

Factors Affecting the Experiences of LGBT Students in Physical Education and Sport  
A Synthesis of the Research Literature

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### Abstract

The purpose of this synthesis was to examine the existing body of knowledge on factors affecting LGBT students' participation in physical education and athletics. Previous research identified low levels of participation by the LGBT population in physical education and interscholastic athletics. The studies reviewed within the critical mass yielded factors which either encouraged or discouraged LGBT students and athletes to participate in physical education and athletics. The climate and environment, presence of interventions, safe spaces and openly "out" teammates were noted as factors which affected participation. While previous research notes that society has created a discriminatory environment for LGBT students and athletes, further research is needed to determine the necessary implications to address this issue. Future research should examine the effects of suggested interventions on the LGBT population.

*Keywords:* [LGBT youth, physical education, coaching, negative factors, positive factors]

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## Factors Affecting the Experiences of LGBT Students in Physical Education and Sport

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students are a population that is often marginalized based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBT youth experience challenges in many aspects of their lives, particularly in school. The Gay, Straight and Lesbian Education Network (GLSEN) commissioned a school climate survey that revealed participants had experienced high levels of anti- LGBT discrimination and maltreatment in the school setting (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danisckewski, 2016). LGBT youth are more likely to report harassment and assault within schools, and face daily challenges that are unique to the LGBT population. Nearly 60% of LGBT students who participated in this study reported feeling unsafe at school because of sexual orientation. Over 85% of the participants reported experiencing verbal harassment at school, and more than a quarter reported physical harassment. Nearly every respondent (over 98%) reported hearing the use of the word gay as a slur or negative statement at school. These statistics demonstrate the negative climate many LGBT youth experience at school.

The challenges faced by LGBT youth extend to experiences in physical education (P.E.) class and interscholastic sports teams. According to GLSEN (2013), over half of LGBT students who took P.E. courses in the past year reported being harassed or bullied during P.E. because of their sexual orientation. Only 23% of LGBT students participated on interscholastic sports teams, and just 6% of them reported serving as a team captain or other leadership role (GLSEN, 2013). Many students do not feel safe or welcome enough to attempt to participate in athletics. Nearly four in every ten LGBT students (39%) reported avoiding locker rooms in general, based on discomfort and mistreatment

(GLSEN, 2013). Lack of participation in physical activity deprives LGBT students of the benefits, which include positive impact on “physical health, self-esteem, and connectedness to schools” (GLSEN, 2013, p. 1). Being aware of and knowledgeable about the negative occurrences reported by a high number of LGBT youth is crucial for physical educators to understand the experiences of these students. Based on these survey results, there appears to be a climate and culture issue drawing the LGBT youth population away from physical education and sport, which points to the need to address this issue.

It is very important for teachers and coaches to determine what they need to alter or eliminate from their everyday actions which discourage LGBT students from participating in physical activity (PA) altogether, and what actions need to be taken or continued which are positive and do encourage participation for this population. There is not a great deal of research on the topic of LGBT youths’ participation in physical education and athletics, as the research is still emerging and relatively new. However, the research that has been conducted to date can provide guidance to physical educators.

Using the critical mass of literature on this topic, I will explore what positive factors have been determined to keep LGBT students engaged in physical education and in athletics, as well as what negative factors have discouraged these students and their participation. This information will inform recommendations for how physical educators can better meet the needs of LGBT students in their classroom and on teams. The factors that are explored in this paper encompass interactions with other players or classmates and coaches, the presence of other LGBT students/athletes, and instances of

microaggressions. This analysis will encompass the LGBT population as a single group, and will not narrow its scope down to just portions of the population. The research reviewed will focus on physical education and athletics for high school and college students and athletes. As I have searched for research studies to include in this analysis, I have focused on studies that not only yield evidence of positive or negative factors affecting participation, but also those that provide solutions or suggestions for either implementing these methods or approaches, or steps towards avoiding factors which decrease participation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this synthesis is to explore factors that affect participation in physical education and athletics for high school and college age LGBT students. LGBT students exhibit low levels of participation, and this synthesis seeks to identify ways to increase participation and/or improve experiences in physical activity.

### **Operational Definitions**

The following operational definitions are used in this paper:

1. LGBT – “An umbrella term referring to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender” (GLSEN, 2016, p. 41)
2. Participation – the joining of a sports team, or choosing to take part in the activity that is occurring in physical education (Symons, O’Sullivan, Borkoles, Andersen & Polman, 2014)
3. Physical Activity – refers to physical education, sports and athletics (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, Schultz, 2010)

## **Scope of Synthesis**

This synthesis will examine research studies on the LGBT population as a whole, in the areas of physical education and athletics. This synthesis does not examine teachers' and coaches' opinions, attitudes, or beliefs about LGBT students. The study will focus on the factors LGBT students perceive as having an impact on their experiences with physical activity, whether positive or negative – and how such interactions affect the level of participation for these students.

## **Chapter 2 Methods**

### **Search Procedures**

In order to find a critical mass of articles on my topic, I used databases which I accessed from the Brockport Online Library. These databases used were Academic Search Complete and SportDISCUS. I utilized a number of search terms to locate articles. Key words included “LGBT,” “LGBT youth,” “LGBT students,” “physical education,” “physical activity,” “participation,” “sports,” and “athletics” to garner results. I searched for articles using multiple search terms together, rather than searching for each term one at a time. Results were then narrowed to include research articles that were peer-reviewed.

Due to the narrow body of research available on this topic, I then reviewed the reference lists of several key articles to locate additional studies on this topic that might qualify for inclusion. This process allowed me to find articles which were more specifically directed to my topic of study and the population of focus.

### **Criteria for Inclusion**

The next step in my research was to choose articles to include in this synthesis. The inclusion criteria for articles was developed to provide a method for determining which studies to include from those found in the broad search. First, I selected research studies, rather than opinion pieces, magazine articles or narratives. The studies selected consisted of those published in peer-reviewed journals or under the direction of governments or large institutions. Next, each study chosen for inclusion must specifically address the LGBT youth population, either at the secondary or post-secondary level. In addition, the studies selected focused on these students' experiences in physical education, in athletics/sport, or in the general field of physical activity. Finally, articles chosen for inclusion needed to focus strictly on the experiences and perceptions of the LGBT population, rather than the experiences of students, teachers, peers, coaches or other observers around them. These articles could be focused on the past experiences of students from high school, or current and past experiences of those in college. These requirements allowed me to narrow down the pool of articles to those that fit my specific needs for this synthesis. After applying the selection criteria, I was able to find a mass of 12 research studies on the topic for inclusion in this synthesis.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the articles meeting the criteria were chosen for inclusion in this synthesis, an article grid was created to summarize and organize the materials (see Appendix A). This grid provides a brief summary of the participants, methodology, results and discussion from each article. The findings in this body of research were compared and

contrasted, and various themes emerged during the analysis process. The findings associated with these themes are discussed in the next section.

### **Chapter 3 Results**

This section provides an overview of the findings which were found in the critical mass of literature, consisting of a total of 12 research articles on factors affecting LGBT youth participation in physical activity. The themes that emerged were divided into two major categories: positive and negative factors for LGBT students and athletes. Within those categories, subthemes emerged that included the environment/atmosphere, presence of verbal and physical threats, the state of the changing spaces, and lack of intervention. A thematic coding chart was created to track the various themes and subthemes in each study (see Appendix B). Most factors that emerged were identified as negatively impacting participation in physical activity. However, the state of changing spaces and other common spaces were identified as both negative and positive factors. In this section, I have organized my discussion of the results around the subthemes.

#### **Environment/Atmosphere**

The environment of a physical education class or the atmosphere of a sports team can have significant effects on LGBT participation. The National Union of Students (2012) reported that almost half the students they surveyed identified addressing homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia in sport within schools as a central focus for involving the LGBT community in sport. Nearly half of the participants indicated they do not join sports teams due to a “culture around sport [that is] alienating or unwelcome” (p. 5). According to GLSEN (2013), just 6.1% of all LGBT student athletes reported serving in a leadership or captain role on their own team while more than a quarter of the study’s

participants reported being harassed or assaulted by a teammate on a school athletic team because of their sexual orientation. The authors also provided first-hand accounts from LGBT students. Some of these students reported being unofficially prevented from participating on sports teams, while others were officially prohibited because their presence was deemed as “disruptive” (GLSEN, 2013, p. 3). Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey and Schultz (2010) conducted a national survey of LGBT students, where they examined the climate and experiences for LGBT students in PE and sport. Students reported hearing homophobic slurs in locker rooms and gymnasiums frequently, only being surpassed by the hallways. Similarly, Symons, O’Sullivan, Borkholes, Andersen and Polman (2014) found that 82.5% of participants reported hearing homophobic language such as “That’s so gay” in P.E. class. Participants also reported use of this language in team sports, as 65% reported hearing these phrases in that environment. The authors termed this “casual homophobic remarks” and noted that they were still harmful even if that was not the intention (p. 12).

Gill et. al (2010) concluded that independent exercise was the most inclusive setting, while P.E. and organized sport were less inclusive than exercise. The authors found that the most exclusive settings for sexual minorities and other minority groups was organized sport, such as school teams. Morrow and Gill (2003) cited that 91% of surveyed students witnessed heterosexist behavior, and over half of those 91% reported doing so “a lot” (p. 211). This is similar to the findings of Gill et al., who reported approximately 90% of participants heard homophobic comments at school on a regular basis. Morrow and Gill also reported a high incidence of homophobic behavior towards LGBT students from their peers, and over one-third of the LGBT students reported

homophobic behavior from their teachers, reporting anywhere from “some” homophobic behavior to “a lot” (p. 211). According to Symons et. al (2014), participants labeled physical education as the place where they most frequently were subjected to verbal abuse.

Research has indicated that there are both cultural and social barriers standing in the way of LGBT students participating in physical education and sport (National Union of Students, 2012). Almost 47% of LGBT participants in a study conducted by the National Union of Students reported a sense of alienation in sport. Hargie, Mitchell, and Somerville (2017) summarize the effects of the alienation of members of the LGBT population from physical education through the powerful words of one interviewee, who equated going to P.E. class with the feeling of going to a concentration camp. Sarac and McCullick (2017) shared the words of a participant in their study, who explained: “In Physical Education, I always hid myself, because I didn’t have the majority’s actions [or] habits... They made me feel that it was difficult to live there for someone like me” (p. 347). The authors found that the participants did not necessarily reject physical activity itself, but they felt alienated from P.E. and team sports. The National Union of Students reported that 42% who didn’t participate could attribute their non-participation to a negative experience which occurred at school. This statistic is illustrated by the words of a participant, who stated there were boys in P.E. class whose horrible actions made students not want to attend physical education.

Not only were there reported instances where other students made LGBT students and student-athletes feel alienated or uncomfortable, there were also reported instances of teachers contributing to alienation. Hargie, Mitchell and Somerville (2017) discussed this

as an emerging subtheme within their research. One interviewee recalls “teachers exclude you in a way when you’re younger, because they’re like, ‘Oh you’re useless at this’ or they try and force you to do a sport or force you to do P.E” (p. 231). Another interviewee even recalled the way an administrator alienated him. He had requested to play netball with the girls in his class, rather than football with the boys, and describes the response as an intense refusal. His conclusions from the early-in-life interactions were that “what I was feeling inside was wrong” (p. 231).

However, this is not just a case-by-case issue of how certain teachers are treating their students. O’Brien, Shovelton and Latner (2013) conducted research on pre-service teachers, to attempt to determine whether there was a systemic issue in physical education teacher education programs. A data analysis of their research concluded that pre-service P.E. teaching majors conveyed higher levels of prejudice against LGBT populations than non-P.E. majors. The National Union of Students (2012) discusses a cultural issue which is in agreeance of O’Brien’s research. Many participants expressed that they very seldom felt directly targeted in discrimination or mistreatment, but noted that the culture within athletics, particularly team sports, is heteronormative and often homophobic. This culture exists, the participants explain, often without realizing how it will affect the LGBT members on the team.

Other times, teachers and coaches are much more overt. Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2014) shared the story of an interviewee who explained that a coach would not let him attend a trip on a sporting club because he was gay, and that his sharing the room with his male teammates would put them at risk of being raped by him, since he was attracted to males. Another interviewee discussed a former coach who would force his female

athletes to go back to the locker room if they “walk like a boy”, and freely discussed his distaste for female athletes “who walk, talk, and dress like men” (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014, p. 716). These actions clearly created a negative environment for athletes, and discouraged their participation within athletics.

### **Lack of Intervention**

While the environment and atmosphere are crucial aspects when it comes to participation, sometimes students will still make poor choices, and treat peers with a less than respectful and welcoming approach. When this occurs, it is the job of the teacher to reprimand and admonish such behavior, and eradicate statements or actions which embolden such a culture. Intervention by adults is crucial to providing a safe and healthy learning environment for LGBT students. GLSEN (2013) reported that LGBT students who felt comfortable speaking with their coaches or P.E. teachers about issues related to their sexual identity were significantly less likely to attempt to and avoid gymnasiums, athletic fields, and sports altogether, as well as being less likely to experience negative treatment from other students in P.E. or while participating in athletics.

Unfortunately, GLSEN (2013) also reported that 79.4% of LGBT students in the survey were not comfortable speaking to their coaches or P.E. teachers. Gill et al. (2010) reported intervention at an extreme low, with under 10% of respondents reporting that someone consistently intervened while they were being bullied or harassed. Moreover, 36.7% of participants in phase 1 (teacher survey) and 53.2% participants in phase 2 (student survey) of the study responded “never” when identifying the frequency of teacher intervention. Finally, 53% of interviewees expressed offense to being called a gay slur; however, just 8% said that someone intervened all of the time, or most of the time

when such instances occurred. These responses paint a picture about the pervasive lack of adult response to harassment and other negative behaviors toward LGBT youth. Ayvazo and Sutherland (2014) described instances where teachers predominantly ignored homophobic name-calling and behaviors consciously, and perpetuated a culture of homophobia. Ayvazo and Sutherland also reported that more than half of physical education teachers rarely or never confronted homophobic language and chose to remain silent:

The boys are into calling each other ‘faggots’ or ‘he’s queer’. I pretend I don’t hear those. I try not to make a big deal about it. Kids are into name calling, no matter what they use, they’re into name calling. If it’s not that, it’s something else. (Wood & Harbeck, as cited in Ayvazo & Sutherland, 2014, p. 62).

Unfortunately, the research indicates that the educator who was quoted above is not alone in his/her actions. There is a clear trend of physical educators and coaches either ignoring the negative situations their athletes and students are being put in, not being equipped to respond to the behavior, or perpetuating the stigma put on LGBT athletes. Morrow and Gill (2003) concluded from their research that both teachers and students identified homophobic and heterosexist behaviors as commonplace within the secondary physical education experience. Despite the awareness demonstrated by those within schools of the existence of such a culture, you will seldom find that students or teachers are intervening or confronting said behaviors; this is an issue that all are aware of, but few will address.

### **Unsafe Spaces**

An additional factor that continues to affect participation in physical education and athletics is the presence of unsafe spaces. GLSEN (2013) reported that nearly 40% of LGBT students surveyed said that they avoided entering locker rooms, while 23%

reported avoiding the athletic facilities as well. Hargie, Mitchell and Somerville (2017) shared similar findings, reporting that changing rooms and showers were the biggest barrier for LGBT respondents who wanted to partake in sport. They cited these locker rooms as ‘definitive stressors,’ saying that they were cause for significant anxiety. Respondents were also hypersensitive to the perceptions of others about their presence within the locker room. Interviewees explained that they were worried about how other students and athletes would react to their being in the locker room, a heightened fear of the potential for negative experiences, and preventative nervousness and watchfulness about being ‘exposed.’ The National Union of Students (2012) found that 12.8% of participants in a study listed non-inclusive changing and showering facilities as a reason for not participating in sports. When considering just the transgender respondents, this number rose to 36.1%.

Conversely, there is some research which illustrates the positive impacts of safe spaces. Litchfield (2011) provided insight into the positive outcomes which arise from LGBT athletes perceiving a comfortable space, whether it is the communal changing space or on the field. Several participants revealed that their sporting club was a ‘safe space’ in its own, where they did not have to worry about being judged, or societal expectations. The safe space team appealed strongly to these athletes, they explained, because they did not have to endure any pressures about their sexual identity, it remained as a supportive club environment for the athletes. While there is limited research on the idea of a sports team providing a ‘safe space’ for LGBT athletes, these findings could be utilized as a template or trend-setter for sports teams.

### **Presence of “Out” Teammates**

A final factor that emerged from the analysis was the importance and presence of “out” teammates. These are not just teammates who are LGBT, but who have made their sexuality public at some level. The National Union of Students (2012) concluded from surveys and interviews that LGBT students perceived that it would be easier to be open themselves, if there were other LGBT athletes on their team. “The best encouragement is if other people in the sport are already out. My coach was bi, and three of my teammates were out as well” (National Union of Students, 2012, p. 18). Conversely, some respondents noted that a culture of casual homophobia can intimidate students into hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity: “Hearing discriminatory language can stop people coming out which is a shame because most of the time if a gay person does come out team member are very supportive and aren’t in fact homophobic at all” (p. 18).

Litchfield (2011) discusses positive impacts of having LGBT teammates within athletics. Female interviewees noted the significance of feeling comfortable with being publicly out, and belonging to a community while also identifying as a lesbian. They were able to describe this as liberating and supportive, and was captured in this interviewee’s words:

...it’s quite lovely in one sense because they [club members] are all very encouraging... of women of all abilities, all ages, of all classes, of all educational abilities. Our premise is that we encourage diversity at the club... the way that we embrace diversity, I think has been fantastic and that’s been one of my experiences at the club. (p. 41)

Sykes’ (2009) research provided similar conclusions. An interviewee describes her coming out at age 13, attributing her successes to feeling support from others who were coming out as gay or bisexual at that time. She noted that although these students

did not have a close friendship, “it was just really awesome having that” experience of coming out when others were (p. 241). This support system of other out classmates or teammates gives LGBT students and athletes a sense of community, assists them in boosting their self-confidence, and provides sense of support (Litchfield, 2011).

### **Summary**

Studies have shown that there are several factors that influence students’ participation in physical activity. These factors include the environment and atmosphere created in the class or on the field, the use of intervention strategies by teachers and coaches to respond to negative behaviors such as verbal or physical aggressions, the availability of safe spaces, and the presence of teammates who have openly expressed and are ‘out’ as LGBT individuals. In the following section, I will discuss how P.E. teachers and coaches can utilize these results to improve the participation and experiences of LGBT youth in physical education classes and on sports teams. Limitations will also be discussed as well as future research that could be conducted in this area.

### **Chapter 4 Discussion**

This synthesis examined the factors that affect participation for LGBT students in physical education and athletics. After careful data analysis, and organization of themes, it appears that the most important factors are the environment and atmosphere, the use of interventions, and the perception of spaces such as changing spaces being safe or unsafe. When examining the results, it was clear that LGBT students are frequently being put in positions where they perceive mistreatment, both from their peers and their teachers. These situations are resulting in discomfort and a significant lack of participation in physical activity. Students and teachers are frequently operating through heterosexist and

even homophobic lenses, and others are not stepping forward to deter people from projecting such negative attitudes, ideas, and actions. The information within the critical mass of articles yields recommendations for teachers and coaches to maximize the interest for participation for the LGBT population in athletics and physical education.

### **Creating a Positive Environment**

LGBT students who experienced a negative environment were less comfortable in the gymnasium or on the fields, and were less likely to participate in athletics or physical education (GLSEN, 2013; Hargie, Mitchell, & Somerville, 2017; National Union of Students, 2012; Sarac & McCullick, 2017). To address such a widespread issue, there are a few considerations for teachers to consider moving forward. First and foremost, creating an environment where all students are included, and feel included, is a top priority. While these changes may not occur overnight, this paradigm shift starts with the educator. The teacher or coach should establish, model and reinforce clear expectations regarding the treatment of others, and identify what type of language and behaviors are unacceptable. Since the use of negative language and verbal aggression was a running thread through several of the studies (GLSEN, 2013; Gill et al., 2010; National Union of Students, 2014; Symons et al., 2014) this would be a good place for teachers and coaches to start. For example, the teacher or coach can make it known that the word gay may not be used in a derogatory manner in their classroom or on their team. This term was specifically noted in several studies as problematic (GLSEN, 2013; Morrow & Gill, 2003; National Union of Students, 2012; Symons et. al, 2014). Staff can also ensure they model expected behavior themselves.

Students surveyed by the National Union of Students (2012) showed strong support for increased training for teachers, staff, coaches, and sport societies in order to help eliminate homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia in sport. One idea might be for teacher and coach training programs to provide in-depth training on how to create a positive environment in the gymnasium and on the field. While applicants for teacher certification in New York State are required to take a six-hour Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) workshop, it seems that creating a safe and healthy environment deserves focus in pedagogical courses as well. It is key to equip teachers and coaches with the appropriate tools for creating a safe emotional environment, recognizing an unsafe emotional environment, addressing issues and making the classroom, locker room, and field desirable places for LGBT students to be. This would allow teachers and coaches to create a safe and healthy environment and atmosphere that the studies show is currently lacking. Beginning training in the teacher preparation program is important given the findings of O'Brien and colleagues (2013), who reported higher levels of anti-gay prejudice among physical education majors when compared to non-P.E. majors.

### **Engaging in Effective Intervention**

Undoubtedly, there will be instances where students and athletes do not follow teachers' and coaches' expectations; thus, interventions must occur. Students and athletes may develop beliefs about whether educators and coaches truly care about the wellbeing of LGBT students based on how they respond when those negative behaviors occur. If teachers and coaches make excuses for the behavior, ignore it, enable it, or fail to respond to it, students will continue to see staff as part of the issue. This will likely perpetuate the lack of participation in physical activity that is currently occurring (GLSEN, 2013;

Hargie, Mitchell & Somerville, 2017). Therefore, physical educators must follow through with consequences when students do not adhere to the behavioral expectations they establish, something that is occurring at too low of a rate at this time (Gill et. al, 2010; GLSEN, 2013; Morrow & Gill, 2003; National Union of Students, 20112).

Holding students accountable for their words and actions would be a major step forward for teachers, coaches, and the LGBT population. Whether a student intentionally or inadvertently uses derogatory language, the impact on the LGBT students is negative (Symons et al., 2014). Whether a student intends to harm with a word or phrase or not, teachers and coaches must intervene each and every time. Although it may be seen as just a joke, or not that serious, all educators must take comments of this nature seriously. Teachers can accomplish this by visibly, clearly and immediately addressing any homophobic language, derogatory terms, or verbal aggression that occur toward LGBT students.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.), intervening in instances of suspected bullying and discrimination requires school community members to work as a team. They recommend stopping the behavior on the spot, finding out what happened, and most importantly, supporting the students and athletes who are involved. This set of steps can be employed by P.E. teachers and coaches to address instances of physical and verbal maltreatment of LGBT students. While a physical educator's first instinct is to simply punish a student's behavior by sending them to the principal's office, this can be viewed as an inability to handle the situation themselves. When the teacher or coach handles the situation in-house, they are showing to all students that their gymnasium or athletic fields will be a place where the

climate is emotionally safe. It also sends a message to students that this behavior will not be tolerated and will be addressed when observed.

### **Creating Safe Changing Spaces**

Finally, teachers must consider the importance of safe changing spaces. In fact, Hargie, Mitchell and Somerville (2017) noted changing areas to be the most significant barrier to participation for LGBT students. Creating safe changing spaces sets the expectations before students even enter the classroom or playing area. Providing all-gender bathrooms and private changing spaces for students to utilize can remove this barrier. Students surveyed by the National Union of Students (2012) recommended these bathrooms as a way to make sport more inclusive. Students need to be provided with the opportunity to use bathroom stalls which lock and conceal students from both peers and adults.

Achieving this recommendation may require reconfigurations or remodeling of facilities such as locker rooms. Physical educators can advocate for these changes to be included in building renovations, or created from existing facilities when possible. They can work with administrators and maintenance staff to examine ways to create private and safe changing facilities for LGBT students. This will provide LGBT students with a greater sense of comfort and safety in the facilities and may result in increased participation in physical activity.

### **Limitations**

The critical mass on the topic of factors impacting LGBT students' participation in P.E. and sport is limited in scope and volume at this time. While it is expected that the body of research on this topic may grow exponentially in the coming years due to current

interest in this topic, the current body of research is not only small but also relatively current. Unlike other topics of study, there is no research stretching back further than approximately the past decade. As a result, there has been no longitudinal research yet conducted on the topic. This reflects the relatively new consideration of the needs of LGBT youth in physical education and athletics. This is reflected in the mass utilized in this synthesis, as half of the sources used in the synthesis were articles from the last five years.

Furthermore, much of the research conducted on the experiences of LGBT students is based on interviews that capture the memories and experiences of adults reflecting on their childhood. Recalling experiences may not accurately reflect the actual experience, and may be clouded by their perceptions of the experience. Depending on how long ago the experience was, the representation may not accurately reflect the current experiences of LGBT students. There is little research that includes current students in middle and high school. It is also important to note that none of the research in the critical mass was geared towards elementary students. This may be due to the challenges of conducting research on this topic with minors. Most of the available research focuses on secondary and post-secondary students and athletes.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Based on the analysis and the limitations of the critical mass, more research must be conducted to effectively examine this topic. As new strategies are being developed to improve the climate and culture of physical activity, research is needed to determine whether the strategies are effective when put into action. For example, does an improved school climate increase participation in physical activity? Do increased interventions by

the teacher and coach lead to changes in perceived safety of physical activity? Follow up studies can capture information about the interventions and strategies that positively and negatively affect participation. Researchers can also work with teachers and coaches to assess the effectiveness of strategies with each segment that makes up the LGBT population. This line of research may point to different needs for lesbian students as compared to transgender students, for example.

Another area of development might be to explore the participation levels of LGBT students in specific sports. This may yield information about patterns of participation. Further exploration might shed light on why LGBT youth do or do not participate in certain sports, when compared with heterosexual counterparts.

## **Conclusions**

Studies have demonstrated that LGBT youth do not feel safe in physical activity settings, and therefore do not participate at the same rate as their non-LGBT peers. The research examined in this synthesis appears to point to a series of areas that P.E. teachers and coaches can address to potentially improve the experiences of LGBT youth in P.E. classes and on athletic teams. Recommendations include creating a positive environment, employing effective interventions to address problem behaviors, and the creation of safe physical spaces for changing for class or practice. Though the critical mass of research points to addressing these areas as a starting point, there is a need for additional research to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of LGBT youth in physical activity.

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## Appendix A

### Article Grid

| <b>Author</b>                  | <b>Title</b>   | <b>Source</b>               | <b>Purpose</b>   | <b>Methods &amp; Procedures</b>   | <b>Analysis</b>  | <b>Findings</b>  | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
|--------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|--|---|--|--|---|
| Ayvazo, S. & Sutherland (2009) | Uncovering the Secrets: Homophobia in Physical Education | Action in Teacher Education | This article examines heterosexism and homophobia in physical activity settings, particularly in physical education. | This study used interviews and surveys to gain an understanding of the experiences of teachers and students hiding their LGBT identities in physical education. | Review of interviewees statements through comparative methods. | Concluded that physical education is an environment where heterosexism, homophobia, and homonegativism are ingrained and consistently directed to students and teachers. Teachers are expected to operate in a heterosexist professional climate, forcing the same expectations on students. | The article calls for being able to respect and care for others, appreciating diverse sexual orientations, and demonstrating inclusive behaviors as the most significant steps in combating homophobia in physical education. |
| GLSEN (2013)                   | The Experiences of LGBT Students in School Athletics     | GLSEN                       | This article explains the tension and difficulties that LGBT students face in physical education. The                | This organization sent out an annual survey on physical education and athletics which   | The results of the nationwide surveys were compiled and        | LGBT students are underrepresented in athletics, show low participation in physical education, and are not given leadership roles in   | School-wide efforts to reduce discrimination based on bias is necessary for any significant changes to occur for LGBT students in   |

| <b>Author</b>   | <b>Title</b>                                    | <b>Source</b>            | <b>Purpose</b>  | <b>Methods &amp; Procedures</b>  | <b>Analysis</b>   | <b>Findings</b>  | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
|---|---|--------------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
|   |   |                          | article notes that it is an unsafe environment, that students are discriminated against, and that interventions do not take place.  | asks hundreds of thousands to share their experiences to display the environment available for LGBT athletes.  | compared and contrasted to understand what LGBT students perceived.   | athletics. LGBT students are harassed and are often left defenseless. They are in negative environments without intervention from teachers.  | physical education and in athletics. These students need consistent supports and safe environments, stemming from policies and procedures created by coaches, teachers, and school officials.   |
| Gill, Diane L., Morrow, Ronald G., Collins, Karen E., Lucey, Allison B., & Schultz, Allison M. (2010) | Perceived Climate in Physical Activity Settings | Journal of Homosexuality | This article examines the emotional environment in physical activity settings. Authors are looking for the attitudes being expressed in the gym, sport, locker room, etc. | A two-phase study was conducted. In the first phase, school climate and climate in PA setting were examined with a sample of undergrads, many of whom were PE & exercise science students. In the second phase, the same measures were used but on | Primary analyses used descriptive analyses to the School Climate Survey and PA Climate measure, and a setting by minority group. They compared climate ratings across PA settings and | High levels of homophobic remarks in physical activity settings, such as the gymnasium in PE, and that there was little intervention. Students cited frequently hearing homophobic slurs during both phases. Locker rooms and fields/gyms were cited as places where this language was often used. | These results indicate that both students and future professionals understand that there is a hostile climate being created for LGBT youth. This school climate is negative, and those surveyed show that they are aware of it. However, they do not show that intervention frequently takes place. |

| Author  | Title  | Source  | Purpose   | Methods & Procedures  | Analysis  | Findings  | Recommendations   |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |  |   |   | largely ESS students and a campus pride group with predominantly LGBT students. | four minority groups. They used MANOVA in comparing subjects by gender, race/ethnicity. |   |   |
| Hargie, O., Mitchell, D., & Somerville, I. (2017) | 'People have a knack of making you feel excluded if they catch on to your difference': Transgender experiences of exclusion in sport | International Review for the Sociology of Sport | Analyzes and explores the accounts of transgender individuals who had were involved in sport and PA, particularly on their experiences with others. | Ten transgender individuals were interviewed                                    | Constant comparative methods through interviews with authors                            | Four central themes emerge, relating to feelings of exclusion within class and teams, as well as confusion with body image and gender identity. Those interviewed felt uncomfortable inside their own bodies, and this was made worse by treatment of classmates and teammates. | Students are able to sense when they are different and school experiences and environments of sports exclusion have amplified these differences, as the students are unable to follow normative gender expectations. These expectations are enforced by teachers and peers, and result in feelings of fear, alienation, exclusion and loathing. |

| <b>Author</b>                 | <b>Title</b>   | <b>Source</b>  | <b>Purpose</b>  | <b>Methods &amp; Procedures</b>  | <b>Analysis</b>   | <b>Findings</b>   | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| Litchfield, C. (2011)         | Finding Safe and Affirming Spaces in Women's Field Hockey  | The International Journal of Sport and Society                       | This study examines the importance of providing safe spaces for lesbian women in field hockey. This study uses a critical feminist framework, and examines a field hockey team's experiences during travel. | Interview methods were used for participants to describe their experiences at their hockey club.   | Analysis using the critical feminist framework, examined interviews and dialogues between herself and the athletes.                                 | The NCHC was identified by several participants as a safe space for them and their teammates, free of mainstream societal expectations. The interviewees reflected positively on the safe space and noted its importance. | This environment caused women to gravitate to participating in sport, rather than avoiding involvement, because of the strong presence of safe spaces and a positive atmosphere. This environment provides strong supports and respects differences amongst the athletes.             |
| Mavhandy-Mudzusi, A.H. (2014) | Experiences of lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex students regarding sports participation in a South African rural based university | African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance | This article views the experiences of LGBT students in athletics in South Africa. The author examines the negative effects stigma and discrimination have on the athletes' experiences within athletics.    | Twenty students from a South African based rural university who were purposively recruited were interviewed on their experiences in athletics. | Data analysis during collection, After being coded and transcribed, participants' statements were grouped together into themes based on commonality | Central theme from all participants was that of stigma and discrimination. They felt this from their fellow students, and university employees as well. They were expected to behave 'like heterosexual people.'          | Recommends putting forth programs which allow athletes to participate without discrimination, and for advocacy for LGBT athletes. Programs should target university members for improving awareness, LGBT community in better understanding their rights, and rural community members |

| Author                                     | Title  | Source                                    | Purpose  | Methods & Procedures  | Analysis   | Findings   | Recommendations  |
|--|--|---|--|---|--|--|--|
|  |  |   |  |   | es within discussion.  |  | to better open their minds and respect LGBT athletes equally.  |
| Morrow, Ronald G., & Gill, Diane L. (2003) | Perceptions of Homophobia and Heterosexism in Physical Education | Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport | This study examines homophobic and heterosexist behavior in physical education, from both students and teachers. | This study has two phases. The first is surveying PE teachers from NC high schools; the second involved surveying college aged young adults about HS PE experiences. This was to see if homophobic and heterosexist behaviors were occurring. | Constant comparative methods of interviews of P.E. teachers and young adults   | Gay and straight students witnessed some to a lot of heterosexist behavior between students, as well as homophobic behavior. | The study had a limited sample size, but remained consistent with national trends and reports. Students reported frequently hearing homophobic remarks while seeing little to no intervention from teachers. |
| National Union of Students (2012)          | Executive Summary  | National Union of Students                | This is a summary of research conducted on the LGBT community and the climate and environment of                 | Nationwide surveys were conducted to find baseline data on the climate in physical activity for the LGBT  | Surveys and accounts were compared and coded in order to establish commonality | LGBT students face clear barriers to participation in physical education and sport, and overall have negative experiences in | The summary recommends endorsing friendliness and alliance with LGBT community, zero tolerance homophobia policy,  |

| Author   | Title   | Source                              | Purpose  | Methods & Procedures   | Analysis  | Findings   | Recommendations  |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|--|
|  |   |                                     | schools and sports relating to the LGBT community.   | population. Workshops were also accessed, where people answered questions and provided accounts.   | es and allow various themes to emerge in the mass of data.  | physical activity, as the environment is largely exclusive.  | and providing guidance to students who are struggling with gender identity in order to make the environment more inviting.   |
| O'Brien, Kerry S., Shovelton, Heather, Latner, Janet D. (2013) | Homophobia in physical education and sport: The role of physical/sporting identity and attributes, authoritarian aggression, and social dominance assertion | International Journal of Psychology | This study was conducted to determine whether or not homophobia was increased in the environment of physical education and sport, and if so, how or why. | 409 New Zealand university students. 199 pre-service PE students completing a four year professional program; 210 non-physical education students. Many P.E. students were considered elite athletes. Surveyed via paper and pencil questionnaire, and via Likert scale. | “They conducted 2 (males/females) x 2 (PE vs. Non-PE) ANCOVAs, controlling for age, to assess differences in anti-lesbian and anti-gay prejudice. Paired t-tests... to assess cell differences (p. 895).” | Anti-gay prejudice was much more prevalent in PE students than non-PE students. Males had greater anti-gay prejudice than females, and athlete self-concept and upper body strength contributed to anti-gay standpoints and behaviors. | Gay males were discriminated against more heavily than lesbian females, and levels of homophobia and anti-gay views could be linked to your personal characteristics. Those with strong perceptions of masculinity showed homophobic viewpoints. |

| <b>Author</b>                    | <b>Title</b>  | <b>Source</b>                | <b>Purpose</b>   | <b>Methods &amp; Procedures</b>   | <b>Analysis</b>   | <b>Findings</b>   | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
|----------------------------------|---|------------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|
| Sarac, L. & McCullick, B. (2017) | The life of a gay student in a university physical education and sports department: a case study for Turkey | Sport, Education and Society | This study examined experiences of a gay male in Turkey who goes to a college for a sports related major. His experiences are significant as they come from a country which ignores homosexuality and is largely homophobic. | After purposive sampling to find the appropriate subject, the subject was interviewed on his homosexual life, life experiences related to homosexuality, coming out, and experiences as a sports major. | The interview was transcribed and coded so that the authors could determine what themes were emerging and what findings were significant. | The interviewee revealed conflicting feelings about coming out because of his environment, but that positive experiences allowed him the comfort to come out, even in a largely negative society. He experienced homophobia in his community, so he chose to only come out to his close friends and family. | It was concluded that since the interviewee did not feel safe, comfortable or confident in his environment, he kept his sexuality largely a secret, suppressing his identity. These social pressures create a negative atmosphere for the LGBT population in Turkey and other Middle Eastern nations. |
| Sykes, Heather (2009)            | The qBody Project: From Lesbians in Physical Education to Queer Bodies In/Out of School                     | Journal of Lesbian Studies   | This article examines how gender minorities interact with heterosexism and transphobia in physical education   | Forty adults interviewed about their previous experiences in physical education and the impact that it had on them moving forward   | ANCOVAs analysis helped to determine levels of gay and lesbian prejudice outlined from the interviews                                     | Interviewees struggled to understand their bodies, and this struggle was magnified by institutional biases in physical education class such as assessment and gender  | Physical education as an institution needs to avoid normative and harmful discourses which disrupt gender minorities and others with unique bodies.   |

| <b>Author</b>   | <b>Title</b>  | <b>Source</b>  | <b>Purpose</b>  | <b>Methods &amp; Procedures</b>   | <b>Analysis</b>  | <b>Findings</b>   | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
|---|---|--|---|---|--|---|---|
|   |   |  |   |   | of the participants  | expectations enforced by P.E. teachers.   |   |
| Symons, C., O'Sullivan, G., Borkholes, E., Andersen, M.B., & REMco, C.J. (2014) | The Impact of Homophobic Bullying during Sport and Physical Education Participation on Same-Sex-Attracted and Gender-Diverse Young Australians' Depression and Anxiety Levels | College of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University, and the Institute for Sport, Exercise, and Active Living | This article examines the health and well-being of same sex attracted and gender diverse (SSAGD) individuals in physical education and athletics. The study compares the environment that physical activity yields and its negative repercussions on LGBT student-athletes. | Data was collected via a Facebook survey completed by 400 SSAGD individuals, and nearly 200 heterosexual individuals. | Survey responses compared to determine both perceptions of SSAGD students and perceptions of heterosexual students on the climate of physical activity, and could also draw conclusions on mental health and well-being of students based on their survey responses. | Higher levels of homophobic verbal aggressions were shown as predictors of increased depression, anxiety, and stress. Abuse and homophobic bullying in sport overall shows negative effects on emotional well-being | PE appears to be a problematic environment for LGBT population, and needs to be made a sanctuary where all students can participate without being subject to abuse. Unconditional self-acceptance appeared to be a strong factor against verbal homophobic abuse and mental health and well-being concerns. Policy changes in sport and education will assist the gender diverse in comfortably participating in athletics without worry of discrimination or harassment. |

## Appendix B

### Thematic Coding Table

| <b>Article</b>                               | <b>Anti-Gay Prejudice</b> | <b>Environment/ Atmosphere</b> | <b>Lack of Intervention</b> | <b>Verbal Threats</b> | <b>Physical Threats</b> | <b>Unsafe Changing Spaces</b> | <b>Out Teammates</b> |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Ayvazo & Sutherland (2009)                   | X                         | X (+ and -)                    | X (+ and -)                 |                       |                         |                               |                      |
| GLSEN (2013)                                 | X                         | X                              | X                           | X                     |                         |                               |                      |
| Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, Schultz (2010) | X                         |                                | X                           | X                     |                         |                               |                      |
| Hargie, Mitchell, Somerville (2017)          | X                         | X                              |                             |                       |                         | X                             |                      |
| Litchfield (2011)                            |                           | X (+)                          | X                           |                       |                         |                               | X                    |
| Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2014)                      | X                         | X                              | X                           | X                     |                         | X                             |                      |
| Morrow & Gill (2003)                         | X                         | X                              | X                           |                       |                         | X                             |                      |
| National Union of Students (2012)            | X                         | X                              |                             |                       |                         |                               |                      |
| Sarac & McCullick (2017)                     | X                         | X                              |                             |                       |                         |                               |                      |
| O'Brien, Shovelton & Latner (2013)           | X                         | X                              |                             | X                     | X                       |                               |                      |
| Sykes (2009)                                 | X                         | X                              | X                           | X                     |                         |                               |                      |
| Symons et al (2014)                          | X                         | X                              | X                           | X                     |                         | X                             |                      |