a skill with one another (without risk of failure or penalty, or in affirming different skills/abilities or modes of competition).
 - Prompt students to engage in self-reflexive exercises about this. For instance, ask students to reflect on their own enjoyment in sport or physical activity, and challenge them to consider whether it is because they enjoy competition, perform well, and/or have certain skills, aptitudes, or abilities.
 - Interrogate how the body is centrally figured in physical education. Ask students to consider how physical education may be experienced differently by different types of students or by those who are trans, nonbinary, gender non-conforming, or intersex; fat or overweight; disabled or have movement restrictions; and so on.
- *Land-based physical education.* Introduce conversations about land-based education as a way to engage in physical education. For instance, invite Indigenous or Two-Spirit guest speakers to talk about land-based pedagogies and ways that phys ed can occur using these principles; organize a field trip or weekend land-based excursion that connects to the local/regional curriculum.

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