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Lesbian, anorexic, disabled, and big: other ways of being a female physical education teacher

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that Physical Education (PE) is a white, male, and able body-dominated profession, particularly in Spain. When some female pre-service PE teachers, who had a difficult relationship with their bodies and sports abilities, enrol in such a degree, some of these problematic relations come to light. Participants for this study were four female pre-service teachers who self-identified as lesbian, anorexic, visually impaired, and big respectively. Data were collected through participant-produced texts, graphical representations, and interviews. The authors then reconstructed the participants' stories which are presented in the form of narratives. The conceptual tool of embodying norm-criticality helped us to highlight the importance of critical reflection about own beliefs, past experiences and understandings, and their influence on pedagogical practices in PE. This study contributes to the push towards a change of the stereotypical beliefs of what a PE teacher should be or look like, and in this way, emphasises the vast benefits of diversifying PE teachers' beliefs and understandings.

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Introduction

Research has shown that previous experiences influence teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practices (González-Calvo et al., 2014; Korthagen, 2009; Virta et al., 2019). Teacher knowledge has been characterised as 'personal practical knowledge', knowledge that is also considered as narrative and embodied (Connelly & Clandinin, 1987, 2000). In this narrative view of teacher knowledge, teachers' ways of being in the classroom are viewed as storied: teachers are the characters in their own stories of teaching that they author (Whelan et al., 2001). Teachers live out their stories shaped by early personal experiences and embodied in their personal practical knowledge (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019). As such, 'teachers' personal practical knowledge and their identities, understood narratively as stories to live by, are interwoven' (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019, p. 56).

While there have been some studies that investigated previous experiences of pre-service Physical Education (PE) teachers in Spain (González-Calvo et al., 2021; Varea

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et al., 2019), little is known about undergraduate students who do not conform to stereotypical ideas of what it is to be (and look like) a PE teacher. Thus, this paper explores the experiences, beliefs and understandings of four female pre-service PE teachers who do not conform to stereotypical ideas of those of being (and looking like) a PE teacher in Spain.

The participants included pre-service teachers who self-identified as lesbian, anorexic, visually impaired and big respectively. Investigating their personal experiences in-depth, allows us to understand how their past experiences influence their future pedagogical practices. In so doing, we are able to highlight the vast experiences and diversity of those pre-service teachers who have different approaches and conceptions of bodies, health, and pedagogies, and how they negotiate their different approaches within the dominant discourses and practices in the field of PE. This study is timely and significant as it highlights the relevance of taking into account a new alternative generation of pre-service PE teachers who do not always conform to the traditional and stereotypical ideals of being (and looking like) a PE teacher.

Intersectionality and norms in PE

This study uses the concept of intersectionality. By intersectionality we mean factors that are important in PE, such as (in)ability, gender, sexuality, body size, clumsiness, etc, and not just indicators related to social class, ethnicity, religion, etc. Research has shown that PE is a white, male, and able body-dominated profession (Azzarito, 2009; Kirk, 2020; McCuaig & Tinning, 2010). PE has also been found to have strong gendered discourses given its hyper-embodied nature (Flintoff & Dowling, 2019). Indeed, PE and sports are sites where heteronormativity is reproduced by reifying heterosexuality and marginalising homosexuality (Clarke, 2012). Significantly, homophobic and heterosexist behaviour has been reported to be common in PE (Clarke, 2004; Morrow & Gill, 2003; Sykes, 2011).

Heteronormativity in PE has been widely researched lately and many researchers agree that PE seems to convey traditional masculine and feminine values according to a heteronormative culture (e.g. Hunter, 2004; Larsson et al., 2011; Penney & Evans, 2002). Masculine boys dominate the PE space, partly because of the dominance of masculine-coded activities (Gerdin, 2017; Kirk, 2010), and queer students have been found to be positioned 'at the margins' of the gym (Larsson et al., 2009). Some gender stereotypes are intentionally or unintentionally embodied in PE teachers who expect different outcomes and actions in boys and girls in their lessons (Webb & Macdonald, 2007).

These findings suggest that ideas about gender, sexuality and normality are deeply embodied in students, teachers, and movement. However, most of the literature has focussed on students and practices within PE. The research on PE teachers who do not conform to heteronorms or dominant discourses is more limited (for an exception, see e.g. Edwards et al., 2016; Landi, 2018; Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Sykes, 2003; Woods & Harbeck, 1992), particularly when they intersect some other factors that might be considered important for a PE teacher, such as (in)ability, (in)coordination, impairment, eating disorders, and body size. In so doing, heteronormativity (in a broader sense) may

condition how PE teachers feel they need to look and still be viewed as ‘normal’ PE teachers.

Spain is an interesting country to explore this topic, as it can be considered a traditional and chauvinistic society, due to its history of nationalism and patriotism (Barisione & De Luca, 2018; Díez Gutiérrez & Gajardo Espinoza, 2020). By considering a more inclusive PE that takes into account that there is not just one single way to be a PE teacher, we will be able to open the PE field to more inclusive practices for future generations of PE teachers. Since heteronorms and other types of norms are embodied (Larsson et al., 2011), we now move on to how norm-criticality can also be embodied in an attempt to challenge the heteronormative culture and dominant discourses of PE.

Embodying norm-criticality

Norm-critical pedagogy [*Normkritisk pedagogik*] was introduced in Sweden at the end of the 2010s from established anti-oppressive, gender and queer theories. The concept is relatively unknown internationally, but it has been widely used in Sweden to challenge the institutional view of ‘normality’ as something objective, desirable, and essential, and the homogenisation that comes with it (Tengelin et al., 2020) (such as the normalisation of a PE teacher’s body for the purpose of this article). Norm-critical perspectives are characterised by a distancing from the previously dominant ‘tolerance pedagogy’ in education, whereby the majority is educated towards the acceptance of dominant norms. Instead, the new focus is directed towards exposing the construction and history of normality, investigating how oppressions operate by the repeating of norms in everyday lives, and engaging people to think critically and question structures of power as well as their own oppressive actions and positions (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020).

Particularly relevant is when people also embody norm-criticality, that is people who do not conform with the stereotypical body norms, especially in a profession with an embodied identity (Macdonald et al., 1999), such as PE. In doing so, this paper uses the concept of embodying norm-criticality to explore how a group of four ‘different’ female PE teachers embody oppression and challenge the dominant ideas of a PE teacher’s body in their typical daily lives as future PE teachers.

Methodology

This article uses socio-narratology, that is the sociological perspective of how people live in a story-shaped world, to show how stories construct experiences and identities (Polkinghorne, 1995). The use of stories to make sense of experiences is well established within the realm of qualitative research (Riessman, 2008) as it helps to understand the relational and cultural fabric of human lives (Frank, 2010). Stories are a research tool that have been successfully used for research in PE and sport (e.g. Duncan et al., 2018; McMahon & McGannon, 2019). Stories facilitate the exploration of sensitive topics (Blodgett et al., 2017; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2018), such as the ones included in this article. They also allow participants to decide what they want to say, and what they prefer not to say (McMahon & McGannon, 2019). In so doing, stories minimise the damage that some painful past events may have on participants, as they control what they would like to disclose (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014).

Thus, narratives are a way to test and understand the lived experiences of a person through the most relevant events written about them (Anspal et al., 2012; González-Calvo & Fernández-Balboa, 2018; González-Calvo et al., 2014). In this sense, narratives and the relevance of some knowledge content—as the experiences of four pre-service teachers concerning PE, for this paper—have the possibility to make daily actions and thoughts visible to be able to take distance and analyse them.

Participants and ethical considerations

The participants of this study were a group of four primary pre-service PE teachers from a university in Spain. They were in their second year of studies in a four-year programme. The participants were undertaking a compulsory unit called ‘School Physical Education’, in which they had their first encounter with PE for primary schools. The unit includes topics related to conceptions and prejudices towards PE, positive and negative experiences that the pre-service teachers have been through in PE, their expectations for their future careers and the foment of a critical and reflective approach, so that the pre-service teachers can understand PE from a wider perspective. The four participants were selected because of the strong experiences they wrote about in a text they had to hand in for the unit, their complicated relations with their bodies, and because of their different motivations to become a PE teacher.

Given that some of the participants have lived stressful and traumatic situations that they had to remember and write about, it was of utmost importance to protect them and safeguard their wellbeing during and after the research process (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014). As author X was also the tutor of the participants, the consent form for participants clearly included that the (non) participation in the study would not imply any consequences for the unit in question. Furthermore, it was stated that no results were going to be published from the study until the participants have finalised their studies, given the personal nature of the narratives presented. Finally, the interviews were conducted by an external person. Ethical approval was obtained through Author’s X university and participants’ names were replaced by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity in the reporting of results.

Data generation

The narrative representation presented below is based on collected data. Data were generated during 2021 and 2022 through participant-produced texts and drawings, and semi-structured interviews. Participants were given a number of tasks for the generation of their texts. The first task was to remember their positive and/or negative experiences in PE, and link them to their current understanding of PE. As a second task, they were asked to write a short story around issues related to: (a) starting exercising; (b) points of deviation during sports participation and physical activity; (c) PE matters; (d) emergent ideas about PE according to their school memories; and (e) the choice of their university degree.

We also used participant-produced drawings to tap into the emotional lives of participants (Vince, 1995; Vince & Broussine, 1996). Graphical representations, such as drawings, can surface unspoken thoughts and feelings. More specifically, ‘drawings offer a different kind of glimpse into human sense-making than written or spoken texts do, because they can express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious’ (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 34). Drawings are

a stimulus that can be used to motivate, set a scene and build emotion (O’neill, 1995). The pre-service teachers were then asked to produce a drawing in which they could represent themselves (e.g. a self-portrait, a cartoon, an animal, an object). In the drawing they needed to highlight some strengths and some fears that they felt in their daily lives related to their gender and bodies.

Later, an interview was conducted with each participant during which they explained their drawing and went into more detail about their past and present as pre-service PE teachers, and their future expectations. Each interview lasted approximately 70 minutes and were conducted in Spanish. Then, Author X translated them to English. The first questions were related to their previous experiences as school students. The second part of the interview focused on the deeper details about some of the main events they have lived as pre-service teachers.

The reconstruction of the stories

To reconstruct participants’ stories, we drew on the theoretical tool of embodying norm-criticality described above. In doing so, particular attention was placed on the participants’ focus on issues related to their bodies, and their reflexivity and actions towards hegemonic norms and dominant discourses. The experiences of the four participants are presented as stories narrated with a brief description of some PE-relevant events from their past, their expectations as future PE teachers, and the focus on their bodies. The stories are presented as the description of a ‘typical’ day in the life of a woman who tries to be a PE teacher, and all the complexities she faces. Further conversations with the participants confirmed the accuracy of the stories and how they felt represented. The final narratives were approved by each participant, and they decided on some of the final details to be included, excluded or modified.

The stories are factual in content, but fictional in form (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). According to Sparkes (2002), this kind of stories are written and interpreted by the researcher who creates the story, which means that the writer is not only a researcher, but also a critic who makes judgements about writing.

Dialogical narrative analysis was adopted to make sense of the data (Frank, 2010; Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2022). This analysis aims to examine what is told in the stories, how it is told, and what happens as a result of recounting certain stories. Dialogical narrative analysis allows for movements of thought between the ‘whats,’ the ‘hows,’ and the effects of the story. In terms of procedure, instead of following a step-by-step approach, dialogical narrative analysis functions as a heuristic guide and an interrogative method to stimulate imagination.

During the initial data immersion (i.e. reading, rereading, and discussing what the data could provide after the constant reflections), we identified the concept of ‘traditional PE teacher’, which then proved to be a decisive deductive tool for clarifying the relationship between our participants and PE as a narrative environment. In this regard, along with the participants’ stories, we expanded our focus of dialogical narrative analysis to include other individuals (e.g. families, teachers), events, and actions related to PE and sport/physical activity. From that point on, our analysis was stimulated by dialogical questions that delved into the most relevant aspects to grasp the complexities of the data (Frank, 2010; Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2022). For this, we used three types of analytical questions: a) ‘What’ and ‘Who’ questions (e.g. What happened and to whom? Who were

the main characters involved? What did the others do? Whom do certain PE practices favour or disadvantage?); b) 'How' questions (e.g. How are the participants' stories embedded in the school environment? How could a more positive school environment be fostered for them? How can more inclusive sport/physical activity practices be promoted?); and c) Effect questions (e.g. What were the consequences of certain school practices that favoured some people over others? How were the participants affected by these practices?).

Throughout the analytical process, we iteratively and cyclically revised both the questions and our understanding of the data until we were able to construct a valuable narrative.

We aimed to give voice to groups of people that have been silenced or whose stories have been undervalued. In our case, the voice of these women had been marginalised in contrast to the voice of science in discussions concerning the 'ideal PE teacher'. We, therefore, wanted to give voice to women's experiences and understandings of PE and its relationship with issues related to sexuality, motor skills and body shape. Concerning the transferability and generativity of the narratives (i.e. what others learn from the stories), although we cannot predict reader's reactions to the women's experiences, the purpose is that the stories may resonate with them to gain insight and empathy (McMahon & McGannon, 2019).

Results

Life through glasses: a window to the word of PE

In primary school, we used to play dodgeball and some other games, such as hide and seek, in PE lessons. Those were the days of the week that I was most terrified about. Given my visual impairment, many balls hit me, and I was the first one to be disqualified from the game. During hide and seek, I was usually the one staying and counting. I was unable to distinguish my classmates from far away, I never used to see the ball coming until it was too late, and I used to finish the lesson crying out of impotence. I cursed myself those days because of my problem, and I never used to wish so much to be able to see properly as during those days.

You can say that glasses were my 'first friends', my 'besties'. Since I was two years old, they are my window to the world, they are a part of my body. My body is nothing without my glasses. However, my glasses don't completely solve my problem: without them I feel naked, fragile, vulnerable; with them, my visual acuity is reduced to 40%, so my glasses just reduce my nakedness, fragility and vulnerability by 60%. Not a bad stats, I guess. In this sense, during the few moments that I'm not wearing my glasses (e.g. the minutes before sleeping and during the shower), I feel insecure and vulnerable. I know they are an object and not a human being, but for me, they are a body extension that I depend on to the same extent that I depend on my arms, legs and heart. Unfortunately, my besties can't do it all for me. I also can't do everything for myself, as I depend on others for some daily chores. I can't drive, I need to pay more attention for crossing a street and I have difficulties in recognising some people sitting next to me if I don't hear their voices. I also have problems in classes to see the board and I always bother the person next to me with the question: 'What does it say there?'. Luckily enough, most of the people that I meet on my journey are very sympathetic and they are happy to help me.

Since I was little, one of my biggest concerns was not having friends because of my visual impairment. You reach an age when having to sit in the first row of a classroom doesn't help

to make friends. I spent the first semester of my university degree sitting by myself. I was so lonely and sad. When I started to get used to the loneliness, some classmates started to approach me and sitting next to me. After a few months, they realised that I had a visual impairment, and they started to ask me if I was able to see properly. I also had a hard time there, because I didn't want them to feel pity for me, and that was the only thing they would notice about me.

The glasses, as good besties, are almost like a mother to me. They remind me that life isn't going to always be trouble-free, that I'll encounter many obstacles on the way, and that I need to pay attention if I want to avoid them. It's easy to give up ... the same with games. However, I never stopped playing. I proposed to myself to try even harder. Even though I never felt lucky for having a disability, the truth is that because of my visual impairment, I've now developed some other skills and strategies that made some other stuff easier. My hearing is now much more developed, which I can use to recognise voices and calculate distances. My mind has also developed. I'm a very rational person and I've developed a divergent way of thinking, always looking for alternative solutions to problems. I have even developed a competitive nature lately, that I had no idea was even possible for me, and it's up to me to achieve whatever I want to achieve.

As these aspects have always been present in my life, they'll also be present in my teaching of PE. I'm not entirely certain that teaching is my calling. But when I realised that PE could be so much more than what I originally thought, it was like a wake up call. It was like a veil that has been lifted from my eyes, and I could see now the endless possibilities that this subject has to offer. I had an epiphany—I may not fit the mould of a traditional teacher with my visual disability, but I could still find my place in this profession and help those students who face the greatest challenges.

My glasses will be my source of inspiration in my teaching job. They represent the uncertainty I can feel in a class, the first fears, the not knowing how to act with students or not being sure if I'm going to be able to demonstrate a practical activity to the students (and see how I'm going to figure out how to teach precision throwing!). But besides my concerns, I have plenty of hope. I'm pretty agile, I've lots of patience and stubbornness, and I can't wait to teach PE.

My glasses help me to see the world, and as such, to see how when one door closes, another one opens. It's important to teach students to make the most out of an 'obstacle' to transform it into something positive. One of my ultimate goals as a future PE teacher is to



Figure 1. Ailana's drawing.

develop students' self-esteem and be able to adjust all activities in my classes so that they are according to each student's needs and goals (Figure 1).

The caterpillar doesn't always turn into a butterfly: bullying and anorexia

You can always think that the cactus spikes protect you and make you stronger. Actually, the spikes go on the inside, and they hurt your heart and feelings. It has been like that for years. Day by day.

I wake up slowly with not much energy and not feeling like confronting what life will bring to me. After checking the nutritional value of the breakfast food, I discard them one by one. 'This one has too much sugar, this other one too much fat, and the other one . . .' I know by heart the ingredients of many of them. I prepare an orange juice, and then I remember that most of it is sugar, that fat ingredient that always ends up on my hips. Right away I feel some stomach-ache, even though I'm not completely sure if it's not just my imagination. Anorexia nervosa still joins me in my life, even though I haven't been hospitalised for a few years. The antidepressants help to keep me away from the hospital.

My childhood wasn't easy. As far as I can remember, I have always been a chubby girl, and as such, the target for many jokes and discrimination . . . the cruelty related to the body. I was panicking to go to school and that the others will see me. I used to pretend I was sick many times to avoid going to school. My mum was very smart, and I couldn't fool her. What my mum didn't know was the reason why I didn't want to go to school. Maybe she wasn't that smart after all. Or maybe my silence didn't do much to ask for help on time.

When I was just 8 years-old, I started being bullied. I was 'the freak' at school, the girl whom no one wanted to hang around. If we also had PE during that day, it was even worse. The jokes and mocking were just continuous. I needed to show everyone my big body and my inability to do some physical tests . . . it was just humiliating! The only few times that I broke my silence and complained about my classmates' attitudes, I always got the same answer: 'It's just a kid's thing, it'll pass'. But it never did.

My PE teacher used to 'motivate me' saying things such as 'Lift your ass that it weighs a lot'. But he truly motivated my classmates to laugh even more. I always found it funny that I was told that by a fat PE teacher. Now I think about that, maybe he was trying to ventilate his body complexes on me. My classmates believed they had the right to call me 'cow', 'seal' and 'fat ass', cheered on by the teacher. The day when who I thought was my best friend, also called me a freak, my heart broke. If even for her I was the 'freak', I couldn't image what I was for the others.

I was my worst enemy during the whole time. I have never accepted myself the way I am. That's why I hate mirrors. The mirror is my second worst enemy. But somehow, I'm accepting my reflection more. I try to tolerate it, accept it, understand it and embrace it. It's not easy and I don't know if I'll succeed one day. To make it easier, I have enrolled in a gym months ago. I don't think my story will end up like the stories of Hollywood stars, who after living in hell when they were teenagers, they end up as prom queens. I don't think this caterpillar will end up as a butterfly. But I'm noticing the changes in my body, I feel stronger, slender and less heavy.

After finally finishing high school with a lot of effort and lack of continuity (the visits to the hospital didn't help my studies to be a priority), I've started my dream to become a teacher . . . and not just any teacher—a PE teacher! Actually, it might be possible that something in my head was not working properly . . . studying to become a PE teacher? Sounds ironic. My main motivation is to try to help with all my energies to all those kids around to avoid for them to go



Figure 2. Cleopatra's drawing.

through the same as what I've lived. My goal is to teach them to be whatever they want to be despite what others say. To break those stereotypes that blind us and make us worse, and to avoid for them to suffer what I've suffered—and continue to suffer (Figure 2).

A big woman or a narrow body ideal?

A small bed for a woman who gets bigger every day. This is what I think every day when I get up. A whole woman of 1,80 meters and still, I feel like crying every morning.

A sad breakfast thanks to my willingness to keep going, and then, a more voluminous lunch. But I keep moving around to compensate (some jumps, squads and skipping) even while having lunch, so the excess calories will be burnt right away. Because of my sad appearance, it's common for others to judge me as anti-social, or as a person with too high self-esteem. But it's actually the opposite – it's my shyness and lack of self-esteem. I'm sure I'd be more self-confident if I'd been shorter and skinnier.

I used to belong to that small girls' group back at school, in which I kept silent when the PE teacher asked us about our sports background and the type of physical activity that we did. I had very little to say . . . I didn't exercise at all. It was even worse when some teachers asked us who hasn't played any sport before or doesn't like to play sports. I used to raise my hand

with fear, and I could hear some laughing at the back. I have often felt marginalised in PE classes, as everyone seemed to know what to do, and they were able to do it . . . except me. Even though I felt a bit 'strange', it was no one's fault. Not even from my classmates who never mistreated me for being the 'clumsy one' – even though they preferred that I wasn't part of their teams for games and sports. Who wanted to have the obstacle that makes them lose?

Some years I was lucky enough to have another classmate like me in the class. During those years, we sat together to protect each other and to avoid feeling so lonely. When we were asked to perform a gymnastic skill or a sport skill, I used to put in all my effort and the teacher seemed to appreciate that. It's like when someone is bad at maths and the teacher thinks: 'Well . . . at least he tried'. Well . . . the same in here . . . 'at least the fat girl tried'. The true problem with PE classes is that I didn't realise that the rest of my classmates were having fun, acting spontaneously and even laughing at themselves about their own mistakes. I was just feeling miserable, ugly, and fat, and I never learned to laugh about my own mistakes.

It was not so long ago during my university degree that I learned in a book chapter from Tinning that many kids learn during PE classes that 'this is not your thing'. And what I remember from my own PE classes and what I live now during my university degree confirms this. How many fat PE teachers can I remember? How many of my university classmates can be considered overweight? So, why should I be here? Is this the place where I belong, if obviously I don't fit in?

It's difficult to suddenly modify all my beliefs and the expectations that I have for myself. Maybe I need to understand that this degree is part of a very long process and that it'll be up to me to find a job as a PE teacher. My working conditions and the people that I come across in my journey could make my path either a positive or a negative one. What I'm sure about is that I can be a good teacher. I have no difficulties in the educational setting that is expected from a PE teacher. Another different issue is my second-guessing about my body for my chosen career . . . and the coherence between the theory (which I'm pretty good at) and the practice (which is quite difficult given my clumsiness).

One way or the other, what is important is to dare and choose this journey, even if it's just to challenge some stereotypical ideas about the body and PE teacher education (i.e.

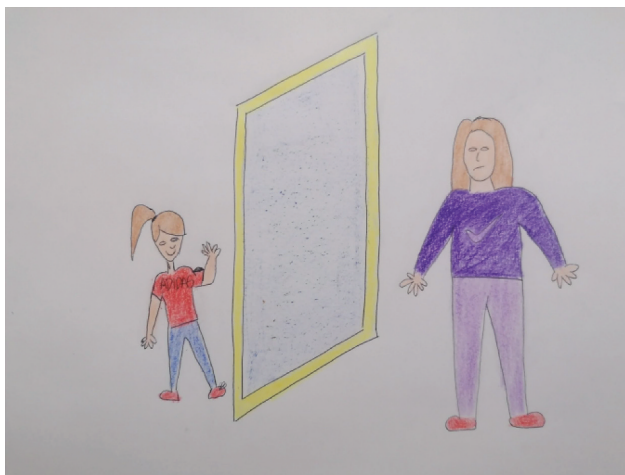


Figure 3. Ashley's drawing.

mostly athletic and skilful males, in Spain). Or have I chosen my degree to make it up for my clumsiness, my size and my insecurities? Of course, I want to get my degree to be able to have a job as a teacher, but I also want to teach children about loving themselves the way they are, and enjoy exercise and PE. Two objectives that until today I haven't been able to achieve for myself (Figure 3).

I dress in sweatpants and I play rugby: does it mean that I'm a lesbian?

I was born in a very small sporty city, so sport has always been present in my life. My mum has also forced me to play sports, as she believed it was good 'for the mind, the body and friendships'. According to her, sport was going to save me from stupidity when I became a teenager. Maybe, she always referred to 'girly sports', as she enrolled me in rhythmic gymnastics. I could never understand that sport and I never felt comfortable in the classes. One day, when warming up, I dislocated my knee, and that was the end of rhythmic gymnastics for me. But from an injury, something good can come up.

I asked my mum to enrol me in judo and football. She tried to negotiate and enrol me in volleyball and basketball, which were still ball games and less masculine in Spain. I didn't accept the deal, and I'm proud to say that I was the first girl to ever play football on my school team. Even though I was used to being picked up last for teams and I could never play in competitions because of the gendered rules, I always put all the effort into each training session. After a few months, the local club asked me to join the tests for the female football team. Finally, I could leave the boys behind and play in a girl's team. This maybe isn't what my mum had in mind, but I was at least playing in an all-girls team now.

Unfortunately, the female team extinguished in just one year. As I didn't want to try again playing with the boys, I tried different options: boxing, cycling, canoeing . . . I didn't mind which specific sport; I just couldn't bear the thought of practising one of those 'girly-girl sports'. As the school subjects became more difficult and my grades decreased, my mum decided that I should stop playing sports and that I needed to get extra support in maths, English, Spanish and pretty much all the school subjects (except for PE, in which I was the best and I never needed extra support). I guess that was actually an excuse from my mum to take me away from masculine sports.

I started to put more effort into my school subjects, not because I was interested in them, but because I knew they were going to be my way back to sports. If I was able to improve my grades, my mum wouldn't have any excuses for not allowing me to go back to sports.

When I was 16, I started to play rugby. It was then that I became honest with myself. I listened to my feelings, and I tried new experiences in sexual orientation. It was then that I met my first (and brief) girlfriend. Now I think that my homosexuality was always there in me, and that my sport preferences were a consequence of that. I remember that I used to play sports as a way to 'escape' sometimes, or for the pleasure or the feeling of belonging to a group sometimes.

Coming out of the closet wasn't well-received at home. Maybe my mum already suspected something when she used to say: 'Dress more like a girl', 'Don't be so brutal playing', 'Don't you have a boyfriend?'. But I never paid attention to her comments, and I never regretted my sexual orientation.

My past helps me to understand that my body is the way it is. I need to accept it, listen to it and give it what it is asking for if I want to feel good about myself. And for that, I need to

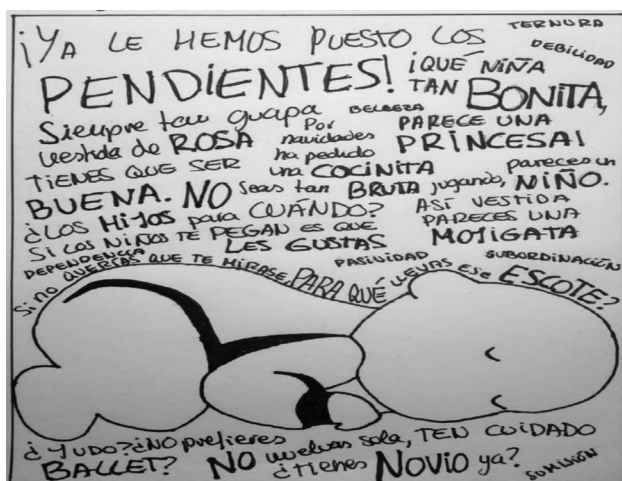


Figure 4. Tomoe's drawing [translation from Spanish: 'we have given her the earrings!'; 'she looks like a princess, so beautiful!'; 'Softness'; 'Weakness'; 'always so attractive'; 'dressed in pink'; 'you need to be nice'; 'she has asked for a kitchen toy for Christmas'; 'don't be so brutal playing'; 'you look like a boy'; 'and when are you going to have children?'; 'if boys hit you it's because they like you'; 'Passiveness'; 'Subordination'; 'you look prudish dressed like that'; 'Dependency'; 'if you didn't want for him to look at you, why did you wear that neckline?'; 'judo? don't you prefer ballet?'; 'don't come back alone, be careful'; 'do you have a boyfriend already?'; 'Submission'].

know myself. That, together with sport, which is my passion, helps me to understand why I want to be a PE teacher: because it's the only tool we have at schools for children to know their own bodies, accept their physical possibilities, and empathise and respect different realities. Therefore, as a PE teacher, I intend to teach children that they don't need to be the strongest, or the tallest, or the fastest. They just need to trust themselves (Figure 4).

Concluding discussion

The participants' stories reveal that they embodied norm-criticality, and therefore, they demonstrate that it is possible to be a 'different kind' of PE teacher. Their embodied past experiences have influenced their present selves as pre-service PE teachers. All four participants showed a different way of being (and looking like) a PE teacher, which is not common in Spain. This aligns with studies from other countries, which have also portrayed PE teachers who are critical towards heteronorms and dominant discourses in PE (e.g. Fitzpatrick & Russell, 2015; Landi, 2018). Of course, their stories also demonstrate their struggles while navigating this path, and their feelings of loneliness, frustration and anxiety. While similar feelings have also been found among other (pre-service) PE teachers in the literature (e.g. Alves et al., 2019; González-Calvo et al., 2020, 2021), the feelings of these four participants are exacerbated because of their complicated relationships with their bodies.

Specifically, Ailana challenged the need of being able to see properly in the embodiment of a PE teacher. Her visual impairment allowed her to sharpen the other senses of her body. Cleopatra still struggles with eating disorders but she is now more aware and prone to resist dominant discourses of what a body should look like. The embodied

memories of what was to be chubby while growing up still accompany her. Ashley resisted narrow body ideals prevalent in PE in Spain, arguing that it is not necessary to be petite to be an efficient female PE teacher. Finally, Tomoe challenged heteronorms in PE and sport. She listened to her body and desires, and embraced all her qualities.

In this vein, participants' intersectionality factors (i.e. sexuality, impairment, body size, and eating disorder) have functioned as a way to resist dominant discourses in the field of PE, a field traditionally distinguished by narrow homogeneous ideals and specific body types (Azzarito, 2009; Azzarito & Katzew, 2010; Kirk, 2020). With their embodied 'differences', they have challenged the institutional view of 'normality' for a PE teacher in Spain. In doing so, they stopped repeating norms and stereotypes in the everyday lives of PE teachers. They engaged in critical thinking and questioned their own oppressive actions and positions (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020). They questioned their own past experiences, how that may have influenced their choice for the PE degree and how they might shape their practices as future PE teachers.

Telling stories is a way of resistance. Therefore, in this paper, we wanted to resist dominant ways of being (and looking like) a PE teacher in Spain. Four different ways of being a female PE teacher were presented through the participants' narratives, that is, being lesbian, anorexic, visually impaired and big respectively. While we wanted the stories to 'speak for themselves', we have also highlighted the suffering of the participants, as suffering offered them a way to challenge hegemonic norms and dominant discourses in PE. Suffering was ultimately not useless and became an opening in their lives. In line with other studies (e.g. Hillel Lavian, 2015), we have also learned the importance of hope on participants' lives and how much we can learn from their stories.

We have specifically explored how four women have had difficult experiences in their relations with their bodies, PE classes and personal relationships, and how those four women intend to overcome those obstacles and become PE teachers. Their narratives have shed light on how through perseverance and braveness, they chose PE as their profession. They have been clever and creative enough to convert those obstacles into strategies and motivation for their chosen careers. They have accepted their ('faulty') bodies and as a consequence, they have a stronger commitment to the PE profession: to challenge stereotypes and traditional ways of teaching. By highlighting the complexity and risks faced by certain pre-service PE teachers in their choice of profession, this study highlights the importance of further research into the negative experiences encountered by individuals like these participants. Such research is necessary to provide improved resources and opportunities within the broader field of education, with particular emphasis on PE.

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